# Selected White Heirloom Grape Varieties for the Northeast

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This article outlines white heirloom grape varieties that I have grown on my farm and evaluated for the past fifteen years. My farm, Cedar Cliff, is located in Athens, NY, which is on the west bank of the Mid-Hudson River Valley. These quality heirloom varieties were bred in New England and in the Hudson Valley between 1820 and 1890. Here we detail some of those varieties that are suitable for cultivation in most of New England and the Middle Atlantic States except for its coldest regions. Many of these varieties are dual-purpose grapes that can be used to produce wine or sold as table grapes.

The reader will find that all of these varieties are productive, winter hardy, fungus disease, and drought resistant, and tolerate wide swings in temperature. Hence, they need fewer cost inputs than most commercial varieties that are grown today; consequently, they can be profitably grown on most vineyard sites in the Northeast. Further, since they are locally developed heirloom grape varieties, they should command heightened interest and demand in the market place as either wine or table grapes.

**Croton** *(vinifera, labrusca, bourquiniana)* is a hybrid bred by Dr. Richard T. Underhill (1802-1871) and possibly his nephew Stephen W. Underhill (1837-1925) of Croton Point, New York around 1863. It comes from a seed of Delaware pollinated by Chasselas de Fontainbleau. This is a high quality white grape that makes quality wines. Like Riesling, it is moderately susceptible to winter injury and has suitable fungus disease resistance. It is moderately vigorous in heavy soils, and seems to grow optimally in well drained rich, silty soils. The vine blooms late, is self-fertile, and ripens by mid-season. Its clusters are very pretty, with a prominent shoulder, very long, slender, cylindrical, and moderately compact. The berries are medium sized and translucent yellowish-green. The skin is thin, but tough. The taste in the fruit and wine is delicate that has a superior *vinifera*/Delaware flavor. It is refreshingly spritely with high sugars.

**Diamond** *(labrusca, vinifera)* was bred by Jacob Moore of Brighton, NY (1835-1908) around 1870. It is a Concord seed fertilized by Iona pollen that was introduced as Moore's Diamond around 1885. Its progeny includes: Cayuga White, Horizon, and Melody. Diamond is an early mid-season ripening variety that ripens about one week before Concord. It is very winter hardy, productive, and a vigorous grower. The plant resembles its seed parent Concord, but it is not as vigorous. However, it grows as well in the same soils as Concord, hence it has a wide range of habitat. It buds out by mid-season, with disease resistance as good as Concord, but it is more susceptible to black rot. The pale green compact clusters can be somewhat variable in size – medium to short, rather broad, somewhat blunt, and cylindrical.

The wine is clean, balanced, spicy, and rich, but mild and slightly perfumey. It can be an assertive white wine with flinty overtones and some spice with fewer of the astringent Native-American *labrusca* flavors. It is floral with clean notes of guavas, honey/mead, banana, some pineapples, and melons.

**Empire State** *(riparia, labrusca, vinifera?)* is a James H. Ricketts (1818-1915) hybrid that first fruited in 1879 and was introduced in 1884. Ricketts of Newburgh, NY maintained that Empire State came from a seed of Hartford pollinated by Clinton, however others believe that it is a hybrid of Clinton with a white European grape. Empire State is comparable to Niagara and Diamond in its vigorous growth habit, fungus disease resistance, and productivity. However, it is slightly less winter hardy and does not have as attractive a cluster for the table market. The fruit quality is very good, much better than Niagara and nearly as good as Diamond. Its flavor profile is more of *riparia* and Muscats, rather than the foxiness of a Native-American *labrusca.* It is a vigorous to very vigorous vine, healthy, and winter hardy. The grape ripens late mid-season to late, a few days earlier than Niagara. The clusters are medium-large, long, and rather slender and cylindrical, with a pretty pale yellowish-green to light green color.

**Empire State** *(riparia, labrusca, vinifera?)* is a James H. Ricketts (1818-1915) hybrid that first fruited in 1879 and was introduced in 1884. Photo credit: Linda Pierro, Flintmine Press.

The grapes ripen to 18˚ - 20˚ Brix and it is very suitable for wine production. The wines are clean, acids are well balanced, and it is floral in nose and taste. The wines are a pale light green to yellow; soft, not foxy, with fruit of pink grapefruit, slight appealing petroleum, pears, bananas, soft melons; bright, full, and flinty, with a long clean finish.

