Selected White French-American Grape Varieties for the Northeast

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This article covers recommended white 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. Hence, the grower should be interested in growing grapes in a profitable manner, but which can be used by their winery to produce quality wines. These varieties can produce more than one style of wine; this versatility in the cellar is an added bonus for the wine producer.

Seyval Blanc (S.V. 5-276) *(lincecumii, rupestris, vinifera)*, is a white wine grape that was developed in 1921 by Bertille Seyve, Jr. (1895-1959), whose nursery was located on the Rhône River, just south of Lyon. Rayon d'Or is the pollen parent of Seyval Blanc and shares this parent with Vidal Blanc. Seyval Blanc has been used extensively in university breeding programs. Its progeny include Cayuga White, Chardonel, La Crosse, Melody, and St. Pepin.

Seyval Blanc is adaptable to where it grows and can make many different styles of wine, such as: very fruity, semi-dry Germanic-like whites; Sancerre/Sauvignon Blanc-like wines that are dry with crisp fruit and herbal notes; Chablis-style Burgundy/Chardonnay-like wines that are flinty, with the fruit of green apples and soft lemons; and California-style, fat and buttery Chardonnays.

Seyval Blanc buds out fairly early, but has a secondary crop if a late spring frost hits. It is moderately winter hardy to hardy, but less so than Baco Noir or Delaware. It is moderately susceptible to black rot, powdery mildew, and botrytis at maturity, but is more resistant to downy mildew. On average, it is more susceptible to fungus diseases than either Vidal or Vignoles.

The cylindrical to slightly tapering conical clusters are medium-large to large and compact to semi-compact. Seyval grows on a standard-sized vine of medium vigor. It ripens mid-season to late mid-season. The vine is very reliable in the field and highly productive. It should be cluster thinned to produce quality wines. It does not do well in droughty or shallow soils.

When Seyval is fermented cool and aged in neutral containers, the result is a Germanic-style white. The wine's fruit flavors include elements of green apples, pineapples, and citrusy notes of lemon, grapefruit, and pear. It is a bright, clean, and crisp – even metallic.

If made from slightly under ripe to ripe grapes, fermented cool, and then aged in oak for a short time; the wine is similar to a Sancerre or Muscadet. These Loire-like whites are more complex, with an herbaceous flint-like body and softer fruit flavors of pears, melons, peaches, and apples.

Seyval Blanc, if picked ripe – but not too ripe – and aged in oak for six months or more, is a slightly thinner version of a Burgundian-style Chardonnay. The flint and steely finish is still there, but it is more austere with fruit flavors of apples, cider, peaches, and pears with a complex yeasty and toasty vanilla finish.

The grape can also be made as a California-style Chardonnay that is fat, buttery, and full of wood and vanilla flavors. If very ripe grapes are fermented in oak and left on the lees, this results in a lighter version of a California-style Chardonnay. These wines tend to have big wild flavors of melons, bananas, honey, ripe peaches, orange blossoms, almonds, and hazelnuts. The body is round, warm, buttery, and complex with lots of vanilla throughout.

Verdelet (S. 9110) *(aestivalis, cinerea, labrusca, lincecumii, riparia, rupestris, vinifera)*, is a dual-purpose grape that makes excellent wine, but is also a superb seeded table grape. The wines are floral, with a perfumey nose, and a solid acid backbone that makes it ideal for still or sparkling wine production. It is one of Seibel's later crosses of Plantet x S. 4938.

Verdelet is a productive variety of only medium vigor, but has average yields if managed well with pruning and cluster thinning. Its bud break is neither early nor late. The variety matures by late mid-season

Verdelet.

to late, but hangs well, so can remain on the vine much later. The clusters are very large, loose to well filled, and very pretty, with large tear-shaped berries that ripen to a beautiful pink-yellow to light golden color. The skin is resilient, but not tough and adheres to the flesh. Due to its large clusters and medium vigor, Verdelet should not be allowed to over crop.

It is sensitive to downy mildew and is hardier than Riesling. Verdelet is susceptible to *phylloxera,* both on its leaves and roots, so it should be grafted, but it can still be grown commercially on its own roots. The variety should be planted on warm, well-drained sites that are out of the wind.

The wine quality is excellent with a delicate, floral and perfumey nose that has a flinty finish. The flavor profile has elements of green apples, lemons, melons, lots of white peach, bananas, and light apricots. Verdelet wines tend to be very pale with some hints of green color. As it ages, they can take on flavors of orange rinds and hazelnuts. The wine has lots of structure, which makes it flinty, clean, and steely, with grapefruit flavors, and an acid profile that sometimes has almond pits.

For those who are adventurous and live in the warmer parts of the Northeast, Verdelet is highly recommended as a quality grape for wine and the table.

Vidal Blanc (Vidal 256) *(lincecumii, rupestris, vinifera)* yields ample crops that produce quality wines. It is made both as a varietal wine and used extensively in blends. This high acid white grape is very versatile in the cellar and can make either bone-dry, steely white wines; barrel-aged Fumé Blanc type wines; sparkling wines; or sweet dessert/ice wines.

