



Tasting Vermont Wine

Vermont Fresh Network, December 2018

How do you describe the flavor of wine?

That may be one of the oldest culinary questions (literally - in the tombs of ancient Egyptian pharaohs there are shards of wine containers with tasting notes), and Vermont may be one of the best places to explore it. Vermont has a unique combination of several things: grape varieties that are new enough to be unfamiliar yet established enough to be producing high quality wine, a growing food tourism economy that brings locals and visitors out to discover all aspects of wine production, and a local food culture that values flavor experiences informed by a "taste of place" - or as old world winemakers would say, *terroir*.

Modern commercial winemaking is relatively new in Vermont. The first grape-based commercial wineries began selling their products in the late 1990s. The most popular Vermont grape (Marquette) wasn't released until 2006. That means that many wine drinkers need some help becoming familiar with our wine options. Outside of tasting rooms, and similar locations where consumers travel with the intent to spend time learning about wine, the opportunity to introduce Vermont wine is very short - a few seconds to convey enough about a wine to shape someone's decision.

We can think about wine description in three basic categories: **technical production notes** that include qualities of the grapes themselves and any faults (intentional or otherwise) in the production process, **flavor notes** that correspond to an established wine vocabulary (here we have our notes of cherry and hints of vanilla), **experience-based descriptions** that evoke a place, a mood, a personal connection of some type.

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Let's start with the grapes. Vermont grape growers use vines bred for our colder climate, many of which owe a debt to Wisconsin farmer, Elmer Swenson. As a newlywed, Swenson experimented with grape breeding on his family farm, crossing his grandfather's pre-Prohibition vines with French hybrids and wild "riverbank" grapes. After writing to University of Minnesota researchers and attending an open house for their grape breeding program, he started working with the professors as a full colleague in the 1940s. Many commonly used wine grapes in Vermont today have an Elmer Swenson vine in their family tree.

It takes time and generations to perfect a new grape for a particular climate, and another decade or more for the vineyards growing those grapes to become well established. We do not have the centuries of production found elsewhere, but Vermont *has* arrived at a time when our vineyards are mature and our agronomy practices for these grapes are strong. Furthermore, our winemakers now have years of experience developing the best ways to utilize this new generation of cold hardy wine grapes, and to be able to exploit the best characteristics of each.

Vermont winemakers are also reviving heritage style ciders which have a tannic structure similar to grape-based wines, as well as combining grapes (or grape skins) and apples to create complex wines that some consider a signature Vermont style. Other traditions include wines made from honey, blueberries, currants, rhubarb, dandelion, raspberries, cranberries and other local fruits.



Marquette

A Pinot Noir hybrid that produces complex red wines with a ruby color, flavors of cherry, blackberries, pepper, & spice.



Louise Swenson

This grape produces light-bodied whites, with notes of pear, tangerine, honey & flowers.



Frontenac

Produces a dry wine with a deep garnet color and aromas of cherry and other red fruits with a palate of blackberry, black currant, plum.



La Crescent

A distinctive grape producing big, floral wines with aromatics including apricot, peach, citrus, and tropical fruits.



Petite Pearl

This grape produces wines with spice and jammy fruit qualities, can bring softness to other northern reds when blending.



Frontenac Gris

Copper colored grape producing wines with a characteristic peach flavor, blended to add fruit notes to neutral wines, excellent rosé.



Prairie Star

A neutral grape that adds body to other wines, Prairie Star also has tropical fruit notes and a long cinnamon finish.



St. Croix

Produces a deep red wine with low tannins. Flavors of currant and other dried fruits, can have a smoky note, as well.



Knowing Vermont grapes and the types of flavors they can produce isn't the whole story. As one wine seller put it "Nobody in the history of wine has ever bought a bottle because it had notes of cherry - hints of cherry isn't exciting for anyone." Instead it's a question of what experience goes with the bottle. It needs to be grounded in what is going on chemically with the wine, cherry notes perhaps, but unless you are serving only to trained sommeliers, those notes can become more distraction than clarification.

As food writer Rowan Jacobsen puts it, "Trying to capture the flavor of wine by describing particular fruit flavors, or other flavor notes, is a fool's errand because you're never going to accurately describe the experience of the person drinking the wine. . . and if they're buying a bottle of Vermont wine, they're not buying a generic California or Australia wine, so we know they want to go to a particular place - how do we lead them? We want something evocative not descriptive."

Triangulating these points between what's physically happening in the wine, the consumer's experience, and the server's experience can be tricky. Rhiannon Johnson, who trains tasting room servers, notes that in some cases it's best to simply choose a description that's fun and invokes the right attitude - "goes well with a smart cardigan" has worked in the past. But we don't necessarily have to go that far. Three possible starting points:

The place where a wine came from - this element overlaps with more technical tasting notes because the natural environment where grapes grow helps determine the character of a wine, like a limestone contributing to more acidic wines often with strong minerality. Place can be more poetic than that, though. Consider the labels of La Garagista wines from Barnard, Vermont.

The *Loup d' Or*: "a blonde wine that comes from our alpine vineyard thick with Queen Anne's Lace, wild chrysanthemum, and red-winged blackbirds." Or *The Flesh & The Bone*: "grown from our vineyard in a green and gold valley of rolling hills that faces the setting sun . . . fermented on glimmering skins, this blonde-colored wine bubbles like a thousand stars seen in the evening gloaming."

The people who made the wine - We all like a story, and wine writer Todd Trzaskos points out that story plays a particularly important role in wine, or coffee, or caviar, or any other foods that we develop a taste for through trying them. "The story is how we move across the unfamiliar territory," he says, it's a reason to get past the hurdle of trying something for the first time, it tells us why this product exists, who cares about it, and that as much as anything can be why we want to give it a chance ourselves.

