

# **Latvian Grapes in Wine**

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[**Note from Editor:** In the years since 1998 when we made our first trip to the Baltics, Andris Dishlers has worked tirelessly to organize grapegrowers and winemakers in Latvia. His efforts have created opportunities for Latvians to meet and evaluate their wines. Through these activities, a great deal is being learned about Baltic grape varieties, how to grow them to enhance wine quality, and how to process them into wine. No small achievement in this land with only half the heat units of St. Paul. This is Andris' report to us on the 2002 vintage. **TP**]

Some enthusiasts in Latvia are looking to produce wine from local grapes. For this they have already started plantings in a bigger area with varieties considered as possible wine grapes, such as Zilga and Skujins-675. Sceptics say – why do we need this? - look at wineshops overcrowded by true grape wines! However, if it is your money, you can spend it in any way you like. And who knows – you can be a winner in future...

The year of 2002 was a year in Latvia when grapes ripened properly and thus showed what a potential they really have as table or wine grapes; it is indeed true that good quality fruit is necessary for producing good wine. Our wine experiments are still too rare, - to make definite conclusions about suitability of our varieties for wine we need to continue wine experiments in different summers, with different yeasts and fermentation technologies involved. It is too early to make such conclusions for many varieties grown today. Also, we still grow grapes without much concern about sun exposure of clusters. To get out the maximum from a variety, an effort and individual approach should be applied to variety to find the best training system for it, ensuring good sun exposure of the crop. In our search for wine grapes everything is important – proper variety, growing site, climate conditions and our own creative unrelenting spirit.

## **Is It Worth At All ?**

To the opinion of me and others –yes, it is at least worth a try. Three wine competitions, organized by Club of Grapegrowers and Winemakers clearly demonstrated enthusiasm for experiments with the quality of presented wine samples growing from year to year. Varieties like Alpha and Zilga has been most often used in wine, but Skujins-675, Supaga, Veldze, Smugljanka and other varieties have been also presented on competitions.

## **Labruscas and Foxiness**

Varieties, based on American *Vitis labrusca* are called fox grapes for their unpleasant flavour, unacceptable for an aristocratic French nose. Therefore, *labrusca* wines are closed for European market. However, in United States, the picture is a different one. Thus, in the State of New York, which is considered as second by its wine production level, products from traditional *labrusca* grapes like Concord, Niagara, Delaware, Catawba, Isabella are reported as being in a dominating position. This is because *labrusca*-grapes are much better adapted to local climate, they are also more resistant to pests and diseases; people know *labruscas* and are accustomed to processed products of them - juices, jelly and also wines, which are traditionally quite sweet. It should be noted that grape varieties developed by Pauls Sukatnieks are also "spoiled" with *labrusca* genes. However, Isabella wine coming here from Moldova is quite popular in Latvia. If you like sweet wines, try Concord wine, which you can also buy now in Riga, and make your decision about what is *labrusca* in wine. Interesting, that some time ago we expected that Tom Plocher and Bob Parke would show us which Sukatnieks varieties are more foxy- however, they didn't find this expected foxiness. So we remained uncertain - are Sukatnieks grapes foxy or not? Apparently, the foxiness is not a simple answer. You will find *labrusca* genes also in some of the new tasty grape varieties, such as Swenson Red, for example. In the last grape exhibition we first tasted Kijevskij belij and Steuben and concluded- *labrusca*! But is it so, however? We assume that it is too early to discard a variety just because it contains *labrusca* in its blood. Taste aromatic varieties Guna and Jadviga and know - they have *labrusca* parents!

## **Wine Gets its Start in the Field**

Those who look to produce grape wine should carefully think not only about varieties they will plant but also how to get high quality fruit from them- still lot of research is needed there. New wine candidate varieties from Latvian breeder, Andrash Fazekash are expected to come out soon. High sugar level is far from being the only criterion to produce a good wine. A plain, uninteresting wine is needed by nobody. Our often cool and rainy summers are very dangerous for wine quality of fruit - maximal sunlight is essential.

### **Early variety, good sun exposure, proper vine management**

Only with these factors in combination can you hope that your grape wine will be called good wine by an expert. To ensure the quality of the fruit, the proper training system of your vine is important. Each variety is different, and to some extent vine itself

makes a choice for the best style of its architecture. As Tom Plocher states, training system of your vine depends first on whether your vine is to be covered on winter, and next, on how your vine wants to grow – are its shoots rambling or do they grow straight up? Also, is your vine vigorous or moderate in its growth energy? It has been found that cordons are the best training system to ensure good sun exposure of fruit. Take into account the hardiness of your vine, its growing character and make a choice for low or high, simple or double cordon. It is essential not allow the shoots to shade the fruit and to cut off the leaves around the clusters at the end season. Experience has shown that for better quality wine an old wood and cordon should be used for fruit.

What About Our Varieties for Wine ?

Thirty grape wines from different varieties and their combinations were made in 2002 by the author. Most of fruit was a gift from Evalds Pupols<sup>1</sup>. Several combinations were made with Zilga. Zilga is able to cause our disappointment – often its specific smell is described as unpleasant. It was of interest to try Zilga's female parent – Smugljanka as well as its open-pollinated seedlings Varnava-1 and Varnava-2 (seedlings selected by E. Pupols).

