

Northwest Growers

Experiment with Hybrids



Cold-hardy varieties show promise in chilly, wet growing regions

BY MARK GANCHIFF

The Pacific Northwest is one of the United States' premier wine regions, known worldwide for its merlot and riesling wines from Washington state and pinot noir from Oregon.

While the 75,000-plus acres of wine grapes in Washington and Oregon are predominantly vinifera, a small-but-increasing number of wineries in the Pacific Northwest are growing interspecific hybrid varieties.

In 2013, one of Washington state's top winegrowers, Paul Champoux of Champoux Vineyard in the Horse Heaven Hills AVA, made national wine news when he announced that he would be harvesting Marquette, a cold-hardy hybrid developed by the University of Minnesota. The

wine made from Champoux's 1,000 pounds of Marquette, produced by Charlie Hoppes at Fidelitas Wines and Hilary Sjolund of Sonoris Wines, will be available in small quantities this spring.

"I went to Marquette High School in Yakima and I must admit the name 'Marquette' was my first draw to plant this American hybrid," Champoux said, adding that he is also interested to see how it adapts to the region.

While the variety's name was the main attraction for Champoux, whose vineyard is planted in hot, dry southeastern Washington, growers in cooler Northwest regions are turning to hybrids for their cold-hardiness and resistance to disease.

COLD HARDINESS

According to Wisconsin native Dr. Michelle Moyer, assistant professor of viticulture at Washington State University in Prosser, there is currently no reason to grow hybrids in the top wine-producing areas of the Pacific Northwest. However, she said she thinks there is a place for hybrids in regions that are too cold for vinifera and where tasting room traffic can help sustain a winery financially.

Such an area is the high desert region of Oregon, near Bend. According to Oregon State University, 2.2 million tourists visit the Bend area each year. But it gets only 1,800 growing degree-days annually, which is not enough to ripen most vinifera grapes.

Kerry Damon, a Californian who once worked for Robert Mondavi Winery, was one of the first to plant hybrid grapes in central Oregon, in 2006. Today he is the ranch and vineyard manager for the Ranch at the Canyons development in Terrebonne, 20 miles north of Bend. "Interspecific hybrids fit very well here," Damon said. "They are early-ripening and most have late bud break."

Damon's first hybrid vines were grown at the 4-acre Monkey Face Vineyard at Ranch of the Canyons. Cultivars grown at Monkey Face include other University of Minnesota grapes: La Crescent, Frontenac and Frontenac Gris, as well as French hybrids such as Marechal Foch, Vignoles and Leon Millot.

Damon was the vineyard manager at Monkey Face in 2010 when it sold its first hybrid grapes



Kerry Damon, who first planted hybrid grapes in central Oregon in 2006, says hybrids are a good fit for the region.

— including La Crescent, St. Croix and Marechal Foch — to Faith, Hope and Charity Vineyards, also in Terrebonne.

Faith, Hope and Charity now has its own 15-acre vineyard planted to four red and five white cold-hardy hybrid cultivars. In 2013, the winery took over management of Monkey Face Vineyard and uses all the fruit grown there to produce its wines.

Winery owner Cindy Grossman, who moved to central Oregon from suburban Chicago in 2000, said the

consumer reaction to the new, hybrid varieties has been "fantastic."

"Our clientele are experienced wine drinkers from all parts of the country and they are impressed with the quality of the wine that our winemaker, Linda Donovan, is making from these cold-hardy grapes," Grossman said.

For Donovan, of Pallet Wine Co. in Medford, the fruit she is receiving from Faith, Hope and Charity is her first foray into hybrid winemaking.

"I had never heard of these varieties before," said Donovan, a UC Davis enology graduate who also worked at Robert Mondavi Winery before starting her own custom-crush facility in 2009. "At first, Cindy had to remind me which were white and which were red."

While Donovan is still learning to make wine from Bend-area grapes, she is surprised by their quality. "You get very good aromatics on some of the whites," she said. "I'd have to say that La Crescent is the star. You can smell it down the hall when you open the tanks. It has a very nice lemony, sage aroma."

