

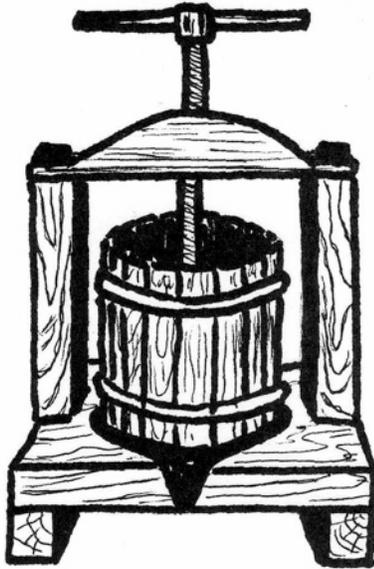
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The Peninsular Agricultural Research Station: A Valuable State Resource

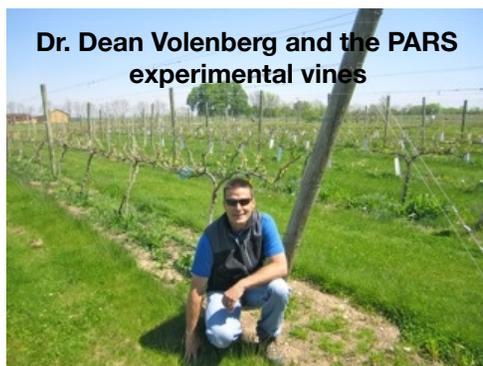
By Stephen Franzoi



Making wine out of fruit is still most popular among the majority of Wisconsin Vintners Association (WVA) members, but an ever-growing number of amateur winemakers are interested in actually growing cold-climate grapes for their wine making pursuits. In February 2012, just-under 40 WVA members met at Clifford's Supper Club for a Vineyard Management Seminar where they exchanged information and ideas on such topics as soil testing and preparation, vine selection and planting, and pest management and fertilization. Based on the enthusiasm expressed at the seminar, it is a sure bet that member interest in cold-climate grapes will grow even further in the coming years. Because both cold-climate grapes and fruits will continue to occupy the winemaking efforts of WVA members, it is vitally important to have the most up-to-date information about these wine-yielding plants, and identifying where to best find such information is the focus of this article.

Door County's Venerable Research Center: PARS

Although there already is a great deal of expertise within our association on cold-climate grapes and other fruits, arguably the most valuable information source in Wisconsin comes from work being conducted at one of the state's University of Wisconsin Agricultural Research Stations, the Peninsular Agricultural Research Station (PARS), located just north of downtown Sturgeon Bay. PARS has been part of the Door County landscape since 1922 and it is the only state research center that studies specialty crops such as apples, cherries, and grapes. One of PARS's primary tasks is to determine which grape varieties do well in different areas of the state. Through their work, researchers at PARS are helping both amateur and commercial growers better understand the varietal grapes they should plant in their vineyards (or backyards).



On a recent trip to Door County, my family and I received a tour of PARS from Dr. Dean Volenberg, an Agricultural Educator with the University of Wisconsin Extension-Door County. Dean received his bachelors and masters degrees, as well as his PhD, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in natural science, horticulture, and agronomy, respectively. His graduate degrees focused on biological weed management and the physiology and

genetics of weeds resistant to herbicides. Postdoctoral work at the University of Illinois-Champaign Urbana focused on molecular mechanisms of herbicide resistant weeds and gene flow (are your eyes glazing over yet?). Dean's interest in viticulture began 24 years ago when he interned at Dow Agro Sciences in Walnut Creek, California (also known as "Wine Country"). I am noting the details of Dean's educational background because he may well be the most important scientist in the state of Wisconsin providing invaluable information to both amateur and commercial grape and fruit growers.

At the beginning of our tour, Dean informed us that one reason Wisconsin, like all other surrounding Midwestern states, is witnessing a growing consumer interest in locally produced wines is because state-produced wines meet the desire of Wisconsinites who have embraced the "eat and drink local" movement. In the future, this demand for Wisconsin wines will be met by the opening of additional wineries and by increased acreage being used to cultivate grapes throughout the state. Five years ago, Wisconsin had 41 wineries and about 480 acres of grapes, but in 2012 the acreage is closer to 700 and the number of wineries is over fifty (soon the number will be over 80). Unfortunately, Wisconsin lags behind its neighboring states in support and funding for the fledgling commercial grape growing and wine producing industry.