For the first time a small wine sample was made from a bit forgotten, but attractive variety Kuzminskij sinij (CGL 02-5-43, fruit gift of V.Kužums), as well as from an indentified variety Melna Skaistule, and from Andrash's Fazekash Toldi (from Pupol's vineyard). Beside these dark colored varieties the wine was made also from Leon Millot (both from greenhouse and from the field) and Foch – both from Pupols. Guna was chosen because of its aroma, and this was fermented in three ways – without skins, with skins, and with a double amount of skins. There were no doubt, that Silva of Lithuanian breeder, A.Gailunas should also be tried – Tom Plocher in 1998 noted its wine character. The following light colored varieties also were fermented: Supaga, S-675, Muskat Moskovskij, Aljoshenkin, so called "Gailuna Salda" (Gailuna Sweet), Jubilejnij Novgoroda and a chance seedling of Gvido Dobelis, which I name here as 'Gvido'. Pupols is growing a late ripening variety which he received as 'Vino Nordica', but which probably is Muromskij. An old variety Alpha was also taken to make a sample. For whites and reds EC 1118 yeast was used, for dark colored varieties – yeasts EC 1118, Pasteur Red or 71B.

**Sugar level** in 2002 harvest was high or even very high. Jubilejnaja Novgoroda (from Pupols) surprised us most of all – its Brix (which shows the soluble solids and correlates close with the

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<sup>1</sup>Editor's note. Evalds Pupols has one of the largest vineyards in Latvia located on an excellent highland site in the south of Latvia near the town of Rezekne.

percentage of soluble sugars in juice) exceeded 23! Gailuna Salda (Pupols) and Hasanskij Sladkij (fruit gift of A. Karklins) were also very sweet with Brix value 22-23. Toldi and S-675 had a Brix 21, but Smugljanka, Varnava-1, Leon Millot Guna, Melna Skaistule – Brix 19-20. Sugar level of Zilga was in the range of Brix 16 to 19.5, depending on the site of harvest. Muskat Moskovskij, Aljoshenkin, Supaga, and Foch were in medium range with a Brix 17-18. Even Alpha, the well known sour variety, had Brix 18. Brix of Varnava-2 was 15, Kuzminskij Sinij - 16, on the same level was Vino Nordica, but the variety named Gvido showed a very serious face - with a Brix only 13.5.

**Titrateable acidity (TA)** of red colored varieties Guna and Silva was in an acceptable range – 0.7-1.0 % . Notably, most of dark colored varieties were in normal range – TA of Smugljanka, Varnava-2, Kuzminskij Sinij were on ideal – 0.75 % level , close to 1.0 it was for varieties Varnava-1, Foch, Melna Skaistule and Zilga. Very high acid - 1.6 % was found for Alpha and Vino Nordica.

**pH** is another indicator of acidity – pH is very important for wine stability. It is considered that optimal pH in finished wine is around 3.5 or a bit less. At pH exceeding 4.0 the wine becomes unstable. The wine from Kuzminskij Sinij had this optimal pH. For other dark-colored varieties it was in the range 3.0 to 3.4, but for Vino Nordica and Alpha it was below 3.0. Leon Milot was the only variety with pH above the critical level - 4.2. All the white wines were with pH figure below 3.5.

### **How do the wines look?**

The wine starts its story with its appearance. It should be bright with an attractive tone. Our wines were judged to be nice looking, cleared off and nobody noted any defects in their appearance.

### **How our nose accepts them?**

Aroma of the wine should be considered carefully if we are looking for varieties to grow for a wine, since the appearance and aroma are the first impressions of the wine you taste. In this respect we have something to be proud of. Very aromatic were wines of Jubilejnaja Novgoroda, Guna, Kuzminskij Sinij, Vino Nordica and Gvido. It was interesting to find that additions of Kuzminskij Sinij and Guna are able to improve the wine of Zilga significantly. Evaluators found specific wine aroma in wines of Varnava-2, Silva, Foch, and Toldi. Aljoshenkin, a popular table grape, surprised everyone by its expressive apple aroma. Muscat Moskovskij also nice wine aroma.

### **How are they in the mouth?**

The taste of our grape wines is a critical issue in our wine evaluations. Quite often in evaluation protocols you can find phrases like: not bad, usable, watery, lacks finish, tannins, behaves not as a wine, too sour, empty. It could well be, however, that some wines were too young for evaluation and conclusions about suitability of a particular variety for wine were premature. I will put here those wine samples which in general, – including the taste, evaluators found as best or perspective. Two of them -Jubilejnaja Novgoroda and Varnava-2 got the highest rating also on the 3<sup>rd</sup> wine competition in the group of dry and semi-dry grape wines. Smugljanka wine was also appreciated as a potent wine- wine expert Mrs Valentina Grandane found the port-wine potential in it, noting, however, its not very pure taste. Hopeful varieties, with which experiments need to be necessarily continued are Guna, Silva, Muscat Moscovskij, Toldi, Melna Skaistule and Kuzminskij Sinij. Wine of Aljoshenkin is very attractive for its very light character. Apparently, wine can be made also of Sukribe, Veldze, and Supaga. Beekeeper Janis Rozensteins has made a great wine of Supaga using honey for sugar correction in juice and yeast EC 1118. Very expressive was found wine of Vино Nordica, however, there is not a big chance for this variety to ripen on the open field in the normal summer.