

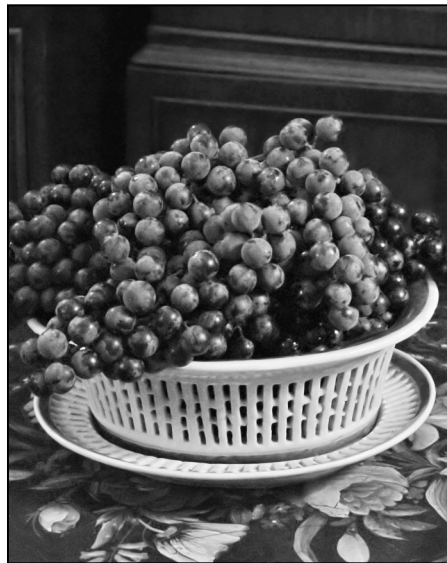
The New Eastern Viticulture or Norton Revisited

by Jim Rink

CALLED “AN AMERICAN Original” on the cover of the Fall 2004 issue of the *AWS JOURNAL*, Norton, also known as Norton’s Virginia as well as Virginia Seedling, is experiencing a renaissance in Eastern viticulture, which has long sought a regionally distinctive, cold-hardy, disease-resistant red wine to call its own. As is true with any new visitor to the wine scene, although Norton could hardly be called “new,” its (re)introduction has spawned attempts to identify the family background of this most welcomed houseguest.

In the Fall 2004 issue of the *JOURNAL*, Drs. Rebecca and Clifford Ambers of Sweet Briar College and Chateau Z Vineyard in Virginia reviewed numerous primary sources such as family letters, historical maps, deeds and an account book belonging to Dr. Daniel Norborne Norton (1794–1842), who is credited with developing the grape that shares his surname. They also conducted an extensive research review of secondary sources to further develop their conclusions, which suggest that the Virginia Seedling originating at Dr. Norton’s Magnolia Farm in Richmond, Virginia, was grown from a seed taken from a Bland¹ vine (the “mother”) and was likely pollinated by *Vitis aestivalis* (a native wild grape serving as the “father”). Although Dr. Norton noted that the Bland mother vine was growing near a Miller’s Burgundy, and Norton’s own maps confirm this was possible, ampelography shows the Miller’s Burgundy could not be the father.

DNA analysis currently being performed by Dr. Violeta Colova at Florida A&M University may soon shed definitive light on the origins of Norton. In the meantime, Cliff Ambers has developed multiple working hypotheses concerning the origin of the Norton variety and will undertake field research to test these possibilities. Next



Norton Grape

spring, he hopes to recreate the circa 1824 hybridization from which Norton was an offspring.

Are you my mother?

In a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article dated July 17, 2005, Colova was quoted as saying that Norton’s mother was “for sure known—it’s *aestivalis*.” This assertion conflicts with the historical account of Bland as the female parent. In e-mails to Ambers following the publication of the *Post-Dispatch* article, Dr. Colova amended this statement and said the exact role of *aestivalis* in the origin of Norton is still unclear at this point in her research. The possibilities associated with an *aestivalis* mother resonated with Cliff, nonetheless.

“A light bulb turned on in my mind when I read the quote from her in the *Post-Dispatch* article,” he said. “Even though we have a good idea of what Dr. Norton thought he did to produce the Norton variety, the details are sketchy and very poorly documented. The ‘*aestivalis* father’ possibility is still

the best story for the origin of Norton, but it needs to be tested.”

An “*aestivalis* mother” scenario, said Ambers, would require a father consisting of a *labrusca* × *vinifera* cross, which itself had a white parent. (We know that Norton must have a white grape somewhere in its pedigree because it produces some white seedlings when self-pollinated.) The best candidate, drawn from Norton’s 1828 list of grapes he was growing, is Catawba because it has a white grape in its heritage. It is also possible that Alexander could have been the Norton father, but it has an extremely foxy character. Cliff was uncertain whether it produces white offspring when self-pollinated. Given the choice of Catawba or Alexander as possible Norton fathers, he prefers Catawba, because it is known to have a white grape in its pedigree, is less foxy, and is extremely similar to Norton in many respects.

To test the historical “*aestivalis* father” and his new “*aestivalis* mother” hypotheses, Dr. Ambers will attempt to create a Norton analogue in spring 2006 by first hybridizing the female varieties Lindley and Gaertner² (which were created by Edward Rogers in 1851 and are very similar to the descriptions of Bland) with a wild, male *aestivalis*; and second by hybridizing his select, female, wild vines with Catawba, respectively.