**Golden Drop** *(labrusca, vinifera, bourguiniana)* is a late-early season ripening white grape of superior quality. Cyrus G. Pringle (1838-1911) of East Charlotte, VT bred this grape (Adirondac x Delaware) and planted its seed in 1869. The vine is of medium vigor to moderately vigorous and very winter hardy, but not so productive since its cluster and berry size are below average. The cluster is cylindrical, moderately loose, and of moderate length. Golden Drop is somewhat resistant to fungus diseases. The berry is medium to medium-small and becomes a deep golden color when ripe. Golden Drop is a superior wine grape. It has a soft, delicate, and clean Native-American *labrusca* flavor profile like its pollen parent Delaware without its Muscat flavors. It is a clean tasting fruit that achieves a Brix of 17˚ to 18˚. The flowers are sterile or nearly so, open by mid-season, with upright stamens. My experience is that while the flowers are said to be self-sterile, it will easily pollinate with other mid-season pollinators and in mixed variety vineyards. Golden Drop, due to its winter hardiness, quality of juice, and early ripening time, should be considered for our shorter season growing areas.

**Iona** *(labrusca, vinifera)* is a Dr. Charles William Grant (1810-1881) hybrid that originated on his farm on Iona Island, in Rockland County, New York on the west bank of the Hudson River between 1855 and 1860. Dr. Grant maintained that Iona originated from a seed of Diana planted in 1855. Iona was introduced in 1864. Iona tends to want a warm soil that is deep and dry, such as well drained sandy or gravelly clays. It does not do well in damp, rich black soils, or on poor sand or gravelly soils without sufficient organic matter. The vine

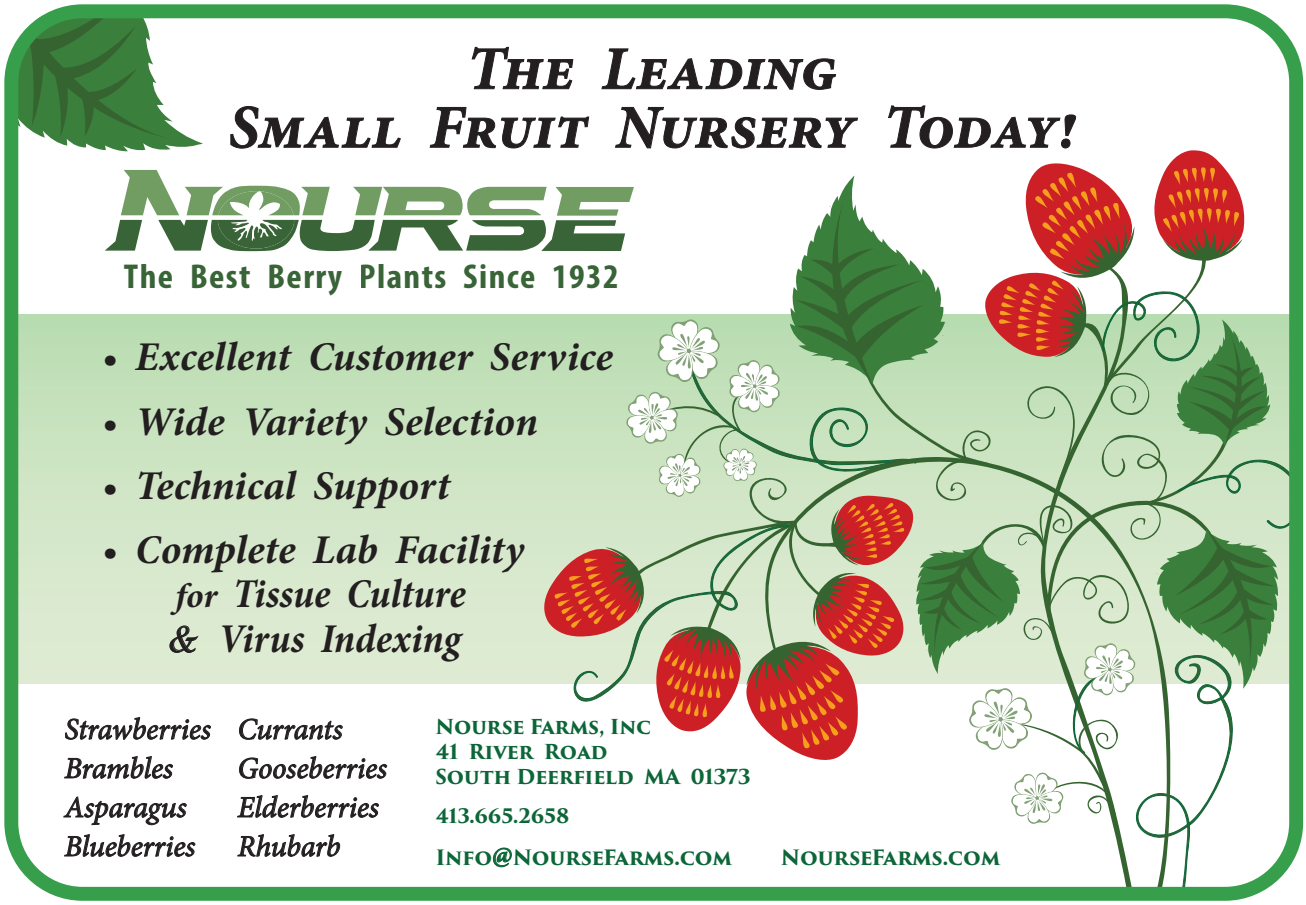
**Iona** *(labrusca, vinifera)* is a Dr. Charles William Grant (1810-1881) hybrid that originated on his farm on Iona Island, in Rockland County, New York on the west bank of the Hudson River between 1855 and 1860. Photo credit: Linda Pierro, Flintmine Press.

