

The Vineyards of Renville County



Kevin Fluhr's Vineyard, Hector



Ron and Wendy Kluver's Vineyard, Danube



Steve & Maria Zenk's Vineyard, Danube

**** The Vineyards of Renville County is a project of the Renville County Ag/Renewable Energy Committee, a committee of the Renville County HRA/EDA; written by Dick Hagen in an effort to raise the awareness about agriculture in Renville County. ****

Two Olivia 'northsiders' Chuck and Toni Baumgartner 'set the stage' for this rather unusual phenomena called the 'Vineyards of Renville County.' Chuck reflects, "One evening after work my wife asked me what I'd like to do if I no longer wanted to do construction work (Chuck is an accomplished brick and stone mason). I just happened to be holding a glass of wine. I looked at that glass and told Toni, I'd like to be a grape farmer. She said, 'Let's do it.'"

And they did! The Baumgartner's hand planted 779 potted Marquette vines this spring into the freshly dug soil behind their 3-acre 9th St. North home site. Already another 60 vines will be planted next spring "...by then we'll have nearly \$10,000 into our little project," says Chuck. Yet it will still be three years before Farmer Chuck harvests his first grapes!

Such is the uniqueness of this new business entity in Renville County called growing grapes. Once the bug bites the fever sets in. Nobody expects to get rich and so far nothing big---only about 20 acres of grapes in the entire county. Small stuff compared to the 600,000 acres of corn, soybeans, sugar beets and canning crops that make this county famous for its #1 ranking within the state of Minnesota. But now a dozen 'backyard' vineyards ranging from small patches of 220 vines to sizeable vineyards of nearly 3,500 vines have magically sprouted around the County in the past 4-5 years.

Strange names for this new crop - names like Frontenac, LaCrescent, Marquette, Saint Croix, Marechal Foch, Frontenac Gris, Sabrevois, St. Pepin and Prairie Star are pedigrees of the various varieties now flourishing in Renville County vineyards. Farmers, meat retailers, government employees, stone masons, house wives, farm management specialists, county employees, Ag communicators and former farmers are the pedigrees of this new breed of Renville County agribusiness people called vintners (one who grows grapes).

The Vintners of Renville County include:

Ron and Wendy Kluver, rural Danube---

2004 was the first year for these former dairy farmers to plant their first grapes with 138 Frontenac's, LaCroix, and Sabrevois planted in their front yard. "Because that's about all that would fit at that time," recalls Wendy. They now have 387 plants with LaCrescent and Frontenac Gris added to the lineup.

Explains Ron, "Milk prices were sort of lousy so the dairy business didn't look that promising. We had talked with Steve Zenk about grapes as an alternative crop. So Steve and we were sort of the guinea pigs to see if growing grapes would work. We had done some research about grapes and had talked with Field Stone, particularly if there was a market. Maybe it's my farming background. I didn't want to put something in the ground without some guarantee that there was a market."

But now that they've got experience, will they plant more? Both are extremely busy in their 'new world' running Danube Upholstery and Shoe Repair so Wendy cautiously answers, "I don't know. Maybe we could get up to about 640 vines, about one acre." Their take? "It's a quiet place, plus it looks nice in our front yard," chuckles Wendy. "Definitely more relaxing and a lot less work than milking cows," laughs Ron saying that even if he's in the vineyard just pruning, it's a relaxing chore.

Kevin Fluhr, Hector meat market---

"My first vines were planted in 2004. Just 40 that year; then 650 in 2005, and another 2,700 this spring," says Fluhr. "I see this as new opportunity, totally different from what I've been doing for 30 years. I think it has good profit potential otherwise I wouldn't be getting involved."

Located on his 11-acre farmstead northeast of Hector, Kevin already has plans for another 1300 plants next spring. That means 4,690 vines and more than 6 acres devoted to grapes, which puts the onus on marketing. But no problem for a retailer with 30 years experience, Kevin already has a 5-year contract with Field Stone Winery, Morgan.