“What I am trying to do is get interested vineyards involved to help grow these Norton-class seedlings to fruit-bearing stage,” said Ambers.

¹ Bland no longer exists and its parentage is cloudy, although it is likely to have been a *labrusca* × *vinifera* cross with some descriptions identifying Chasselas as the *vinifera* parent.

² Lindley and Gaertner are from Rogers’ hybridization of Chasselas with a *labrusca* grape that he called Carter but was also known as Mammoth Globe.

"Vinifera growers will laugh, but those growers wanting to reduce their spraying of fungicides and to some extent insecticides, seem to welcome the opportunity to be involved in creating something new." Growers interested in participating in this project should contact Ambers directly.

Whether research succeeds in determining the exact parentage of Norton or not, the future of the grape seems bright. According to Paul Roberts, writer, winemaker and owner of Deep Creek Cellars in Friendsville, Maryland, the grape enjoyed substantial success as early as 1873, when it was declared "the best red wine of all nations" at a worldwide competition in Vienna. The wine—then grown predominantly in Missouri and Virginia—was a favorite of President Ulysses S. Grant and was cultivated for at least two decades in France.

"Perhaps the biggest modern break for Norton came in 1993," Roberts writes, "when *Gourmet* wine columnist Gerald Asher devoted his April feature to a review of Missouri's industry, emphasizing an 'indigenous grape that might yet do for Missouri what Cabernet Sauvignon has done for California.' His was the first really substantive discussion of Norton in a national periodical in more than a century."

For a more detailed examination of Norton and its role in small-scale farming using sustainable viticulture, see Roberts' 1999 book, *From This Hill, My Hand, Cynthiana's Wine*. (A second, revised edition is expected in 2006.)

Brave new world?

Ambers calls the movement away from pesticide-laden Eastern vinifera vineyards to less toxic ones based on native hybrids "The New Eastern Viticulture."

"It isn't really a new idea at all," he asserts, "but because people have become so divorced from where their food comes from, most of them will think it is a new thing. Vinifera has become so entrenched as 'the norm' in the last 30 years by the wine trade that there are whole generations of wine drinkers out there that have never heard of Marechal Foch or Aurore."

Ambers is not alone in his enthusiastic support for the French-American hybrid. The first big fans of the hybrids

were the French breeders who developed them in the late 19th century in an effort to save their vineyards from the devastating phylloxera louse. Creating pest-resistant hybrids with wild American breeding stock proved very successful, as did grafting vinifera onto American rootstock. In 1933, journalist/winegrower Philip Wagner, who authored *American Wines and How to Make Them*, first promoted growing these hybrids on the East Coast.

"It has now been over 125 years since the phylloxera crisis," Ambers said, "and here we are returning to Norton, a 180-year-old variety, as our choice for the Eastern red. The French hybrids proved their worth to the Eastern industry as it crawled back into production after the stifling blow of Prohibition and before pesticide-intensive vinifera growing came into vogue through the 1970s. Now we need to look back and learn what we can from the early and middle history of wine in Eastern America. We now know that use of agrichemicals is undesirable in many ways, yet we are addicted to their effectiveness. The Eastern vinifera phenomenon is an outgrowth of a willingness to accept certain health and environmental risks in order to turn a profit. At some point, we must come to terms with the fact that the American East is not California or Eurasia and vinifera grapes don't belong here. Genetic engineering may prove successful in inserting genes of native grapes or other organisms into vinifera to give it disease resistance and generate a whole new direction for viticulture. But if not, or if genetically modified organisms become culturally unacceptable, we will only have traditional breeding and induced mutation technology to rely on to develop hardy, resistant and flavorful new varieties.

"The answer is in our native grapes if we dare to work with them and disregard 'professional advice' that says they are unsuitable for the task. The Norton grape proves they are suitable and that it can be done! With six wild grape species in my back yard and the wide selection of French-American hybrids developed in the last century, I am in the right place at the right time to follow Dr. Norton's lead and make some new grapes. I would like to have a variety of vines to make good wine from that I can

grow here in Virginia with as little pesticide, fertilizer and fuel input as is possible."

It appears Dr. Ambers is on his way to creating such a vineyard. ♣



ONLINE RESOURCES

- ◆ 2004 *JOURNAL* article on Norton:
www.chateau-z.com/nortondownload.html
- ◆ Chrysalis Vineyards, Roberts' article:
www.chrysaliswine.com/norton2.htm
- ◆ Deep Creek Cellars:
www.deepcreekcellars.com/
- ◆ The Great French Wine Blight:
www.wampumkeeper.com/wineblight.html
- ◆ *From This Hill, My Hand, Cynthiana's Wine*
www.amazon.com