

Promising Varieties for Prince Edward County

# **Report on ST LAURENT & MEUNIER**

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# REPORT ON ST. LAURENT

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## Pithy Quotes about St. Laurent

“St. Laurent, the local grape variety, is a class act similar in aromatic potential and subtle flavour to its distant relative, the Pinot Noir, but often more deeply colored and fuller-bodied than the latter.”

**Michael Edwards,**  
*The Red Wine Companion A Connoisseur's Guide,*  
Firefly Books, 1998

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“It comes across as Pinot Noir wearing hiking boots,’ Nichol jokes about the big, dark and softly textured wine that St. Laurent produces.”

**John Schriener,**  
*Chardonnay and Friends: Varietal Wines  
of British Columbia,*  
Orca Book Publishers, 1998.

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“This is a très hip grape, folks. It’s Pinot Noir-ish with a ‘sauvage’ touch, and it can do nearly all the things fine Pinot Noir does, but with added bottom notes of sagey wildness. More growers would plant it, but the vine itself is prone to mutation and it can rarely be left in the ground for more than twenty years or so. It won’t flower unless the weather’s perfect. It produces a tight cluster of thin-skinned berries, and is thus subject to rot if conditions aren’t ideal. ‘You have to be a little crazy to grow this grape,’ said one grower. Yet such vines become litmus tests for a vintner’s temperament...when you see it you know, *ipso facto*, you’re dealing with the right kind of lunatic...all kinds of growers are stepping up to the challenge; St. Laurent has become the trendy grape, and I gotta tell ya, I absolutely love it. If you love good Burgundy but can’t afford to *drink* good Burgundy, this variety will satisfy you all kinds of ways.”

**Therry Theise,**  
Austrian Wine catalog 2004

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“St Laurent is to red what Rieslaner is to white; both are fussy difficult vines no one could justify from a commercial standpoint; both offer holy-grail

flavours a certain type of vintner yearns towards; both can make supernal wine of a not-unfamiliar type but an undreamed-of expressiveness. St Laurent is like a Peyote-drenched Pinot Noir; Rieslaner is a lysergically charged Riesling.

**Therry Theise,**  
German Wine catalog 2003

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“This is one of my favourite red grapes, but it’s hard to find because it’s finicky and most growers don’t like its uncertain yields and unstable genetic makeup. In a way, St. Laurent is the same kind of litmus test Rieslaner is; if a grower has it planted he’s *ipso facto* a lunatic. My kinda guy, in other words. St. Laurent, at its best, tastes like really good Burgundy that has 15% Mourvedre in it, a compelling mixture of signals that make the wines haunting and complex.”

**Therry Theise,**  
German Wine catalog 2003

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“St. Laurent has everything that makes a great red wine. Long unnoticed it is now beginning to embark on a great career.

“For decades St. Laurent was – if present at all – a quiet star on the domestic wine scene. In actual fact the potential of the vine was recognized early, but the difficult demands it makes on a grower in vineyard and cellar prevented a significant breakthrough. So St. Laurent remained more or less the hobbyhorse of a few individuals who succeeded, mainly in the 90s, not only in making some wonderful wines, but also in scoring international and local successes at wine tastings. Today the increasing demand for St. Laurent suggests that a new trend is coming. It is going in the direction of the indigenous varieties, and among them St. Laurent.”

**Schneider winery website profile** of St. Laurent

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“The ampelographer Galet says firmly that it is not a Pinot, and probably originated in the south of Alsace. But it is certainly like Pinot Noir – though perhaps even more like good Gamay – in its soft-

centred, juicy cherry fruit. It is best drunk young, and doesn't age well – but so what? It's a complete delight when it's young ... Germany also has some and it is one of the few red varieties to find any success in the cool climate of the Czech Republic. I'd like to see some planted in areas like southern England and Canada."

**Oz Clarke & Margaret Rand,**  
*Oz Clarke's Encyclopedia of Grapes,*  
Harcourt Inc, 2001.

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## Why St. Laurent?

It's no secret that I've been extremely keen on this rare variety for over a decade now, planting, proselytizing ... some would even say churning out propaganda. It dates to when I read an entry on St. Laurent in the large book *Larousse Wines and Vineyards of France*, where it was included even though the vine is not officially sanctioned anywhere in France. I planted it in Hillier as soon as I could, acquiring cuttings in 1996 from (then) lone Canadian growers Kathleen and Alex Nichol of British Columbia.

