Selected Red French-American Grape Varieties for the Northeast

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Baco Noir

This article covers recommended red grapes that I grow in the Mid-Hudson Valley at my farm Cedar Cliff, in Athens, New York. It outlines the viticultural aspects of these grapes and the wines they produce. Wine-making capability is an important consideration as growers need to grow varieties that are not only consistently productive, and economically & ecologically sound to grow; but which produce high quality wine. In the Northeast, many growers also own a winery. A grower should be interested in growing grapes in a profitable manner, but which can be used to produce quality wine. These varieties can produce more than one style of wine; this versatility in the cellar is an added bonus for the wine producer.

Baco Noir *(riparia, vinifera)*, is a small berried, thin-skinned black grape that is hardy to very winter hardy for most of the Northeast. It was bred in 1902 by François Baco (1865-1947) of Armagnac, France. Baco Noir is a cross of Folle Blanche, a traditional grape used to make brandy, by a mix of pollen of a *riparia* grape called Grand Glabre and V. *riparia ordinaire*.

Like many other *riparia* hybrids, the vine buds out early, so it is subject to late spring frost damage, but it produces a reduced secondary crop. Similar to other *riparias*, the vine has lush vegetative growth. Baco Noir is moderately susceptible to black rot and powdery mildew, but is resistant to downy mildew. It is susceptible to botrytis, especially if it rains during harvest, in which case the berries readily crack and botrytis sets in.

Baco Noir can be grown on moderately heavy clay soils. Since Baco is a *riparia* hybrid, it tolerates excessive soil moisture, but the ground cannot be wet or swampy for long periods of time. Baco Noir is a productive variety that ripens consistently by mid-season, around the third week of September, with sugars of between 20˚ and 23˚ Brix. While Baco Noir has some issues in the field, it is great in the cellar. It ferments easily and clears rapidly. To make quality wines, it needs to be harvested when mature to reduce its naturally high malic and tartaric acids.

Baco Noir can produce a wide range of quality wines similar to: Burgundian Pinot and Gamay Noirs; light Italian Valpolicellas, Nouveaus; and Rosés. Baco Noir has deep color, lots of berry, black cherry, and plum fruits, and relatively high-acid levels with a long clean finish. It has great aging potential and brings presence

Burdin Noir

to red wine blends, but does not dominate.

Burdin Noir (B. 6055) *(rupestris, riparia, labrusca, lincecumii, vinifera)* is a great red wine grape whose heritage is approximately one quarter *vinifera*. It is a cross of Plantet x Seinoir. It was bred by Joanny Burdin, who began breeding grapes around 1925 in the Saône-et-Loire department, Burgundy, France.

Burdin Noir is easy to grow with a vigorous, upright growth habit, with thick three to four foot canes that grow in an open canopy. It has good fungal disease resistance, even in wet years. The vine is moderately winter hardy with strong vigor and heavy yields. The medium-large sized compact clusters are cylindrical. The dark blue berries are large with thick skins. Burdin Noir likes a deep, well-drained soil, but will grow in fertile and damp, but not wet, clay soils. The grape ripens by late mid-season to late and hangs well after the grapes ripen.

Burdin Noir makes a superior wine with aging potential. The wine's color is of light beet juice. It has a pronounced berry nose and a soft, but full, tannin structure, with a long clean finish. The flavor profile is of strawberry jam, pomegranates, lots of berries, with a pleasant flint undertone.

Chambourcin (J.S. 26-205) *(berlandieri, cinerea, labrusca, lincecumii, riparia, rupestris, vinifera)*, is a versatile red wine grape that was developed by Joannes Seyve (1900-1966) in Bougé Chamalud, just south of Lyon on the Rhône. Its' parentage is uncertain, but Chancellor may be one of its parents. It can make Rhône or northern Italian-type reds or Anjou-type rosés.

Chambourcin can make big, rich reds as well as light fruity rosés. Chambourcin grown in colder or short season locations can have a thin austere quality, so the variety's northern-most range should be confined to the southern-most coast of New England.

Chambourcin buds out very late, but produces a secondary crop after a late spring frost. The vine is moderately vigorous, of standard size, and produces very large, moderately loose bunches of blue-black grapes. It is consistently productive, but needs cluster thinning. The vine is sensitive to lime soils and should not be planted in droughty places. It does well in deep, well-drained soils. It is only slightly less winter hardy than Baco Noir and about as hardy as Chelois. The grape is somewhat resistant to fungus diseases. It is resistant to botrytis and most bunch rots due to its thick skin, loose-forming clusters, and late harvest date. It is somewhat sensitive to sulfur treatments. Due to its airy canopy and loose clusters, the vine readily accepts fungus sprays and dries out quickly. The grape ripens late to very late.

Chambourcin has elements of a soft, light Rhône or Cabernet Franc. It has a soft, but firm, tannin structure, lovely flavor profile, subtle nuances, and prominent black pepper aroma. These flavors overlay nicely with the grape's basic berry front of blackberries, black cherry/raspberry, cooked mulberries, and chocolate.

