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A Tale of Two (or more) Betas

by John Marshall

The Beta Grape, perhaps the only pioneer hybrid to have an impact beyond the borders of Minnesota is well known for the confusion that exists regarding trueness to variety. Nearly any reasonably hardy Riparia–type vine is classed at least verbally as "probably Beta" or "a Beta type". Anyone who has manned the MGGA's State Fair Booth can attest to the fact that nearly everyone seems to have some Beta–type growing in their back yard predating their ownership or planted by Grandma.

The problem is not recent in origin and begins before the turn of the century when early Minnesota settlers were dissatisfied with the non–hardy grapes of the day. Professor W. H. Alderman of the University of Minnesota writing in 1938 describes the beginnings as well as anyone.

> "As early as 1870, Louis Suelter, in the town of Carver, grew some seedlings of a promising native vine which he thought had been naturally cross–pollinated with the Concord. These seedlings fruited in 1881 and one of them was named "Beta" by Mr. Suelter. Altho this variety appears to be of the vulpina (Riparia) type, and there is doubt that it is a hybrid, it has become the leading variety among hardy grapes. Beta, Alpha and other varieties of hardy grapes have to a very large extent replaced tender varieties in commercial vineyards."[1]

Alderman goes on to describe "Beta" in the same bulletin leaving us with a variety distinctly Riparia in appearance.

> "Hardy, vigorous, productive, early. Bunches medium to small, moderately compact to loose, sometimes shouldered. Berries below medium in size, black, with blue bloom, quality fair."[2]

Alderman describes Alpha in almost identical terms saying finally "Similar to Beta, with which it is often confused."[3]

In fact William Pfaender, Jr., a pioneer New Ulm nurseryman writing in 1912 complained that there was already confusion as to what was the true Beta. Pfaender initially learned of Suelter's work through a Nebraska grape breeder by the name of C. B. Camp. Camp seemed to recommend "Dakota" first among Suelter hybrids and Pfaender was able to procure Dakota from Louis's son Jacob shortly thereafter.

This apparently fired an interest in Pfaender regarding Suelter's work and in 1908 he travelled to Carver gathering eight different cultivars form the original Suelter home and farms around it where Louis evidently passed out examples of his hybrids for test. From this expedition Pfaender states that "I have the Beta from three different sources and find that I have two kinds of Beta...."[4] This sounds disconcertingly familiar. Pfaender goes on to state that after making field observations and comparisons with material he collected earlier "...it is my opinion that two different Carver grapes were sent out, when originally distributed, as Beta."[5]

Franc P. Daniels of Long Lake, Minnesota, a local grape grower concurs that there was confusion from the beginning saying "...as he produced a good vine he would pass it around among his neighbors. No doubt much confusion arose due to this method of distribution."[6] Furthermore Daniels states that University of Minnesota "Professor Green" visited Pfaender early in the century and collected material and Daniels gives Green credit as being "...largely instrumental in their introduction throughout the state."[7]

However, Prof. Green may well have added to the confusion for Daniels goes on to say

> "...Prof. Green went down to his (Pfaender's) place and got cutting wood from a number of different varieties, probably the Dakota, Monitor, Beta and one or two others—not realizing that there were so many different varieties and that they are all very similar in type. The wood was sent out as Beta, thus causing a variation in the so—called Beta."[8]

As though this were not enough the volume "Grapes of New York" printed in 1908 clearly lists not one but two Beta grapes then being grown, one a Riparia/Lubrusca hybrid by Louis Suelter of Carver and a second from New Londin, Ontario a Riparia/Vinifera cross. While it could be surmised that this "Eastern Beta" with its Vinifera parentage would be non—hardy and not tenable in Minnesota it could also be a partial explanation as to why so many large berried "Betas" are seen in the field. Early descriptions of Beta and its sisters uniformly describe small berried, small clustered grapes, Alderman actually questioning if "Beta" was a hybrid at all but a pure V. Riparia.