Donovan is employing a technique that few hybrid winemakers have used: She's fermenting her

AT A GLANCE

- Although most wine grapes grown in the Northwest are vinifera, many wineries are experimenting with hybrids.
- Cold-hardy hybrids do well in cold, wet regions.
- Some vintners blend hybrids with pinot noir to add body and color.
- Hybrids are allowing wine grape production to expand to new regions.



Faith, Hope and Charity Vineyards makes Monkey Face White from hybrid grapes.

wines using natural yeast. "All the yeast for our hybrids comes from the vineyards," she said.

One aspect of making wine from cold-hardy grapes that Donovan wasn't prepared for is chronically high titratable acidity. "One of the first things I had to get used to was the acidity, which is about two times what I'm used to," she said.

And then there are the physical differences between hybrids and vinifera. "There are a lot of proteins in hybrid wine grapes, which create a lot of foam," Donovan explained. "Once we had about 1,500 pounds of fermenting hybrid grapes with 3 to 3-1/2 feet of foam on them."

Despite the production challenges, Donovan said she believes there is a market for quality hybrid wines. She has attended public wine tasting events for Faith, Hope and Charity and received some favorable feedback. "To most people, they are good, refreshing wines, but they're not going to

overtake cab sauv any time soon," she said.

If West Coast consumers were to embrace hybrid varieties, many new areas would benefit from being able to produce wine grapes for the first time.

"Having these hybrids opens an enormous area in central Oregon to produce wine," Donovan said. "It's great for the Oregon wine industry and the regional economy."

HYBRIDS WITH PINOT NOIR

Another central Oregon winery pioneering in hybrid winemaking is Maragas Winery in Culver, 25 miles north of Bend. Next to the winery, owner Doug Maragas has a 21-acre vineyard planted to a mix of hybrid and vinifera grapes. He planted his first cold-hardy hybrids in 2006.

Maragas blends estate-grown Marechal Foch, a French hybrid, with pinot noir. Blending pinot noir with hybrids is a fairly common

practice in Oregon, going back to the 1970s, when Girardet Winery in the Umpqua Valley first imported baco noir.

Hybrids can add body and color to pinot noir, although Maragas and other Oregon winemakers are allowed to blend only a maximum of 10% of a secondary grape without disclosing the blend on the label.

In 2012, Maragas Central Oregon Tootsie, a blend of hybrid La Crescent and Frontenac grapes, won a silver medal at The San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition.

Selling a \$40 hybrid wine such as Tootsie to the sophisticated wine drinkers who comprise the winery's customer base can create "some hesitancy," according to Maragas. Nevertheless, he said there are plenty of consumers who are interested in "adding a broader lexicon to the flavor of wine."

"Our goal is to combine the best of hybrids and vinifera," Maragas said. "Quite a few of our

customers are interested in trying both."

Maragas Winery's award-winning Central Oregon Tootsie is made from La Crescent and Frontenac grapes.

HYBRID EDUCATION

One of the challenges of growing cold-hardy grapes in the Pacific Northwest is the lack of information about hybrid viticulture. Chris Lake, director of the Southern Oregon Wine Institute at Umpqua Community College, said he believes that the "trajectory for hybrids is in the right place," although the college does not teach hybrid winemaking or grapegrowing as part of its certificate or degree programs.

"If we have students who are interested in being entrepreneurs, I don't mind having a conversation with them about the potential for hybrids," said Lake, who once worked at Weiderkehr Wine Cellars, a 130-year-old winery in Arkansas.

"My advice would be to find a location near a population center and find a grape that grows well there," he said. "You will have a better sense of identity with customers if you produce the grapes yourself."

With their disease resistance, hybrids fit into Oregon's long history of sustainability. "Oregon is known for low-impact viticulture and with hybrids, there's reduced spraying or maybe no spraying at all," Lake said.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

While it's too early to draw conclusions about the advantages of growing cold-hardy grapes in the region, the hybrid grape chemistry in parts of the Northwest does seem to differ from those being grown in the Midwest and elsewhere.