is winter hardy to moderately winter hardy, of average productivity and vigorousness. Iona is only somewhat resistant to most fungus diseases. Its nearly self-fertile flowers bloom by late season; hence, it is more productive when placed in a mixed variety vineyard for cross pollenization purposes. Its fruit ripens late mid-season to late, later than Concord. The berries have a unique pale to dark pink/red hue with some amethyst and watermelon shades that are not uniform. The cluster is medium-large to large, with rather loose large berries of varying size that can ripen unevenly. The cluster is double-shouldered and nearly cylindrical. Its sugars range from between 18˚to 22˚ Brix.

Despite its not so perfect cultivation attributes, Iona is great in the cellar. The grape has delightfully soft *labrusca* flavors that carry through into its wines. It is of similar quality to Delaware, but it is much softer, rounder, and approachable; with elements of melons, white peaches, pears, soft tropical fruits, guava and watermelon and none of the mustiness

of Delaware. It is perfumey and welcoming that makes a refreshing white wine.

**Winchell** *(seed of unknown purple grape)* is a superior white grape that was raised by James M. Clough (1820?-1890?) of Stamford, Vermont around 1850. Winchell is a viticulturally superior grape both in the field and in the wine cellar. While its genetic ancestry is unknown, observers maintain that while it is chiefly a *labrusca* variety, that it may have some *vinifera* and *aestivalis* in its genetic background.

Winchell is a vigorous to very vigorous growing white variety that is adapted to many different soil types and cool climates. It is very winter hardy, healthy, fungus disease resistant, and very productive. It has a very dense canopy, so it should be pruned to open its canopy to minimize fungus diseases. While Winchell is not a good table grape because it shells, it is a fine wine grape. The cluster is moderately compact, moderately large in size, slightly cylindrical that tapers, with one prominent shoulder. The medium sized berries are greenish to yellow with small brown dots. The variety ripens by late-early to early mid-season and attains sugars of between 18˚ to 19˚ Brix, but its taste is perceived to be sweeter because of the grape's low acidity. Winchell clusters hang on the vine until they ripen, but then the berries start to fall off. The variety has a soft, nuanced, and very approachable Native-American *labrusca* taste that is muted and subtle. The wines are yellow-green in color, floral, grapey, with very fine soft white *labrusca* flavors complimented by notes of honey, apricots, bananas, and pineapples, with a body and viscosity that is medium to heavy for a white wine. Winchell was used to breed the Geneva hybrids Cayuga White and Horizon.

As they say: "what is old is new again". It is my hope that growers in the Northeast who are looking for new fruits to cultivate will consider these locally developed heirloom white grape varieties. This article is based on the author's over forty years of experience growing cool climate grapes in Athens, NY and making wine from them; and *Grapes of the Hudson Valley and Other Cool Climate Regions of the United States and Canada,* by J. Stephen Casscles (Coxsackie, N.Y.: Flint Mine Press, 2015) (the book is available at www.flintminepress.com). The author's email address is cassclesjs@yahoo.com.