Studying Cold-Climate Grape Vines

As all Wisconsinites are well aware, our state is a cold climate for grape growing. While we strolled through the research station's experimental vineyard of about 192 grapevines (12 varieties, four blocks, and four replications per variety), Dean mentioned that many grape varieties developed by the University of Minnesota do well in Wisconsin. Grapes such as Marechal Foch, Frontenac, La Crescent, La Crosse, Marquette, Brianna, and St. Pepin can tolerate the harsh Wisconsin winters and yield very drinkable wines. Frontenac is a popular red wine grape and St. Pepin is often used in the making of ice



Dean Volenberg & Paul Santoriello

wines. Some even newer cold-climate grape vines are Petite Pearl, Frontenac Gris, NY 76, and some experimental unreleased Minnesota material such as MN 1200, MN 1220, MN 1258.



Experimental Marquette Vine

For the past couple of years, Paul Santoriello, the wine maker at nearby Door Peninsula Winery (see the last issue of The Vintner's Press for an interview with Paul) has graciously taken grapes from these experimental vines and fermented them into "testing wines" to help Dean determine their quality. Of course, such testing is ultimately also helpful to Paul's winery in identifying new grape varieties for their wine consumers. By the way, within the next few months, WVA members will have the opportunity to taste two of these

“testing wines” (La Crosse and Brianna) at a WVA special event and determine for themselves the quality of PARS’s experimental vines.

One other important service provided by PARS and the University of Wisconsin Extension-Door County is its weekly “Vineyard I.P.M. Scouting Report” (I.P.M. is an acronym for “Integrated Pest Management”), which informs vineyard growers what they should be attending to and guarding against as their vines progress through the growing season. For example, the scouting reports during the months of April and May of 2012 focused on such issues as the dangers posed to vines by our early season warm weather and spring frost events and how the extended wet, cloudy weather of late April and early May provided ideal conditions for anthracnose infections of grape shoot tissues. These reports, which are available free at the Door County UW-Extension website at <http://door.uwex.edu/>, provide invaluable information to grape growers throughout the state.

Will PARS Survive Our State Budget Crisis?

Despite the valuable services provided by PARS, its continued existence is currently being threatened. During the past 18 months many state agencies, including the University of Wisconsin System, have faced large budget reductions. The Agricultural Research Stations (ARS) throughout the state are within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CAL S) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Early in 2012, the ARS were facing severe budget reductions due to the state’s financial problems. One solution that was seriously considered by university officials was to close PARS in Door County. Although information generated at PARS is pertinent statewide and within the North central region, the center more importantly serves the largest fruit-growing district in Wisconsin. The eastern lakeshore district encompasses more than 4,500 acres of orchards, while the southern district has the second most acres of orchards at 2,400. Staff members at the station have invaluable applied research knowledge, yet this source of knowledge was almost terminated with little public input. Without a last



PARS’ young grapevines from cuttings

source of information regarding grapes and fruits that are used in winemaking.

minute appeal to the CAL S dean by an advisory board of commercial apple, fruit, and grape growers in Door County, the center would have very likely closed.

Despite surviving the last round of budget cuts within the university system, university officials did decide not to replace at least one key fruit specialist position at PARS following a retirement. The center is currently facing up to \$125,000 in cuts to its \$260,000 annual budget and closure is still a distinct possibility. The harsh reality is that in the very near future, members of the Wisconsin Vintners Association and Wisconsin citizens in general may lose this very valuable

Looking Toward a Future With PARS

In our time spent with Dean Volenberg at the Peninsular Agricultural Research Station, we realized what a valuable service this center was providing to state residents, and more particularly to

fruit and grape (and potato) growers, as well as commercial and amateur winemakers. As Dean told us, with people here in Wisconsin and throughout the country becoming more interested in locally grown food products, in the coming years there will be an even stronger need for applied fruit specialists like those currently working at PARS. Further, Dean stated, local food systems involve more than just food, especially in Door County where tourism plays a major economic role. People's desire for locally grown and produced foods, combined with the tourist appeal associated with those foods, will serve as a catalyst for many social and economic changes in the state during this next decade, most importantly in the area of wine production. Gazing over PARS acreage of experimental grapevines, Dean smiled and said, "Many people have the perception that Midwest wines are different compared to West coast vinifera varieties. Yes they are. The younger generations understand this, but when they travel, most of them want to experience what is locally produced. Imagine just for a moment that at some point the West Coast may someday be importing grape juice from Wisconsin. I know it is hard to comprehend, but you need to dream!"

After Dean made this hopeful prediction, and as we walked toward our car and bade him farewell, the thought uppermost in my mind was that in order for this dream to possibly materialize, Wisconsin officials must maintain the viability of this research station. PARS's survival will be instrumental in shaping the future of winemaking in the state for years to come. If you would like your voice to be heard in helping secure the future of the 90-year-old Peninsular Agricultural Research Station, send a letter of support to:

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1450 Linden Drive
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