

Whitney

winery that grows all its own grapes and makes wine exclusively from those grapes.

It is a very recent "Double-Gold" Award Winner at the International Cold Climate Wine Competition (ICCWA). Hosted annually by the Minnesota Grape Growers Association and the University of Minnesota and organized at the Minnesota State Fair, the ICCWA is the only wine competition devoted to the promotion of quality wines made from cold-hardy grape varieties.

"Walpole Fort No. 3," an off-dry red blend wine, named for the historic fort that was located where the Walpole Inn stands today, was one of just three wines chosen for the highest honor in a field numbering more than 350 wines.

My drive west from Nashua began in rain, moved through blue sky at Monadnock, overcast and fog around Dublin Lake, followed by sun again and clouds, a contrast common to the Connecticut river valley where a foggy river bed changes quickly to sun-soaked hillsides. When Virginia first mentioned her idea of growing grapes on five of her 27 acres, her neighbors looked at her in disbelief. Could she turn a cold blustery hilltop hayfield into a vineyard? Was it ridiculous to try growing grapes in New Hampshire?

But then, the definition of an iconoclast is "a person who does something that others say can't be done." Virginia recalled: "I set my mark – if I could not successfully grow the grapes right here, I would not go into winemaking. I wanted it to be authentic." In fact, it must have helped that the Carters had relocated to New Hampshire from Buffalo, right in the middle of three grape-growing regions: Niagara to the north, Erie in the south, and the Finger Lakes to the east.

Look to Minnesota. In the 1980s, when the state of Minnesota challenged growers to come up with a new cash crop, grape growers looked across the border to Wisconsin and the legendary life work of Elmer Swenson.

Swenson worked a 120-acre family farm

in Osceola, Wisconsin, inherited from his maternal grandfather Larson, a Swedish immigrant. In 1943, Swenson began breeding grapes, at first intercrossing French hybrid grapes with selections of the local wild species, *Vitis riparia*. Swenson, inspired by Texas grape breeder T.V. Munson. From 1969-1979, the University of Minnesota hired Swenson to care for fruit crops, but he continued to do most of his bulk grape breeding on his Wisconsin farm.

Winemaking is an exercise in patience and preparation. In spring 2004, after much research that included touring Minnesota vineyards, the Carters installed trellises and planted their first 250 vines. Their first harvest on those vines occurred in 2006, prompting the creation of a wine-making laboratory.

"Remember," said Virginia, as I stood next to her, both of us clipping Frontenac Gris from the vines, "we are talking about pioneer grapes here – absolutely new varieties. You can find plenty of information on chardonnay grapes and volumes written on how to make wine from these well-known grapes. But to make wine from totally new hybrid grapes is another process entirely."

The season begins in March, with drastic pruning, combined with environmentally friendly integrated pest management. There has to be a balance with organic soil: too organic and the vines will grow only leaves and no grapes. Throughout the summer, netting is put up on both sides of the vines to discourage raptors, even bears, and turkeys, the key predator. Harvest Days happen in September and October – with hand-picking by hired local staff and volunteers. Paul: "Each year is different. Some years we are picking in 95 degrees – other times we are picking in the snow."

Crushing the grapes is followed by "racking," a series of stages in which the natural sediment falls away from the crushed grapes. This is a process not hurried with paper filters, but done naturally. Instead of "mulling" wine in an oak barrel, Virginia experiments by adding oak chips to the wine as it is easier to control. Then comes the "cold stabilization" process of maintaining the temperature

of the wine between 23 degrees and 32 degrees – for four-to-six weeks. Virginia: "We are opening and closing the doors all day long – to maintain this temperature."

"Walpole Fort No. 3" is a blend of five different grapes. First, the Carters "ferment to dry" each grape individually. Then they rate each grape's wine: its aroma, its mouth "feel," and its finish. Then, they play with the better aspects of each grape to find an optimal blend.

Virginia: "When people refer to the 'flavor' of the wine, they hardly ever mean this in-between step, the feel in the mouth. That's why it's good to swish it around in the mouth for 20 seconds. Once the wine mixes with the unique chemistry of the body, it becomes something else. This is why one person will love a wine and it tastes like nothing to someone else."

A bountiful harvest depends on how drastically you prune the vines. "You have to make the vine suffer," said Virginia. How many oak chips to add? Keep that temperature ever balanced between cold and cool. In winter, the vine must turn brown totally because any green canes will not last the winter. Contrast and changeability – that is the key to wine on many fronts – the art and science of wine. Virginia: "Even though we make Barnet Hill White every year, it is different each year, depending on the grapes each year."

The main word that came to mind when I tasted "Walpole Fort No. 3" was complexity. According to Virginia, the key to a wine's winning complexity is the fact that it is always changing. "A wine that is different from the aroma, changing again in its mouth, then once again straight through to the finish is a great wine. If it does not change at every step, it is boring. The aromas of some wines change when you swallow or when a scent is mixed with air. Change, from start to finish, is the key."

Walpole Mountain View Winery grows 32 different varieties. The winery is open Saturdays and Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m., through Dec. 16.

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