This much production means diversity of varieties too. Fluhr has a substantial number of Marquette vines already in the ground. Next year Brianna and St. Pepin get added to the agenda. His vineyard also includes Frontenac, Frontenac Gris, and LaCrescent, all ready for some limited production next year.

David Runck, age 24, rural Fairfax---

"I have about 1 1/2 acres starting with my first planting of 80 vines in 2003. Now I'm a little over 900 vines growing both white and red grapes. I have Frontenac, St. Croix, Marechal Foch for the red; LaCrescent, St. Croix and Prairie Star for white wines. I work in St. Cloud but see this as a way to diversify our livestock farm (Runck Farms, Cairo Township) should returning to the farming become an option for me. So far I'm pleased with both the challenge of getting a vineyard going, and the potential down the road.

"There's more time involved than I first thought, both in weeding and pruning. Also you do have quite a few dollars invested for 3 to 4 years before you have any revenue. But I think it can cash flow after 4 years. You've got to look at it as a long-term investment."

Like most Renville County Vintners, Runck sourced his rootstock from Winterhaven Vineyard and Nursery, Janesville. But he also bought from Northeastern Vine Supply, Vermont explaining that availability of certain rootstocks depends upon when you buy. Weekends at the farm is when he tends to his vineyard admitting is labor-intensive the first two years until the trellis system is established

Richard and Debra Scheffler, rural Morton---

"It has been about a 5 year dream of my wife. She researched the growing of grapes. She gathered the information. So 2006 we planted our first acre of 640 vines; last year we planted two more acres. So we're at 1830 vines, everything Frontenac Gris," reports Rich who with sons Shawn and Aaron, have provided the labor to get this special project started.

"For me it's been fun. We have this little isolated 4-acre field so I'm not concerned about spray drifting in from neighboring fields. It's unique. I think anyone who farms and can make things grow can also grow grapes," says Rich. Adds Debra, "It's been exciting. Next year we begin our first harvest on the 2006 planting. Already the vineyard is something special on our farm. It will be even more so when we get our first crop."

Richard and Carol Rouse, rural Bird Island---

With this new vineyard you also need to reference Ryan McGraw, their son-in-law married to daughter Jennifer. Thanks to 4 years military service stationed in Italy, one of the world's leading wine producing countries, the

McGraw's got great exposure to this business of grape production. After service Ryan earned his business degree at the University of Minnesota. However, because the 'grape growing' fever still persisted, he also took several electives in courses dealing with vineyards and grape production. Inevitably the idea of a vineyard at the Rouse farm became more than just a casual topic of weekend conversation when the McGraw's were 'home' visiting. They live and work in the Twin Cities.

Richard and Carol researched the subject diligently. "We wanted to get well informed before making the decision. Then we sat down as a family, outlined a business plan and vineyard diagram, and made the decision to give it a go," relates Carol.

This May, 765 vines including Marquette, Frontenac Gris and some seedless table grapes set root in the Rouse farm. With two more years before even the first limited harvest, Carol simply says, "Now we're in a wait and see situation."

Chuck and Toni Bamugartner, Olivia 'northsiders'---

Chuck's 'good feelings' about his own vineyard? "I'll come home from work all beat up, sore, stiff and tired. I'll spend 5 minutes in that vineyard and it's like I didn't even go to work that day. It has such spirit out there. It's just cool - a wonderful experience that just lifts my heart, and soul."

Adds Toni, "We always had an interest in wine and vineyards from our years living in California and touring the Napa Valley country." And expansion is already on the agenda for the Baumgartner's. "Yes, hopefully another 5 acres behind our current vineyard," says Toni.

Talking long term, even making their own wine is a possibility. "We're thinking going organic. We're studying biodynamics and what's involved in maintaining good health. We know it will be more labor intensive because we need to control weeds but as people look at their health and what they are putting into their body system each day; we know that route is good."