Most notably, pH appears to be higher and titratable acidity appears

to be lower in the West. The relatively low acidity of Oregon and Washington cold-hardy hybrids could be the result of warmer growing conditions than in the eastern United States, where hybrid production is common.

Warm climates also increase grape sugars. Growing hybrids in warm areas, such as Washington's Horse Heaven Hills, can produce grape sugar levels that seem like misprints. In 2013, Champoux harvested his Marquette on Aug. 19 and reported 30.8 °Brix and titratable acidity of less than .90 grams per 100 mL.

NURSERY RISK-TAKERS

The establishment of cold-hardy hybrids requires the support of risk-taking nurseries that will invest in creating an inventory of vines. With more than 100 acres of virus-indexed rootstock, Inland Desert Nursery in the Red Mountain region of Washington started offering the University of Minnesota varieties during the spring of 2011.

Inland Desert grows La Cres-

cent, Frontenac Gris and Marquette, and sells them as 1-year-old dormant cuttings. (The other Minnesota grape, Frontenac, is still being evaluated by the Clean Plant Center in Prosser.)

"We get a lot of interest from small growers in places where you can't grow vinifera," said Kevin Judkins, manager at Inland Desert. "As we move forward, there may be larger growers who have vineyards with cold spots that are susceptible to freeze who might want to grow hybrids as insurance or to blend with other varieties. We're seeing some interest from places in Washington that are just starting to grow grapes, like Chelan, Leavenworth and around Spokane."

China Bend Winery, 100 miles north of Spokane, makes wine exclusively from hybrids. It sells 1,000 cases per year, all produced from estate-grown Leon Millot and Foch.

Frost can occur in this part of the Columbia Valley into mid-May, but the 20 inches of annual rainfall and abundant sunshine are ideal for hybrids, according to proprietor Bart Alexander. "We don't harvest until the Brix is around 24 and an optimal pH of 3.4 is achievable," he said.

China Bend wines sell for \$25-\$40 per bottle. Alexander said his clients come to the winery for



Kevin Judkins of Inland Desert Nursery in Washington state has seen a lot of interest in hybrid cuttings from growers in vinifera-challenged regions.

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both the wine and the experience. "We're growing grapes where the 'experts' said we couldn't, and we're doing it organically," Alexander said. "I believe Foch and Leon Millot can stand with the best wines when they're grown correctly and made to perfection."

Among the winemaking techniques Alexander uses are extended fermentations, no filtering or sulfites, and barrel aging.

OTHER PROMISING HYBRIDS

In the Puget Sound region of Washington, both vinifera and hybrid wines are common. Of the interspecific hybrids in northwest Washington, one of the most promising is regent, a red variety that has chambourcin and Muller-Thurgau in its parentage. It was bred in the 1960s by the Geilweilerhof Institute in Germany to be resistant to downy mildew and powdery mildew.

Hollywood Hill Vineyard was among the first in Washington to produce regent, around 2007, before it moved from the Puget Sound to its current location in the Seattle suburb of Woodinville. Winemaker Steve Snyder is currently testing a few rows of regent in Woodinville to see how it does.

"You never know when you're going to get a crappy fall," he said. "Regent likes cooler, wetter conditions. You can let it hang until October and it won't rot."

According to Snyder, regent produces a dark wine with bluish tinges. It can be a little "grapey," he said, but it also has some of the qualities of a Cru Beaujolais. "It's a very fruity wine that takes well to oak and ages well."

In Oregon, Cayuga white is attracting attention. Kenton Erwin of Kenton Wines in Portland calls it a "superhero" in his small vineyard in west Portland. (He also planted

the variety in 2013 at his other vineyard in Woodland, 30 miles north of Portland.

According to Erwin, this cold-hardy grape, released in the 1970s by New York's Cornell University, makes a great off-dry wine when ripe and is like a "hypothetical riesling-viognier blend."

Irwin said early ripening and early harvest are advantages for hybrids in areas with cool, short summers. "The question is whether consumers will accept hybrids," Irwin said. "I've been introducing my retail wine customers to great hybrid wines and the adventurous and open-minded wine lovers here are finding hybrids make some pretty good wines."

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