Rather than leave the situation in a state of hopeless confusion careful study of old papers clearly show that early horticulturists saw and detailed differences in the early hybrids. (see Figure 1.) In fact Daniels states that both Pfaender and Strand, another early Minnesota nurseryman "...had them well straightened out. As they are in the nursery business those distributed by them (in 1925) are probably very true to name."[9] In fact Jacob Suelter informed Pfaender that his father had come to regard the Dakota as the best of his hybrids in later years. Pfaender seemed to share this view saying "In comparing notes I find that the Dakota defoliates fully two weeks earlier than the early defoliating Beta, and the fruit of the Dakota is sweeter than all of the others."[10] Daniels goes on to say "the Dakota can easily be distinguished from the Beta, first, by the sweet taste, and second, by the fact that when the berry of the Dakota is picked off the

stem the stubb shows a greenish white color, while that of the Beta is red."[11] Daniels further states that Dakota is "very similar to Beta but a little later."[12]

Elmer Swenson was fortunate enough to obtain a Suelter hybrid, Suelter excluded from local discussion from a source in Kansas. Although it is impossible to determine if this is a true Suelter Hybrid after passing through so many hands, it has proven to have extreme hardiness suggesting it could well be authentic. It is a large berried, medium size, straggly clustered grape which flowers and colors very early, typical of Suelter's work. Another Swenson acquisition "Monitor" the last of Suelter's four named hybrids is so similar to Suelter that Elmer believes it is the same or a clone for although Monitor colors slightly earlier it is identical in taste and appearance.

Whatever the exactitudes it is evident that all the varieties are very similar. Moreover the uncertainty as to variety, both historical and current, continues to cloud the picture. When we note data which suggests "Beta" makes a good fresh grape juice some guidelines must be found to define what Beta we are collecting data from, and where it might be available commercially as "Beta" is widely available under a range of "types".

I am hopeful that this article has brought to light some of the problems that should be addressed in developing new and old Riparia Hybrids for this area. Almost certainly there is a place for Riparia hybrids in the home vineyard and possibly commercially but a framework for identification must be developed for data to become meaningful.

Figure 1. Comparative Characteristics of Early Riparia Hybrids

	Blossom Date	Veraison	Bunches	Berries	Stubb/ Brush	Flavor	Ripening	Bloom	Productivity
Beta	early	very early	med–small sometimes loose	black/ small	red	tart	early	medium blue bloom	heavy
Dakota	very early	later	med–small sometimes loose	black/ small	greenish white	sweet	later than beta	medium blue bloom	heavy
Alpha			medium sometimes loose	black/ small		fair medium sweet	early	medium blue bloom	heavy
Janesville			med–small compact	black/ medium		fair	later than Beta	heavy blue bloom	light yields
Hungarian			small compact	black below medium		medium sweet		medium bloom	moderately productive
Suelter	early	very early	medium straggly*	dark blue medium to large*		sweet bland*		medium bloom*	heavy*
Monitor	early	later	medium straggly*	medium to large*					

* Denotes modern observation

Bibliography

1 – Grape Growing in Minnesota, Bulletin 297, 1938, W.G. Brierley and W.H. Alderman, University of Minnesota Experiment Station, Mpls., Mn. P. 2

2 – Ibid. P. 13

3 – Ibid.

[4] – Minnesota Horticulturist, Vol. 40, #1, January, 1912, the Beta Grape and its Origin, Wm. Pfaender, Jr. Minnesota State Horticultural Society, P. 13

[5] – Ibid. P. 14

[6] – Minnesota Horticulturist, Vol. 53, June, 1925, Hardy Grapes, Question and Answer Exercise, Franc P. Daniels, Long Lake, Mn. Minnesota State Horticultural Society, P. 167

[7] – Ibid.

[8] – Ibid.

[9] – Ibid.

[10] – Minnesota Horticulturist, Vol. 40, #1, January, 1912, The Beta Grape and its Origin, Wm. Pfaender, Jr., Minnesota State Horticultural Society, P. 14

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[12] – Ibid.