



Minnesota Grape Growers Association

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The Valiant Grape: Miracle or Mistake?

by John Marshall

It was back in the mid-1970s when it came to the attention of local growers that the University of South Dakota, Brookings had in fact released a new grape, the Valiant. It was the result of a cross of an eastern Montana Riparia and Fredonia. The first description of it suggested another Riparia hybrid perhaps an earlier ripening Beta. Since Beta was plenty early to begin with, it was difficult to see what real advance this vine represented.

While many people then and now did not know that the University of South Dakota had ever supported grape breeding, the fact is, the program reached all the way back to the remarkable work of N.E. Hanson during the turn of the last century whose breeding work encompassed many, many fruits and vegetables and whose releases are in some cases, still being grown. Tom Plocher at Hugo, Minnesota has made a project of collecting Hanson's old viticultural releases and finds a number of them still of horticultural and possibly economic interest. South Dakota has continued Hanson's commitment to grape breeding and Ron Peterson, the former Head of Horticulture at Brookings, took a personal interest in this work even to very recent times.

In fact Dr. Peterson attended an MGGA Annual Meeting some years ago and gave us an overview of his work talking at some length about the grape material he discovered which became the genetic base for the Valiant. It seems he went on a wild grape discovery expedition traveling northward and westward across South Dakota into Eastern Montana into ever more northerly and higher climes where he might find clones of Vitis riparia, genetically able to survive long, very cold winters and brief, very cool summers. He eventually found some Riparia growing in a site where he thought Indians might have encouraged their growth for the material was, he believed, sweeter and better than other Riparias found. Further hunting produced no new Riparias and Peterson feels he had found the northern extent of Riparia grapes in the high, dry plains of Eastern Montana. He added that he later

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returned looking for this and additional vitis but intensive agriculture appears to have killed it off as he neither refound this vine nor additional Vitis in the region.

While more experienced local growers failed to exhibit initial enthusiasm for Valiant the public at large and the nurseries that sold to them made up the difference. Jewell Nursery for example, a large wholesale nursery at Lake City, Minnesota sold to other nurseries 4,000 to 5,000 vines of it each year from its release until the mid 80's when its popularity began to decline. Other large midwestern wholesalers reported similar volumes and the vine was widely sold, mostly to homeowners, near and far.

I became interested in the Valiant during the early 80's. Initially I received a letter from a researcher at the Agricultural Research Station at Morden Manitoba. I had inquired about grape culture in Manitoba. He replied that grape growing in Manitoba was virtually absent though they had tested the Valiant Grape and found it would survive winters there unburied and able to bear a crop with little cold injury. It was therefore, he went on to say, even harder than our own Beta which would often suffer cold injury at Morden and did not bear fruit reliably. This told me that Valiant was almost certainly the hardiest grape yet produced, perhaps in the world, and suggested a reliability of bearing that was still in question for Minnesota growers with nearly all other commercial varieties. This was most interesting but an extra early ripening, super-hardy Beta Grape remained for me of modest interest.

However, during the 80's the University undertook a number of semi-formal comparative grape juice taste tests with juice from a number of local grapes and the Valiant always scored at or near the top. In fact, I noted that while these

juices were rated on a number of qualities, Valiant always did well in appearance and overall-taste, both qualities of essential value in a commercial variety. I began to think this might be a grape I could plant for repeated tests suggested its juice would have excellent consumer appeal, and yet the vine had the hardiness that gave me confidence it would bear reliably. This might prove to be a commercial variety, yet.

I asked around but few growers I knew in the early 80's had much experience with Valiant. What we were looking for was a fully-hardy Chardonnay or a large clustered Thompson Seedless-type that could withstand -30° F. A new Beta-type was not catching on with us. The literature from South Dakota suggested the vine was disease resistant and since most Riparia types do have good resistance I felt I was ready to move.

In 1988 we purchased our present vineyard site 3 miles north of Lake City, Minnesota right on Highway 61 within easy sight of Lake Pepin. Since we were not planning to plant anything that had to be buried in winter we easily selected the super-hardy Valiant to be among the first varieties planted. It was not a vine anyone else was planting but I thought since we had interest in grape juice this might be a sleeper.

In truth I thought I'd really hit on something initially. The awful drought of the late 80's was in full swing and Valiant not only survived but seemed to thrive. Growth was often close to rampant and during those terrible dry years I rarely had to spray them. They were nearly disease free and healthy as young 'coons filling my new trellis with long canes, waiting to bare fruit. In fact the "Growing Grapes in Minnesota" booklet put out at that time still described Valiant as "disease resistant".

