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Vinifera is the New Black

By: Elizabeth Miller, CSW, CSS

Congratulations American wine region, you made it! You've graduated from an emerging wine region and you now enjoy commercial success, sales in national and international markets, and the respect you deserve. How did you do it? By mastering *Vitis vinifera*.

In the American wine industry, *vinifera* is the new black. One might take this for granted, until he or she realizes the bounty of non-*vinifera* native grapes growing on the American land mass. Despite this, it seems that only through mastering the imported *vinifera* that a wine region earns commercial success and respect. I must ask: why does making it in America mean making *vinifera*?

Vinifera in a Land of 'Other'

From sea to shining sea, the Lower 48 is a deluge of wine grapes, with the widest variety of wild grapes on the globe. Of the eight species of grapevines in the *Vitis* genus noted for wine, six are native to North America, while only *vinifera* is native to Europe. Despite numbers, that powerhouse species from across the pond is viewed as the most legitimate amongst all.

The Path to Success

The American states have never produced more wine than they do today. From the 1960s the modern industry has been born anew and grown rapidly. In researching to prepare an upcoming Society of Wine Educators webinar "Emerging Regions of the US", a pattern is clear...

First, *Vitis vinifera* is planted in a young region. This decision is greeted with a mix of optimism and skepticism, many dubious that *vinifera* can grow in the New World climate. Over time, viticulturists and winemakers learn *vinifera*'s specific relationship with the region, how best to cultivate it, and what authentic palate will be expressed from the region's terroir. Then the magic happens! Articles are written, gold medals in tasting competitions are bestowed, and the emerging region starts seeing sales in larger markets, first state, national, maybe even international!

Sometimes this path to success has a pioneer. In the 1800s, Agoston Haraszthy introduced many of the 125 *vinifera* varieties found in California today, earning him title "Father of Modern Viticulture in California". We know how it turned out for California! On the opposite coast, Dr. Konstantin Frank advocated for planting *vinifera* in the cold region of upstate New York in the 1960s, despite opposition. Riesling became an early winner. As I discussed in a recent Society of Wine Educators webinar, "I'm in a New York State of Wine", the state rapidly grew and achieved international renown just a few decades later.

Many states are poised to leap into the limelight... with *vinifera* in hand. Grapevines have grown naturally in Texas along rivers and streams for thousands of years. The industry began on a commercial scale in the 1970s and today it's ranked sixth nationally in number of wineries. The land bears one of the most diverse arrays of grapevines on earth, yet, the commercial industry is 99% *vinifera*!

What's Going On?

To understand why the imported *Vitis vinifera* has emerged king in a sea of native species, we can look at several factors:

*Vitifera is tried and true. Humans are known to have interacted with vitifera as far back as the Neolithic period. Its latin root literally means “wine-bearing”. The idiosyncrasies of making wine with vitifera have been fine-tuned for several thousand years. Physiologically, its skin thickness, sugar, alcohol content, and phenolic compounds make for a readily fermentably and universally palatable product.

*American wine traditions came from Europe. The “old world” has been drinking wine and creating traditions for centuries. When European settlers came to the American continent, they brought their vitifera with them. While initial plantings of vitifera in the untested American climates resulted in many early failures, the sense of vitifera’s superiority remained. Traditions like the 1855 Bordeaux classification were in essence effective marketing schemes. They contributed to the sense that the apex of viticultural excellence reaches back to medieval Europe and Vitis vitifera.

*Other vitis species taste different. In the early days of American wine, settlers didn’t appreciate just how different American grapevine species were. They tried to make wine from the native grapes but found their flavors and textures off-putting and unfamiliar. Vitis labrusca, in particular was deemed “foxy”, and not in the good way. The early misunderstanding of native species left a lingering and tainted reputation, and today some consumers and sommeliers will drop a native grape wine like its a cold that’s contagious!

*Native grape cultivation has not yet been perfected. In the global race of grape cultivation, vitifera has a 10,000 year head-start. In contrast, our identification of native grape species in America has only occurred in the last few hundred years. Due to the low demand for these native grapes, there is very little incentive to study them, and very few are in cultivation. Until native grapes’ viticulture, vinification and styles are understood, only vitifera will be viewed as legitimate.

The Future of Vitis in America

Til today, Vitis vitifera has carried many American wine regions from obscurity to international fame. Yet, what might the Vitis scene be of the future?

Might an influential native grape emerge? A possibility could be Norton, a grape cultivar from Vitis aestivalis, pervasively grown through the Mid-Atlantic and Midwestern states, and most recently California! Norton’s cultivation dates back to the early 1800s, and it’s a candidate for a real contender on a global stage. It produces deeply-colored red wine with mouth-filling texture, ages very well, and has been compared to Zinfandel. It is also the cornerstone of the Missouri wine industry, whose current reputation pales in comparison to its pre-Prohibition standing when it was the second-largest wine-producing state in the nation! Could a non-vitifera grape like Norton find market power for itself and for Missouri?

Also, what happens when Vitis vitifera fails? From the 1990s through the start of the millennium, the Colorado industry grew quickly. Its winemakers have enjoyed a growing reputation for Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon. Unfortunately, that time also saw several fierce damaging freezes in a land of brutal winters, finicky springs, and some of the highest elevation vineyards in the Western hemisphere. Grape growers are now looking at more resilient hybrids which can produce great wines but are unfamiliar to Americans. Might a larger market embrace them, and then Colorado, in the future?

For the foreseeable future, though, Vitis vitifera is staying in style!

About The Author

Elizabeth Miller is the Manager of Vintology Wine & Spirits in Scarsdale, NY, and the Associate Director and Instructor of the Westchester Wine School. She is a Certified Specialist of Wine (CSW) and a Certified Specialist of Spirits (CSS) through the Society of Wine Educators, and has served as instructor for the CSW. She has traveled extensively and happily throughout New York’s wineries and distilleries. You can find out more about Elizabeth at her blog "Girl Meets Vine".

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