

Sabrevois Wine Tasting

**Bob Parke,
Northern Winework
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Gilles Benoit recently named the Sabrevois (pronounced Sa-brah-voy) grape after his town of 600, which is 75km south of Montreal near Quebec's Richelieu River. Since then, many cold climate wine growers in Canada and the USA have shown interest in the variety, even though very little has been written about its winemaking characteristics. While it performed very well in the vineyard, our early conventional winemaking experience encountered a problem.

The Problem

Bob Parke's first two efforts with Sabrevois produced wine with a glaring flaw that made it unpalatable. It had a herbaceous quality that could be described as "bacon" or "smoked meat." Bradley Beam of the U. of Minnesota Horticultural Research Center reported similar results with their 2002 Sabrevois test batch. Robin Partch had not noted this flaw in the blends he had made in the past using Sabrevois, nor did Tom Plocher when he followed Robin's semi-carbonic maceration method. A number of growers in Quebec were enthusiastic about recent large plantings of Sabrevois and we had heard nothing from them about the herbaceous bacon taint. They reported that their vines did not have our problem of overly vigorous vine growth.

Was the problem coming from the vineyard or the winemaking practices? Bob wondered if the herbaceous quality came from leaf shading produced by the overly abundant leaf growth, a cause documented by Drs. Richard Smart and Andrew Reynolds.

The Panel

We decided to bring people with Sabrevois winemaking experience together, evaluate sample wines, and talk about their experience with the variety. Tom and Carol lured them to their home with a promise (fulfilled) of a gourmet pasta dinner. They timed the tasting so our six Quebecois guests could attend the MGGA Spring Symposium on the same visit. These growers have very large vineyards by our standards, with each of them having between 10-15 acres in vines, with most of it recently planted.

Gilles Benoit, in addition to being a Symposium featured speaker, grows and makes wine from many Swenson varieties. He is the owner of Vignoble Despins in Sabrevois, Quebec.

Robert Leroyer, a featured panelist at the Symposium who specializes in making St. Croix is the owner and winemaker of Vignobles Leroyer St-Pierre in Napierville.

Rejean Guertin, owner and winemaker of Vignoble Artisan du Terroir in St-Paul Abbotsford, and his son **David** have the largest planting of Sabrevois in Canada (and maybe the world) and are make it as a varietal wine.

Simon Naud is the owner and winemaker of Vignoble La Bauge in Brigham.

Alain Breault, also from Brigham, is the nurseryman who propagates many Swenson varieties and has introduced them to many Quebec and Ontario growers. He has also sold many, many copies of *Northern Winework* which he uses to answer questions about the varieties.

Our local experts were:

Robin Partch, Northern Vineyards winemaker and manager.

Anna Katharine Mansfield, Minnesota State Enologist.

Bradley Beam, Minnesota State Enology Lab Technician.

Gordon Rouse, winemaker in his final year of being certified as an American Wine Society Judge.

Bob and **Tom**, as you might expect, made their observations and views known.

The Tasting

Rather than judging the six Sabrevois wines using a formal scoring system, we chose to discuss each wine as we tasted and write down our subjective impressions. We chose this method because our objective was to evaluate the potential and problems of working with Sabrevois, and not to rank the six wines.

We started with Bob's 2002 rose', which had a very pronounced strawberry nose, acidity balanced with residual sugar, and no bacon taint.

Tom's 2002 nouveau-style Sabrevois had a 25% addition of E.S. 9-5-32 to add fruit, and underwent semi-carbonic fermentation for four days, followed by malolactic fermentation. It had good tannins and fruit, with no bacon taint.

Alain contributed a 2002 Sabrevois produced by his brother Jacques Breault using the semi-carbonic method but without malolactic fermentation. The sharpness from malic acid was apparent and tannins were still young. There was no bacon taint.

Robin's 2002 underwent semi-carbonic fermentation for five days. It was a sample drawn from an American oak barrel where it undergone malolactic fermentation. It had a rich middle mouth and displayed plenty of ripe fruit, and had no bacon taint.

Simon's 2001 underwent standard fermentation with skin contact of five days. It had sharp acidity and had an astringent finish. The smoky bacon taint was not strong, but apparent.

Rejean's 2001 was also made with standard fermentation and five days of skin contact. It had better aromatics than the previous wine. It had good tannin, but the finish had a metallic edge. There was a faint bacon taint.

The Findings

Five days of skin contact using standard red winemaking practice routinely resulted in extracting the bacon taint from the skins into the wine. Semi-carbonic fermentation avoided this by limiting maceration time, as did pressing after one day of skin contact, which made a medium colored rose´.

The semi-carbonic process plays well to the strengths and weaknesses of Sabrevois, which Gilles described as not being very aromatic, but having good body and middle mouth characteristics. He further noted that it had more tannin than most other locally grown varieties. Robin has found that Sabrevois rarely ripens beyond 19 °Brix, but Tom harvested his Sabrevois at 22 °Brix in 2002, probably owing to special effort to expose the fruit to the sun.

Conclusions

We think the grape is well worth growing if the winemaker is willing to work within its limitations. We particularly liked the semi-carbonic wines and found the rose´ to be a very pleasant, but one-dimensional wine. The rose has only been made once, so there is probably much room for improvement. Someone will perhaps find a way to make a conventionally vinified red with it that avoids the smoky bacon taint, but it will be a balancing act to get just enough out of the skins, yet avoid off-flavors and aromas.