

Grapes of the Hudson Valley Illuminates The History of Grape Hybridization

By Richard Leahy

Grapes of the Hudson Valley (subtitle: *and Other Cool Climate Regions of the United States and Canada*), by J. Stephen Casscles, is a 250 page soft-cover book published by Flint Mine Press, 2015. Casscles is a commercial grape grower with over 30 years of experience based in New York's Hudson Valley (and also winemaker at Hudson Chatham Winery) so he is well-qualified to write this book.

Casscles' carefully detailed account is actually much more than the title suggests. Since it is located in the oldest continuous commercial grape growing region in the country, the story of Hudson Valley viticulture (as much for table grapes in the 19th and early 20th centuries as for wine grapes today) is the really the story of grape hybridization.

After pointing out that "all grapes are hybrids" (Riesling and Chardonnay both share Gouais Blanc in their genes), Casscles organizes most of the book into epochs of hybridization beginning with the Hudson Valley in the mid-19th century to produce grapes suited for cold climates. He begins with summaries of the various species of grapes used in hybridization programs and their strengths and weaknesses, then introduces the accidental *labrusca* hybrids, moving to details of hybridizers' work, explaining their methodology and the characteristics of their hybrid grapes. Each of the many hybrids has a series of symbols, showing grape color, cold hardiness, disease resistance, growing habit, yield, and wine quality, which are very helpful in such a detailed book. There are also color photos of the major hybrids of each group of hybridizers.

The premise of the book, says Casscles, is that since we have such a rich and diverse collection of hybrids that were developed in the Hudson and France, it may be that we don't need to wait for the newest hybrids from the land grant university hybrid programs to find the grapes best for cool Northeastern conditions. We may already have the best cultivars under our noses, but since they were released at difficult political or economic times, or had nobody to get the word out, they've been overlooked. All we need to do is take a closer look at what's already been developed and we may find grapes that can and should be taken up and championed, and Casscles has done a thorough job of describing and evaluating the 200 or so hybrids described in this book for their potential as cool climate winegrapes. Despite this, this book is well organized and highly detailed, and it will be an invaluable resource for anyone with a serious interest in grape hybridization for cool climates.

The symbol summary for grapes is helpful, but quantifying grape and wine "quality" with a letter grade is always problematic. For example, he rates the red French hybrid De Chaunac a "B+" for wine quality, which would be disputed by most who are familiar with that grape and its wine. Also, Casscles overlooked recently released hybrids GR-7, from Cornell University and Frontenac Blanc, an albino mutation, from the University of Minnesota, and omitted mention of the Vineland grape breeding program of Guelph University in Ontario altogether.