Mike Clouse, another Olivia 'northsider'---

"For years we had corn and soybeans in this area behind my house. But it was getting harder and harder to find someone with small equipment to do those crops on such a small acreage. Two years ago I was turkey hunting in the Minnesota River Valley. As the sun came up, I noticed a vineyard on the hillside. "That's really cool" I remember saying to myself and that view is what planted the seed for our own vineyard." Mike is making reference to Sally Milroy's beautiful Echo Creek Vineyard, a 20-acre masterpiece lying on the south side of the Minnesota River between Delhi and Belview.

This past June Mike planted 750 Marquette vines "because they were new and I wanted to try a new variety." He has enough room behind his 9th St. North residence for at least another 400 plants, and maybe more down the road. Early conclusions: "More work, and more time than I thought they would be." But he calls it quality time. "Intensive but its fun work," is his reading.

Dick & Gladie Hagen, rural Olivia 'northsiders'---

Hagen relates, "Years ago when in the seed business with Keltgen Seed, I had gotten to know Ray Winter at Janesville. A dairy farmer at that time and a heck of a dealer for Keltgen Seed as I recall. Three years ago I heard the cows were gone and the Winter's were into the grape business. I drove down for a visit and did a story for The Land about their new excitement growing grapes. That visit convinced me we were mowing too much lawn at the Little Ponderosa, land which could just as well be growing grapes. Today, we have 592 vines in our 2-year old vineyard. Next year, the good Lord willing, we'll be doing our first harvest."

Dan & Beth Elliott family, rural Sacred Heart---

With three young daughters (Morgan, Molly, and Dana) the idea of a family vineyard just seemed to make good sense. Perhaps a 4-H project for the girls, a relaxing opportunity for Mom after hectic working days as a nurse at Renville County Hospital, and certainly a distinct change of pace for Dan's extensive crop farming operation.

Molly, now 14, said the idea sounded fun three years ago and it still is, albeit a lot of work but that was made easier when other kids, and adults volunteered to assist the Elliott's with their first grape harvest on a mid-September Saturday.

"It went pretty good. We averaged only about 4 lbs. of grapes per plant but I think that was about what to expect," says Dan. Added Beth, "It's been fun to learn as we go. I enjoy the special look of our vineyard. It's relaxing and environmentally very pleasing." Eight-year old Dana also says their vineyard is fun, especially the harvesting. Their vineyard consists of 624 LaCrescent vines. Field Stone Winery, Morgan, was the buyer; 65 cents was the price.

Stacy and Wayne Lindahl, rural Renville---

Besides their own 220-acre farm, both the Lindahl's have off-farm jobs, Stacy at the Renville County FSA office, Wayne as a full-time employee at another farm. So jumping into the vineyard business wasn't because they had scads of free time. "Wayne actually had talked about it for a couple years, so we started checking via the Internet, then drove down to Field Stone at Morgan. We also visited with Ray Winter at Janesville. The more we talked to others in the business, the more excited we got about doing our own vineyard," relates Stacy.

They now have a 2-acre vineyard consisting of 1224 vines; 1 acre of LaCrescents planted in 2005; then 512 Frontenac Gris and 112 Marquette added a year later. Getting into that 2nd acre was relatively easy. "Had we been a little further along in our grape growing experiences, we might not have added quite so many vines that 2nd year but its going good."

Her satisfaction? "I just enjoy being out there. Our vineyard gives me a sense of accomplishment. 'Look, this is what I've done' is my feeling when I get done pruning, or tying the vines. And it's so peaceful ---sort of a serenity that I can't experience elsewhere."

Peggy & Scott Tersteeg, rural Bird Island---

Peggy comments, "We had this open space behind our house that we wanted to use it for something interesting rather than just more grass to mow. We talked with others, including the Lindahls about grapes. It just looked like a really interesting hobby and a neat way to do something special with that space."