Chambourcin

Chelois

The wines are aromatic and earthy with a bouquet of eucalyptus, spice, and cigar box. Chambourcins can have a muted grapey nose, unless aged for five years or more or blended with varieties such as Baco Noir, Burdin Noir, Cabernet Franc, or Chelois to soften it up.

They make lovely rosés, like an Anjou rosé which are partially made with Chambourcin. These rosés are not like sweet Pink Catawbas, but steely rosés that have presence. These high-acid raspberry-red to peach-colored wines are bright, with elements of cranberries, lemons, watermelons, and Hawaiian Punch with a slate finish.

Chelois (S. 10878) *(aestivalis, cinerea, labrusca, riparia, rupestris, vinifera)* makes an excellent *vinifera-like* red wine that is complex, approachable, with great balance and tannin structure. It is also a good performer in the field. Chelois was developed by the French physician, grape breeder and nurseryman, Dr. Albert Seibel (1844-1936) who lived in the Rhone-Alpes region of France. Chelois, a hybrid of S.5163 x S.5593, was hybridized during the first part of the twentieth century, and has the same seed parent (S. 5163) as the red Seibel hybrids Chancellor and De Chaunac. The *vinifera* heritage of Chelois constitutes about 50 percent of its genetic make-up.

Chelois is a vigorous grower that is moderately productive. Its harvest date is no earlier than late mid-season to early late season, about ten days after Baco Noir. Its bud break is late, but if injured by a late frost, it has a small secondary crop. It is winter hardy, but less so than Maréchal Foch or Baco Noir.

The vine is healthy and vigorous, with a slightly upward to lateral growth habit that is bushy. Chelois has an open canopy, which increases sunlight to the fruit and encourages the foliage and fruit to dry off quickly. The very compact cluster is medium in size and cylindrical with a medium-sized blue-black berry. It likes deep, well drained, and rocky soils, not droughty or heavy clay soils. The grape is somewhat resistant to black rot and downy mildew, but is susceptible to powdery mildew. Further, due to its very compact cluster, it can get bunch rot. Often, in the United States, Chelois vines or their cuttings seem to have a virus problem, perhaps tomato ringspot, which can lead to early vine decline.

The quality of Chelois wines is excellent. Chelois has soft mature fruit, medium-bodied tannin structure, and an approachable acid profile that ages very nicely for twenty years. Chelois is a complicated wine, that is Burgundian in character.

The wine's color is a medium scarlet red. The nose is aromatic, complex, and layered with elements of dried fruits, smoky wood, cedar box, black cherry, raspberries, and other berries, strawberry jam, and a nice spiciness reminiscent of anise and eucalyptus. Chelois has a firm, but approachable acid/tannin profile that can stand on its own or blended with other reds. What distinguishes Chelois from many other French-American hybrid wines is that it has a very complete *vinifera* nose

and taste, with soft spice and black pepper.

Chelois blends well with deeply pigmented/highly acidic wines such as the Minnesota red hybrids. This is because it tones down their deep purple pigments and high acids. In addition, Chelois blends well with heavy-bodied reds such as Chambourcin, Chancellor, Cabernet Franc, or Cabernet Sauvignon; and the resultant wine remains a hefty long-lived wine that is more approachable.

Landot Noir (L. 4511) *(aestivalis, berlandieri, cinerea, labrusca, lincecumii, riparia, rupestris, vinifera)* is a hybrid of Landal Noir (L. 244) x Villard Blanc that is between forty to fifty percent *vinifera* in heritage. It was bred by Pierre Landot (1900-1942) of the Rhône-Alpes region of France. Landot Noir is the seed parent of Frontenac.

It is a vigorous vine, with a late bud break. It ripens early mid-season to mid-season. It is winter hardy with good disease resistance, especially to downy mildew. The growth habit is upright to lateral. Landot Noir is a consistent and heavy producer that is effortless to grow. The long and relatively narrow cluster is medium-large to large, consisting of medium to medium-large-sized blue berries. The wine is a fruity Beaujolais-like wine with full body and good tannin structure.

Léon Millot (Kuhlmann 194-2) *(riparia, rupestris, vinifera)*, is productive and makes an excellent hearty, sometimes opaque, red wine. Léon Millot is a cross of a seedling of Millardet et Grasset101-14 by pollen of Goldriesling. Léon Millot, along with Maréchal Foch, was developed around 1911 by Eugene Kuhlmann (1858-1932). Kuhlmann was the director of the Institut Viticole Oberlin at Colmar, Alsace. Reports of the growing habits and wine attributes of Léon Millot vary widely. This is because there are two clones of Léon Millot.

The clones are the Foster (nursery) Millot (or ***Millot Rouge***) and the Boordy (nursery) Millot (or ***Millot Noir***). The descriptors below will bear out why they are referred to this way. Both clones produce sugars of 24˚ Brix.