It was an exciting time watching those Valiants grow and develop but the drought eventually came to

an end. While most of the other grapes shook the water off their leaves and drank deeply of the new summer rainfall Valiant began to show serious outbreaks of Downy Mildew, Black Rot, even some Powdery Mildew. I broke out my now inadequate backpack sprayer and did my best but to little avail. Downy Mildew enveloped the vines at every rainfall and even threatened to defoliate them during some periods. Valiant was proving to have a serious proclivity.

At the other end of my vineyard in what I call my "experimental block" are two half rows of various pure Vitis viniferas. Although Vinifera are generally considered "highly susceptible" to most fungus diseases my inadequate little sprayer was keeping these Pinot Noirs, Gewurztraminers, and Chardonnays quite clean. I realized thus that Valiant was beyond the "highly susceptible" disease rating and could reasonably be given the "exceedingly (or amazingly) susceptible" rating. This past season was very sobering in regard to Valiant. I have come to the conclusion that this variety should not be grown in a climate like ours. In fact when I came back in from the vineyard in a bad mood my wife would ask me "Have you been out walking around in those Valiants again? I'm not speaking to you if you keep doing that." The wet cool weather caused well more than 50% of the crop to shrivel and much of the canopy to be stunted. We have 1,000 of them and have now purchased a 50 gallon tractor-mounted airblast sprayer and plan to initiate an intensive spray program in coming seasons. Even so I tell visitors now, everyone is allowed a few mistakes in life I simply made 1,000 of them all at one time.

In truth however, I don't wish to make a blanket recommendation that no one should plant Valiant in any locality. It has demonstrated hardiness even greater than Beta,

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the previous benchmark of northern hardiness, thus making it of value in places where perhaps no other grape will grow. It is remarkably early to ripen as well. In the hot drought years it was fully ripe in July. Even during the past two cold wet summers Valiant was fully ripe in August when many other grapes dragged on unripe almost to October. This suggests it might be appropriate in extremely northerly climes with short, cool summers or a high elevations where heat and rain in scarce. It has great resilience as well, able to bear fruit after great adversity.

Moreover it is not just an "early Beta" as I initially thought. While Beta ripens with such high acid to make it essentially inedible Valiant attains much lower acid and is good

to eat. Although the berries and clusters are too small for a commercial table grape it is nonetheless far better eating than Beta, Alpha or other Riparia types. As stated earlier it can be pressed into a delicious, grapey, deep red juice that many taste tests confirm would be popular. It also makes a fine, deep purple, deliciously grapey jelly that is already enjoying commercial success. Even in wine it exceeds expectations. Mark Hedin, winemaker extraordinaire has gotten Valiant from me and without acid reduction or other enological manipulations fermented it to dryness. He has been nearly as amazed as I that the wine, while no Cabernet, is drinkable and enjoyable with a nice grapey bouquet and very moderate Labrusca character.

Therefore the Valiant is a clear quality improvement over Beta and

linking this with it's extreme earliness, resilience and unparalleled hardiness makes it a remarkable vine with important potential. Since the vine was selected in an arid locale (Brookings, South Dakota) where it obviously did well and its hardiness parent came from a very high, cold, austere and rainless climate we could reasonably suggest that Valiant be tried in such climates as the Dakotas, Wyoming, Montana perhaps even Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Valiant could be the shock troops that bring viticulture to such places. Indeed, to make grape culture feasible in such places would be something of a miracle but to plant it in a wet and humid clime like Minnesota is for the most part clearly unwise.

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Purpose Statement: The Minnesota Grape Growers Association (MGGA) was formed to further the art and science of growing grapes in cold climates. The Association sponsors grape growing, instructional workshops and tours for those interested in learning more about grape growing in Minnesota.

Membership Information: Both the amateur grower and the experienced commercial grower are invited to join. Membership is \$15.00 per year and includes our **Notes From The North** newsletter (quarterly), an annual "Yearbook", and a booklet **Growing Grapes in Minnesota**. Send check to John Marshall, RR2 Box 233, Lake City, MN 55041.

Booklet Information: **Growing Grapes in Minnesota** is a 62 page booklet on growing grapes in cold climates. It is available for \$1.50 plus \$1.50 for postage and handling. Send check to John Marshall, RR2 Box 233, Lake City, MN 55041.

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