An action associated with the wine - the simplest action to associate with a wine (besides pouring it into a glass) is the food you eat alongside it. "Pairs with" is wine's best verb. But you can also get further afield. Restaurant beverage manager Alex Moran explains choosing a crisp Vermont white to serve alongside our richer dishes this way: imagine it's a hot summer day and you're standing next to a pool and jump in - and the pool water has gotten bathtub warm in the sun. That's chardonnay. Now imagine a hot day and you dive into nice cold, fresh water - that's Black Sparrow, a crisp Vermont white (from Lincoln Peak). Metaphors can get more fanciful from there: "like wrapping up in a fleece blanket", "like the pavement after it rains". . . . and eventually you may find yourself at "goes well with a smart cardigan."

When you add together all the parts of a Vermont wine, we have a product that's distinctive - and with descriptions that tell the story of why *this* wine from *this* place.



Photo by Snow Farm Winery

Marquette: A grape that produces a medium-bodied complex red wine with a ruby color, flavors of cherry, blackberries, pepper, and spice.

Marquette: Marquette suggests the savory, spicy, bold flowers of the Vermont garden - geranium, nasturtium, chicory, oregano blossoms. Combined with the grape's earthy elements, this flavor can call to mind grass roots in freshly edged soil or tomato vines pulled as the summer ends. Its finish is similar to a tea, suggesting matcha or bergamot. Vermont wines often pair well with fattier meat dishes, Marquette is also at home alongside flavorful vegetarian fare, particularly dishes featuring brown butter, heirloom beans, roasted root vegetables, or wildcrafted mushrooms.

Louise Swenson: This grape produces light-bodied whites, with notes of pear, tangerine, honey, and flowers. Can be blended for a more complex, fuller bodied wine.

Louise Swenson: Perhaps best known for being named after grape breeder Elmer Swenson's wife, Louise Swenson, the grape offers flavors of small, cool climate fruits - kitchen garden treats like ripe gooseberries or fat black currants. There are notes of timothy or even salt hay, a reminder of Vermont's ancient sea floor and fossil filled limestone that the sea left behind. The hint of a chalky, mineral flavor is similar to what you might find in true Champagnes and Louise Swenson grapes are often used in wines with a bit of sparkle. It would pair well with stone fruits in peak ripeness, extravagant salads, and any rich cheese.

La Crescent: A distinctive grape producing big, floral wines with aromatics including apricot, peach, citrus, and tropical fruits.

La Crescent: A rich white grape, La Crescent suggests red clover in deep summer, meadowsweet, and a hint of black cardamom. The middle of the flavor blends slight bitterness with a fruity fullness, such as in blood oranges or bittersweet cider apples, and it finishes with a suggestion of white birch. This can stand up to stronger pairings than typically associated with white wine, including lamb or goat.

The different types of language used to describe Vermont wines' flavor are important.

When winemakers come together to taste wines, they need to be able to accurately describe what they're detecting with common references - whether it's something like jammy flavors that indicate heat damage, or the way one treatment of Marquette wine brings out its spice notes while another does not.



When servers in a tasting room offer Vermont wines, they need a way to find a good match for the palates of customers who probably aren't familiar with our grapes. Do we describe Marquette as "like a Pinot Noir"? It sort of is - the grapes are related, they usually produce dry medium-bodied reds, with notes of both berries and spice. But it isn't just like a Pinot Noir, if it were then . . . well, the world is full of Pinot Noirs, we could drink one of those instead. A Vermont Marquette is its own wine. Basic flavor notes outline some common points, without requiring a direct correlation between two wines. And someone who likes a Pinot Noir is likely to also enjoy a Marquette.



Perhaps the most important element of how we talk about Vermont wine is the degree to which it shapes a drinker's expectations about what they're about to experience. As Todd Trzaskos says (and as wine-related science experiments have

supported) the way we taste a wine has everything to do with perception and preconceived notions. That's true for all food, but especially for complex flavors like wine. It isn't only whether a wine is "good", it is also whether its flavors are worth seeking out to experience. If we can talk about Vermont wines as a unique expression of the places where they're from, it changes how everyone can experience that wine.

Winery tasting rooms in Vermont have made a positive place connection for years through the straightforward route of introducing customers to wines in the place where that wine is made and crafting an experience that this wine will bring to mind again when a bottle is opened.

Did you sip a rosé reminiscent of late June strawberries while relaxing on a porch, looking out across the lush vineyard? That is a nice thing to remember. The next step is to build a sense of Vermont wine for people who are encountering it through different routes-- in restaurants when a server suggests what pairs well with a dish, in wine shops when someone wants a bottle for a particular occasion, in conversation with



Vermonters who consider wine part of our local food culture and agricultural landscape.

The Vermont Wine Project has a goal of changing the way we present Vermont wine, in particular through Vermont restaurants and as part of food tourism. It is managed by the **Vermont Fresh Network**, in partnership with the **Vermont Grape and Wine Council**. This article was written by the Vermont Fresh Network based on interviews with winemakers, wine distributors, wine sellers, food writers, and restaurant beverage managers in 2017 and 2018. The project has multiple components and will continue through 2019. You can read all of the reports online at www.vermontfresh.net in our Programs section under “Vermont Wine Project”.



The Vermont Fresh Network is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization founded in 1996 with the mission of building strong connections between local farmers, food producers, and chefs in support of a strong local food system for the benefit of our environment, our communities, our health, and the overall strength of the rural economy.

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