Prince Edward County now has at least half a dozen serious plantings of St. Laurent, and so far at least one winery – Waupoos Estates – has offered a few commercial vintages. There is tremendous opportunity for this variety in the County, for both those looking around for a less expensive 'entry' level Pinot Noir-ish wine to offer, and those trying to settle on a very high quality red vinifera that will reliably ripen within the County's growing season – but one that may not be quite as much trouble in the rows as Pinot Noir is reputed to be.

Any serious vinifera – and attractive red wine – will offer challenges, yet the rewards of St. Laurent I believe are worth it. It is one of the few varieties listed in Jancis Robinson's *Guide to Wine Grapes* that is rated as capable of producing the complete range of wines from fair to the finest bottles.

In Robinson's earlier book on varieties – *Vines, Grapes & Wines*, (1986) – she pointed out some desirable and beguiling aspects of St. Laurent, relating the facts that "The variety ripens a good 10 days earlier than Pinot Noir (although later than the precocious Portugieser) and is considerably less fussy about site than the minx from Burgundy. St-Laurent's grape skins are much tougher than those

of Pinot Noir and rarely suffer attack from botrytis ... Soft, sweet and scented."

In one of the few English books on Austrian viticulture (*the* present touchstone for the variety), Philipp Blom writes: "St. Laurent hails from France and is probably a descendent of Pinot Noir, which it resembles in many ways with its low tannins, pale colour and often smokey morello cherry note. Its name is derived from the fact that it usually begins to ripen on St. Lawrence's Day, 10 August. If the yields are limited, it can make fine, elegant and sophisticated wines with floral Pinot Noir aromas."

Fine Pinot Noir flavour profiles and weight; maturity a week or more ahead of Pinot Noir; thicker skins than Pinot Noir – it does have a few difficulties, yet those are rather inviting characteristics. And though the County has a real opportunity to make this a 'signature' variety – a new world interpreter of an old world vine (the best modern example being the Loire's Sauvignon Blanc settling in brilliantly in New Zealand) – in this case the 'original' is also rising in critical praise and prose, though planted in appallingly sparse numbers, and the Otago region of New Zealand and parts of the United States are also now in the game with St. Laurent, and could in a synchronous manner assist in critical and commercial notice.

## St. Laurent: The Grape

The original entry I came across in the *Larousse Wines and Vineyards of France* gave the following synonyms for the variety: "Saint-Laurent Noir, Saint-Lorentz, Pinot Saint-Laurent". To these can be added those from Galet of: "Lorenz-traube (Wurtemberg), Pinot Saint-Laurent (par erreur car ce n'est pas un Pinot), Schwarzer." German sources also record: "Blauer Saint Laurent, Sankt Laurent, Sankt Lorenztrabube, Lorenztraube, Laurenzitraube". Jancis Robinson mentions it is fairly well represented in the vineyards of "Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, where it is also known as Vavrinecke, or Svatovavrinecke."

The small but intriguing entry in Larousse continued:

"Bunches medium sized, blue-black, ovoid, thick-skinned; ripening period: first epoch.

"This vine originally came from the south of Alsace; it reached Baden in Germany, and was propagated in that area. It gives full-bodied wine of an

attractive, dark-red colour. An unclassified variety, it is very little grown in France.”

Galet’s entry on St. Laurent is listed in the “Encépagement de L’Alsace”, and states: “Aptitudes: C’est un cépage qui fournit un vine rouge corsé, d’un bell coueur foncé, Kulhmann recommandait un coupage d’un tiers de Saint-Laurent avec deux-tiers de Pinot.”

In New Zealand Jackson and Schuster’s *The Production of Grapes & Wine in Cool Climates* notes ‘Pinot St Laurent’ in its secondary list of cool-climate varieties, and sums it as “a vigorous low-yielding Austrian red grape with, at best, moderate quality. It has dark canes with short internodes and tough, dark and shiny leaves with large, well-filled bunches of acid-retaining berries. The wine is usually well coloured, but lacking depth in bouquet and has a coarse flavour. Poor fruit set and sensitivity to early spring frosts are also a characteristic of Pinot St Laurent. Further plantings of this grape cannot be recommended.”