Vidal Blanc was hybridized by Jean-Louis Vidal, (1880-1976), director of the Institut de Recherches Fougerate at Bois-Charentes, located near Cognac, France. The grape's seed parent, Ugni Blanc, is *vinifera* and its pollen parent is the French-American hybrid Rayon d'Or (S.4986). Vidal Blanc shares a common parent with Seyval Blanc -- Rayon d'Or. Its genetic makeup is 75 percent *vinifera.* The goal of Professor Vidal in breeding Vidal 256 was to produce a fungus disease resistant grape that could produce brandy.

Vidal Blanc is a thick-skinned grape that is moder-

ately hardy to hardy to winter damage. It is generally resistant to fungus diseases. The vine is vigorous, a consistent producer, and very productive. The variety can grow in many different soil types and conditions. It buds out late to very late, but if damaged by a late spring frost, produces a secondary crop. Vidal Blanc has greenish-white medium-small berries on a large compact cluster that is long, narrow, and tapering to cylindrical. Vidal matures late to very late and attains high sugars, but due to its late harvest date, is suitable only for the warm coastal areas of New England or the Mid-Atlantic states.

It can make a wide range of wines, including: an Alsatian-style wine with viscous/oily qualities; wines like Vouvray/Chenin Blanc; big fat Fumé Blanc-style wines/Sauvignon Blanc, if aged in oak; and Rhine wine-like dessert wines. As a crisp wine without oak aging, Vidal is very clean, metallic, and flinty with floral and resinous notes that include flavors of pineapple, grapefruit, melon, hazelnuts, pears, orange blossoms, dried flowers, and lead pencils. It has high acid levels, so residual sugars are often left to help balance the acid levels.

As a Fumé Blanc-type wine, the grapes are left on the vine longer to increase sugars and to reduce the grape's high acid levels. These wines are helped greatly with at least six months of wood aging to soften its body, brighten its nose, give it more complex smoky notes, rich spice, butter flavors, and to elongate its finish. These wines have the flavors of ripe pears, orange rinds, vanilla, and almonds. As an ice wine, Vidal Blanc has the classic Rhine wine qualities of rich honey, citrus flavors reminiscent of Grand Marnier, and hazelnuts, with an underlying metallic finish.

Vidal, on its own, can have a muted nose; but, is a solid foundation for blending. Blending it with other whites can brighten it and add complexity. One of the great strengths of Vidal in the cellar is that it is good on its own and is a worthy component in blended wines in cool climate regions.

Vignoles (Ravat 51) *(lincecumii, rupestris, vinifera)* is a hybrid of Plantet (S. 5455) x S. 880. Vignoles was bred around 1930 by Jean François Ravat (? –1940), who was a civil engineer from the Saône-et-Loire department in Burgundy. He bred grapes from 1929 to 1935, and died relatively young in 1940, whose work was carried on by his son-in-law, Jean Tissier.

This versatile white wine grape is similar to Riesling in many ways both viticulturally and in its wines. It can be made into barrel-aged dry wines; simple semi-dry county wines; and very complex sweet late-harvest wines. The grapes have high acids and sugar levels that can reach 30˚ Brix.

Vignoles is as winter hardy as Seyval Blanc or better. The vine is not vigorous, but is resistant to black rot and moderately resistant to downy mildew. However, it is susceptible to botrytis and powdery mildew because of its very compact cluster. Its susceptibility to botrytis can impart peach, apricot, and honey notes to its wines.

Its bud break is late, with very compact clusters that are relatively small, conical, with a small shoulder. The thick-skinned light green, pink tinged berries are small for a white variety. This makes Vignoles only a moderate producer. Vignoles' tight clusters make the grape even more susceptible to cracking, bunch rot, and botrytis. To help reduce fungus disease pressure, Vignoles should be pruned to open the canopy to increase sunlight penetration and air circulation.

The grape ripens by late mid-season for dry wines, but can be picked much later for late-harvest white wines. If made dry, it can be clean and crisp with a touch of tartness of green apples, grapefruit, and bananas. The fruit is citrus in character, with underlying elements of peach and tropical fruits, which works well with oak aging. If made semi-sweet, Vignoles can have subtle and complex floral notes of apricots, pineapples, honey, peaches, orange rinds, melons, guava, and orange blossoms with a tart finish. The finish consists of honey, almonds, and Grand Marnier. Vignoles is good for blending. It adds complexity, color, and weight to white wine blends.

The grape varieties detailed above can prosper in some or most of the Northeast. They all make high quality white wines that are versatile in the cellar. Further, and very importantly, they consistently yield 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 these grapes. 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).

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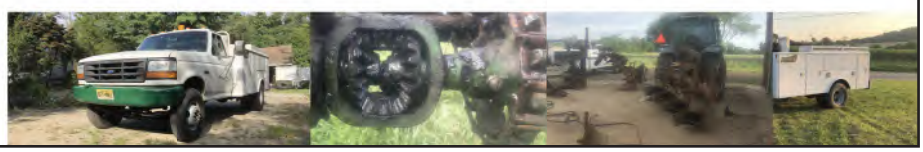
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