

# Top 10: Vitinord Conference

(An international grape & wine conference for growers in cold climates)

by Bob Bors

*The Vitinord conference was held in the fall of 2009 in St. Hyacinthe, QC. It was particularly friendly with about 300 delegates from a dozen countries. I learned much from talks, conversation, trade shows and handouts. The talks often inspired conversation and sent me on a quest to figure out what I didn't understand. Below is a list of what I considered to be the top 10 things I learned. Keep in mind that I am relatively new to grape growing and wine making.*

*The next Vitinord conference is likely to be in 2012 in a Baltic or Nordic country. When decided, the info on the next Vitinord conference will be posted at: <http://www.vitinord.org> .*

## 1. New book

There is now a 2nd edition (2008) of my favourite grape grower guide: 'Northern Winework: Growing grapes and making wine in cold climates' by Tom Plocher and Bob Parke. ISBN: 978-0-9709784-2-4. Pub & Dist by Northern Winework, Inc., 9040 152nd St. N, Hugo, MN 55038, USA. The book has updates on varieties and growing techniques and many new photos. But it also covers basic wine making skills especially for those growing in more northern regions. I especially appreciate the informative tables that convey much information in little space. The authors are good at explaining why you do something rather than just telling you what to do. If you have the old version of the book, get the new one. The new chapter on avoiding frosts, the update to the varieties chapter and other changes make it worthwhile.

The Canadian distributor for this book is "Viticulture A & M", (Mariette Lagueux and Alain Breault), [coquine@endirect.qc.ca](mailto:coquine@endirect.qc.ca), 450-379-5302.

## 2. There are important production differences between red and white wines, especially in northern areas

In Northern regions, it is hard to make good quality red wines. At the conference, an economist of Quebec Ag urged northern wine producers not to make red wines because they are of much lower quality than

what can be imported while white wines are of better quality. Red grapes used for wines require more time to get colour and the season is too short. Also tannins in the grapes which are important to making quality red wines don't fully develop with most varieties having shorter seasons. Red Wines can be made in BC and Vineland of good quality but elsewhere in Canada it is difficult. At the wine tasting banquet many of the red wines did not taste very good to me, but there were a few good ones. The good ones give me hope that quality red wines are possible but I don't know the background of those good wines...there were over 300 participants from a dozen countries. But red wines are the ones that are becoming more popular with consumers that read about antioxidants and resveritrol. In contrast we will never make white wines with Haskap or our dark sour cherries. So maybe some vineyards might adopt Haskap or other red juiced fruits to substitute for red grapes in their wines? The white wines at that banquet were clearly of better quality. Many of them had a 'citrus' flavour to them.

### **3. Ice Wine drawback**

It would seem that ice wine would be a 'natural' opportunity for northern grape producers. But leaving grapes on the vines into fall greatly taxes the cold hardiness of the vines. It was recommended to not do it during stressful seasons and attempt ice wines only every few years from any given vine. Stress to the plants could also be minimized by reducing fruit load by thinning the bunches or by pruning for less flower clusters.

### **4. Think Blended not Varietal wines**

North Americans are used to 'varietal wines' which are wines made from one variety of grapes. Examples: Cabernet Sauvignon, Reisling, Chardonnay. But such varieties are pure *Vitis vinifera* which are adapted to warmer regions with growing season long enough to have their flavours, aroma and tannins fully develop. In northern regions, the grape varieties are usually *Vitis vinifera* crossed with other species. The different genetics and shorter growing season results in there being no one grape variety that can be used to make a high quality wine. Instead, northern vintners blend juices of different varieties to get a good combination of attributes. Thus some northern varieties add alcohol content, others flavour and aroma, others colour, etc. Vintners using northern grapes are more like artists or musicians working to create a good wine. Growers of grapes need to be aware

that several complimentary varieties need to be grown if wine production is a goal.

## **5. Grape varieties & temperatures**

Grapes can be affected by late or early frosts, cold temperatures and winter fluctuations. It is therefore very important to choose varieties suitable for your area. Growers who grow varieties not quite suitable for their areas use many methods to bring the grape crop through such as oil sprays to delay bud break, choosing special microclimates for their orchards, burying vines over winter, or planting vineyards in unheated greenhouses, to name a few. Apparently many growers love to grow unadapted varieties that need special help. They do this to have higher quality grapes and wine.

## **6. Where Northern grape varieties come from**

Most northern Canadian grape growers are using varieties developed in Minnesota by Elmer Swenson and/or the University of Minnesota. Also breeding grapes are Helen Fisher, (U of Guelph) and 2 private breeders Tom Plocher and Mark Hart (Minnesota). Some varieties from Northern Europe are being grown, but mostly are being tested. [Incidentally, the U of SK program has scarcely begun with our first large planting of grape seedlings occurring in 2009]

## **7. I hope you like pruning**

To grow good grapes requires more than just pruning just before the growing season. It is labour intensive with tying up vines, shoot and leaf removal during the growing season (sometime 4 times) and bunch thinning. Some of this can be mechanized.

## **8. High Acidity**

Northern grapes tend to be too acid for good wine making, especially if the season is too short. But much of this problem can be alleviated with proper techniques. If the juice contains high amounts of malic acid, a bacteria can be used in the fermentation process that will reduce the amounts of Malic acid by 40%. Also some yeasts are better for high acid juice. I was quite surprised to find out that there are dozens of strains of yeasts that have been specifically selected (and sometimes bred) to make different styles of wine from certain types of grapes. I thought there were only a few yeast types. Some yeast strains are better for fermentation at warmer or colder

temperatures and they affect the end product's fruitiness, dryness, alcohol content and many other quality factors.

## **9. United we stand**

A speaker from Nova Scotia (Hans Christian Jost) noted that for 17 years a handful of wineries were unsuccessful in lobbying their provincial government for more favourable laws and regulations. When these wineries formed a Winery Association which adopted quality standards for their industry, they became successful at lobbying the government. The NS winery association helped promote "Buy Nova Scotia Wines" to the point that many restaurants now carry NS wines while before they had difficulty convincing any restaurant to carry them. Today there are many new wineries (I think 30+) in NS and Jost Vineyards Ltd. is selling more wine than before when there was less competition. By working together, NS wineries have created respectability and demand in local consumers and the competition is largely with imports.

## **10. Go West**

I got stumped when Hans Jost asked this question: If you have disease resistant and susceptible varieties where do you plant them in your vineyard? Answer: Resistant varieties should be planted on the north and/or west of the susceptible varieties. Why? Because prevailing winds coming from the northwest would tend to spread disease toward the southeast. Less spores would be available to spread (although they would go to your southeast neighbor). That concept seems like a good idea for any crop.