What caused the dissenting profile of St. Laurent by Jackson and Shuster isn’t known; possibly any examples in the vine libraries they had access to were virused and of poor quality. This might well be the case, because when the variety was sought by growers in Central Otago, at the behest of grower Paul Jacobson (Judge Rock winery), the Sustainable Farming Fund Project grant announced by the New Zealand government stated that “St. Laurent grape is in New Zealand (NZVIG) but these plants have leaf roll type 3 virus and are unsuitable. As no facility in New Zealand is available to heat treat or tissue culture the disease-free material this project has started from proven disease-free material in vitro from Canada.”

Galet’s rather curt denouncement of St. Laurent did include a recommendation that 1/3 St. Laurent be mixed with 2/3 weaker Pinot Noir for a better wine. (In fact, Alex Nichol of Nichol Vineyard was at first interested in St. Laurent as a darker, riper wine “primarily for bolstering colour in other reds” according to John Schriener; this proved unnecessary, and it became a small cult bottling of its own – barely 15 to 30 cases most years.)

St. Laurent has performed best – and has received the most respect – from the German wine world ... although that has changed, as many influential

British wine writers have now taken up its cause.

The prime source for information on St. Laurent is found in Walter Hillebrand’s *Taschenbuch der Rebsorten* (Zeitschriftenverlag, 1981.) Hillebrand’s entry “4.2.6 Blauer Saint Laurent” was translated into English by Dr. Aurikel von Haimberger for the Becker Project Committee, British Columbia. British Columbia viticultural scientist and consultant John Vielvoye kindly forwarded this document to me, one of many important pieces of European information that flowed into Canada during the Becker Project years of 1977-82. It is quoted at length to benefit those seeking information that is almost impossible to find in English:

“The St. Laurent belongs to the good red wine varieties and is actually not widely enough grown. Yields are satisfactory, the wine is of dark colour and very good, its quality is somewhere between the Blauer Spatburgunder and the Blauer Portugieser.

#### Geographical Distribution and Origin

This variety is mainly grown in Austria. The statistics state that 700 ha are planted with St. Laurent grapevines. In Germany, only 30 ha are still planted with St. Laurent. Supposedly, this variety is also grown in France in a few places.

Goethe describes the St. Laurent as being a French grapevine used for wine-making, a status this variety cannot claim anymore. Vogt mentions in his book *Wienbau* that the St. Laurent is only seldom grown in France today. In the EEC regulations on grapevines it is not listed.

Oconomierat Bronner from Wieslock introduced the variety to Germany around 1870. He had procured it from a viticulturist, Baumen, in Bollweiler, situated northwest from Mulhausen (Alsace) where viticulture is no longer carried out today. His son Carl Bronner, a grapevine breeder, promoted this variety. It cannot be traced back in what region of France the St. Laurent originated. One is tempted to suppose that it was in Saint-Laurent, a grape-growing village in Haute Medoc near Bordeaux. However, except for the name, there is no fact supporting this assumption because this variety has never been grown in this region.

### Names of the Variety

The name Saint Laurent cannot be attributed to the grape-growing village of the same name in Medoc either, but rather to the Calendar of Saints, St. Laurentius Day on August 10th, as that this variety matures 10 to 12 days earlier than the Blauer Spatburgunder.

**Synonyms:** Blauer Saint Laurent, Saint Laurent, Sankt Lorenztrabube, Schwarzer, Lorenztraube, Laurenzitraube and Pinot St. Laurent.

### Description of Variety

**Tip of Shoot:** open, light green very wooly (whitish colour);

**Leaf:** medium-size, five lobed, mostly only medium-deep lateral sinuses, the lobes overlap, dull dark green, below slightly downy;

**Wood:** short internodes, dark reddish brown;

**Bunch:** medium-sized to large, compact, mostly conical;

**Berries:** oval, the juice has a good to strong colour and the skin is blackish-blue;

**Bud-break:** early to late;

**Growth:** vigorous;

**Yield:** good to medium;

**Lignification of the Wood:** fair to good.

### Properties of the Variety

#### Requirements in Respect to the Growing Location

Only average growing locations are needed because of the early date of maturity. In this respect one can compare this variety somewhat with the Scheurebe. Both tend to keep too high an acid content in cooler growing locations.

#### Requirements in Respect to the Soils

In respect to the soil, the St. Laurent has only average demands. Lighter soils are more suited than heavy clay soils. Soils containing lime are suitable.