Two years ago they planted 230 root stock, both LaCrescent and Frontenac. Next year Peggy hopes to have her first grapes to harvest. "For us it's a backyard hobby. I like the 'special look' it gives our country home. Already the vineyard has sort of become our family project. I doubt we'll plant more, but it's kind of unique knowing that these 230 vines might still be providing grapes 20 years from now."

Steve Zenk & Maria Zenk, rural Danube---

Because he teaches growing grapes in the BOLD Community Education program Steve is credited with being the lead promoter of grape production in Renville County. He says the idea surfaced in 2000.

"My wife and I had just learned that there were areas in Minnesota where grapes were being grown commercially. We started investigating and asking questions and soon said, "We could do this. So our first vines were planted in 2002...100 vines in that first planting...all the red Frontenac variety which we purchased as greenhouse stock near Redwing. These first rows are now mature stock. They did about 18 lbs. per vine this year.

Zenk says production depends on soil fertility of your vineyard, the particular varieties, and your disease, insect and bird control. Without netting, birds can be quite destructive, quite quickly. He relates their harvest history two years ago started with only an 85-lb. crop (5 plastic pails), last year 26 pails (550 lbs.), this year 1340 lbs. from those original 100 vines and next year maybe a ton of grapes. They have another 400 vines (2/3rds of an acre) on the northwest side of the machine shop.

As an educator in Farm Business Management, Ridgewater College, Zenk relates to this new niche market called growing grapes as simply a function of diversity. "People are always looking for something new, so here's a new venture that can be both enjoyable and profitable. There is an additional income opportunity with grapes."

He doesn't know when or if the Minnesota market can get saturated but offers this advice, "When you're working in a niche market, when that niche gets full, that's it. Minnesota wines are a niche. The demand is there. Because people more and more want to know the origin of their foods and drinks, the Minnesota Grown label takes on more value all the time."

He speculates that even the churches of Minnesota (and elsewhere for that matter) might be a potential new market for Minnesota grown wines. He also sees potential for Renville County grapes being bottled by an established winery such as Field Stone at Morgan or Olde Country Winery at Lake Lillian but with a 'Grown in Renville County' label on each bottle.

"We're selling a premium product here and we should never lose sight of that. We have a locally grown, premium product that does command a premium price. The market will always have the discount wines from California, Australia, Spain, and elsewhere. But we have unique vineyards grown with tender care. It's not like the 80-acre, 180-acre mammoth vineyards in California. Our vineyards are handwork, with minimum spraying. I simply ask the people buying the wine, "Do you want your money traveling to California, or overseas? Or does it make more sense to see it used right here in Renville County," sums up Zenk.

MORE GRAPE INFORMATION---

Vineyards are typically planted in rows spaced 8 foot apart with also 8-foot spacing between each newly planted rootstock in the row. With those dimensions you can plant about 600 vines per acre. It takes four years from planting to full production. By that time you have \$6,000 to \$8,000 invested in this 1-acre 'bundle of anticipated joy'. When finally into full production, 4-5 tons per acre should be doable at 60 cents per pound delivered to your winery, that represents a potential \$6,000 yearly revenue stream minus the estimated \$1,000 of costs for weeding, harvesting and fungicide sprays.

So how big is this U.S. wine industry? Suffice to say California produces nearly 80 percent of all grapes grown in America. New York and Michigan would be distant 2nd and 3rd. Total vineyard acres in the U.S. were at 934,750 in 2005 with 85% less than 50 acres in size. But these nearly 1 million acres generated \$3.5 billion in sales that year.

However it's the explosion in winery numbers and wine consumption that tell a more exciting story. In 1999, only 2,688 licensed wineries in the U.S. In 2005, there were 4,929 --- an 83% increase in six years! Today the number of wineries nationwide is well over 5,000. In 1999, per capital wine consumption was 2.02 gals. By 2005, the number was 2.37 gals. Today wine imports make up less than 25% of all wine consumed in the U.S.