Millot Rouge was distributed by Foster's Nursery as Léon Millot and has the same genetic makeup as Maréchal Foch. It is similar to Foch in its growth habit and the wine that it produces. This black grape ripens very early, sometimes even before Foch, but generally no more than one week later. Its early bud break, small cluster size, tight and compact clusters, and shape are similar to Foch, but Millot Rouge is a bit more vigorous

Léon Millot

in vegetative growth. The variety is very vigorous in the field, more so than Foch, more productive, and has higher acid and sugar levels.

While very winter hardy, its canes are more spindly than Foch and winter dieback can be more pronounced because of the thin canes. Millot Rouge has good disease resistance, but due to its thick canopy, it must be sprayed carefully to control fungus diseases. The wine is medium bodied and fruity, with lots of berry, blackberry, and bright prune notes in a Burgundian style. The berry notes of Millot Rouge are more herbal, woody, and complex than Foch and its color is darker.

Millot Noir was distributed by Boordy Nursery, the now sadly defunct nursery of Philip and Jocelyn Wagner of Riderwood, Maryland. It is a vigorous grower, more like Baco Noir, and more productive than Millot Rouge. It has larger clusters that ripen later than Millot Rouge.

Millot Noir, it is believed, has the same genetic makeup as Millot Rouge and Foch, and while it has some of the attributes of Millot Rouge, there are significant differences. While Millot Rouge clusters and plant look like Foch, Millot Noir is a very vigorous vine that also has more spindly, but longer growing canes. Also, it ripens by mid-season or later, a full ten days to two weeks after Foch or Millot Rouge. The clusters are much larger than Millot Rouge or Foch,

but its berries are small, sometimes very small. The vine is much more productive than Millot Rouge. It has good disease resistance, but is more susceptible to botrytis than Foch. For the Northeast, Millot Noir, may be one of the few very winter hardy varieties that can consistently produce these large, dark, complex reds.

It is in the wine that really differentiates Millot Noir from Millot Rouge. Millot Noir is a very big, aromatic, chewy, herbaceous, and earthy wine that is more reminiscent of a Rhone or a big Italian red. It's flavor profile includes cooked mulberries, chokecherries, tobacco, black olives, and licorice. It is integrated, but layered, with elements of leather, thyme, eucalyptus, and lots of earth. It has none of the soft berry flavors of Millot Rouge.

Both Millots are solid wines, with aging potential. They are also good for blending and benefit greatly from wood aging. Millot Rouge adds a nice berry nose to any blend and softens its acid profile, while Millot Noir has big tannins that can provide deep color, depth, and complexity to a blend. Leon Millot has been overlooked in the past and should be considered for future plantings in the Northeast.

Maréchal Foch (Kuhlmann 188-2) *(riparia, rupestris, vinifera)* is versatile both in the field and cellar. Like Léon Millot, it is a seedling of Mgt. 101-14 x Goldriesling that was bred in 1911 by Kuhlmann.

Maréchal Foch (Foch), is an early ripening, vigorous variety. Foch is not particular about its soil. It is relatively productive, but due to its small cluster size, has only average yields. It buds out very early to early on a vine that is smaller than average. Its compact cylindrical cluster is small to medium in size. It is very winter hardy in the Northeast and will produce a small secondary crop if hit by frost. The vine is generally resistant to fungus diseases, particularly downy mildew and botrytis, and slightly less so for black rot and powdery mildew. Further, it is somewhat sensitive to sulfur treatments.

Foch is versatile in the cellar. It makes a standard red table wine; soft and easy to drink Beaujolais-style red; rosé; and Nouveau. In addition, it blends well with other red wines to add more fruit or to soften other wines. The deep to medium-deep colored red-violet wines are light to medium in body. The wines tend to be relatively high in malic acid, and low in tannins. It has some limited ageing potential and can benefit for oak aging.

Maréchal Foch

Foch can be made into many different wine styles. Among its flavors are fresh blackberries, blueberries, cooked strawberries, bramble-berry jam, and red cherries. The wines can have a creamy fleshy feeling and a soft-acid/tannin profile, so it may need to be blended to enhance its presence. Some have a musty, herbaceous, metallic finish; however, they can be complex and perfumy with elements of chocolate, cloves, leather, black olives, burnt toast, and mocha.

The red grape varieties detailed above can prosper in some or most of the Northeast. They make high quality wines and are versatile in the cellar. Very importantly, they consistently produce bountiful crops to boost the growers' bottom-line and can be grown in an ecologically sound and sustainable manner that make a diverse set of quality wines that are unique to the Northeast.

This article is based on the author's over forty years of experience growing French-American hybrid grapes and making wine from them at the Hudson-Chatham Winery. See generally, J. Stephen Casscles, Grapes of the Hudson Valley and Other Cool Climate Regions of the United States and Canada *(Coxsackie, N.Y.: Flint Mine Press, 2015.*