"Even though this is still a relatively new industry to Minnesota, there is tremendous interest. Much credit goes to the University of Minnesota's Department of Horticultural Science. Their intensive research and genetic work with grapes has produced several new varieties with outstanding winter hardiness. That single factor is what now makes Minnesota a very viable grape growing culture," reflects Tom Martell, President, Minnesota Grape Growers Association. Martell and his wife operate Martell Vineyards & Orchard at Somerset, WI.

Minnesota currently has 26 licensed wineries. John Maloney, Cannon River Winery, Cannon Falls, planted his first vines in 2001 and opened his winery in 2004. Today his vineyard is up to 20 acres and his winery last fall produced about 11,000 gallons of wine. Maloney is Vice President, MN Grape Growers Association

And the fever continues. Maloney predicts Minnesota will have 30 new wineries within the next 12 to 18 months with the bulk of new growth mostly in the southeast quadrant of the state but wineries already are now extending to the borders of both the Dakotas.

The big corn state of Iowa is doing even better. Even though ethanol plants are springing up everywhere in the #1 corn producing state in the nation, so to are wineries. Iowa had only 3 wineries in 2002 but now has 70 wineries!

Can there soon be too many? Not a chance according to Maloney saying that wineries complement each other. "Napa Valley wouldn't be Napa Valley if there were just a handful of wineries. It's a synergistic effect. The more wineries, the more interest, the more promotion and the more rural development be it agri-tourism, wine trails, even new jobs and industry created. I don't think anyone would disagree. At this stage the upside of the Minnesota wine industry is phenomenal."

And is it truly a labor of love? Toni Baumgartner says, "Yes. Though it is labor intensive, there is great joy and peace in being in your vineyard."

She sees area vineyards becoming tourist attractions and a real mixing of people. For instance, they already are looking ahead to the Christian Community Youth Center in Olivia, and ACTS in Olivia as possible partners when it comes harvesting their grapes. "Bringing the community in to be a part of this is how I think we all benefit," says Toni.

According to marketing experts who study these things, history was made in the United States in 2005 when ever per capital consumption of wine exceeded per capital consumption of beer. Realizing this the brewery industry retaliated with more tastes, colors, and fanciful names of new brews.

GOOD GENETICS MAKE GOOD GRAPES---

Just like good corn starts with good genetics, much the same holds true with grapes. Dr. James Luby, Professor, U of MN Department of Horticultural Science, expressed that the U of MN grape program is known worldwide for expertise in cold hardy varieties.

Today four varieties dominate in Minnesota vineyards. Frontenac, introduced in 1996, perhaps claims the most acres. Right behind are Frontenac gris, introduced in 2003 and La Crescent, introduced in 2002. The most popular newcomer is Marquette, introduced in 2006.

"We've bred grapes over a century and formally initiated a breeding program for wine grapes in the mid-1980's. Today, we're recognized as one of the top wine grape programs in the United States," related Luby.

He indicated grapes aren't fussy when it comes to soils as long as they are well drained. Grapes tolerate a broad pH range, 6.6 to 7. They like only a moderate rich soil. Too much fertilization and you get too much vegetation at the expense of grape production. "In many of our native prairie soils we need little or no fertilizer because of the inherent fertility of those soils. But the best procedure is to soil test before establishing your vineyard. We are seeing some low potassium soils. Grapes are heavy feeders of soil potassium," related Luby.

At the U of MN arboretum, Chanhassen, over 10 acres of research vineyards with approximately 10,000 experimental vines produce new seedlings each year with a diverse genetic base that includes quality French hybrids coupled with cold hardy, disease resistance related to Minnesota's native grape, *V. reposita*. Over 1,000 vines are planted each year under the supervision of Peter Hemstad, a 20-year Research Scientist. Other traits observed are productivity, cluster size, growth habit, bud break and ripening times.

For more info on the Minnesota Grape Growers Association, go to www.mngrapes.org