#### Lignification of the Wood

Lignification of the wood is mostly good and ensures an adequate frost resistance in winter.

#### Susceptibility to Diseases

Somewhat susceptible to peronospora and oidi-

um. Susceptibility to botrytis is low due to the thick skin of the berries. Low blooming firmness. Sensitive to frost in May, therefore only growing locations without danger of late frost in May are suitable.

### Training

Scheu recommends wide-spaced planting of grapevines and Lenz-Moser considers this variety very well suited for wide-spaced training. Dependable good yields can only be obtained if the grapevines have enough space.

### Normal training

Normal training requires rows not less than 1.80 m apart and distance between grapevines in the rows not less than 1.30 m, trunks should be 60 cm high.

### Pruning

Short and long spurs or the training method according to Merz should be applied. Pruning can be done on long or short bearers.

### Choice of rootstock

In soils promoting growth well, SO4 and 5C are suited; in soils furthering growth to a lesser degree, 125 AA and 5BB.

### Yield

Several authors, also Scheu, attribute a very good fertility to St. Laurent, supposedly matching the yields of the Portugieser if trained correctly. This is certainly an overstatement, because in most cases yields are only medium high with a long term mean of 70 to 80 hl/ha.

### Maturity

Grapes mature later than those of the Portugieser, but at least 10 days earlier than the Blauer Spatburgunder.

### Harvest

The harvest should not take place too early so that the acid content can decrease while the grapes are still on the grapevine. For this reason a training method allowing for good air circulation is advisable so that the grapes do not rot early. The best time for the harvest is after the harvest of the Silvaner.

### Quality

As a rule, the must weight is higher than that of the Portugieser. The average must weight is about 80 degrees Oechsle. The acid content is higher than that of the Blauer Spatburgunder and lower than that of the Portugieser. The mean is 8 to 10%.

The wine of the St. Laurent is superior to the wine of the Portugieser. The wine has a strong deep red colour and a fine Bordeaux bouquet. Wines from unfavourable growing locations tend to be sour. All in all the wines can be considered to be of superior quality.

### Advantages of the Variety

Early maturity of the grapes, low susceptibility to diseases, easy to grow.

### Disadvantages of the Variety

Sensitive to frost in May.

### Value of Growing the Variety

Where red wine is produced, it's preferable to Portugieser."

Apart from important caveats about recommended rootstocks, densities and training systems (which *must* be modified to suit the particular climate and soil challenges of Prince Edward County!), this is a fairly complete and useful profile.

The debate over the origin of St. Laurent is not over. In Oz Clarke's *Encyclopedia of Grapes*, the following note is fairly typical of recent entries: "An early-flowering Austrian grape that according to leading Austrian producer Axel Stiegelmar is a seedling of Pinot Noir – in other words both its parents were Pinot Noir, but, as happens with vines, it did not reproduce true to type. The ampelographer Galet says firmly that it is not a Pinot, and probably originated in the south of Alsace."

Yet in Austria there is definitely the belief that St. Laurent is definitely a seedling of Pinot Noir. Dr. Ferdiand Regner and his team in Austria wrote in the English version of previous German papers *Genetic Relationships Among Pinots and Related Cultivars* (*American Journal of Enology and Viticulture*, Vol 51, No. 1, 2000) that:

"The SSR profile of Saint Laurent clearly shows that it could be a progeny of Pinot. The second parent is still unknown. Considering the loss of wild

types and *V. sylvestris* genotypes in this century, we may not find all genotypes with relevance to today's cultivars." In a personal communication Dr. Regner confirmed that they still have not found the second parent grapevine of St. Laurent."

In a publication on Austrian Wine 2003, the entries on varieties are taken from Dr. Regner's *Wissenswertes über unsere Rebsorten (Information Worth Knowing about Our Grape Varieties)*, and St. Laurent's states that "the name 'Pinot St. Laurent' as a synonym for this variety is completely correct, since the St. Laurent is a Burgunder seedling."

At Stift Klosterneuburg, which grows 60 hectares of St. Laurent and is the single biggest grower of the variety in the world, they state that it has existed for 300-400 years, though no evidence is offered, only acknowledgement that the oldest known report goes back to 1850 in the Alsace, and claims that the monastery was "responsible for the arrival and extension of the St. Laurent grape in Austria" and first mentioned in documents in 1893, planted on riparia in two of Stif Klosterneuburg vineyards.

One of the most famous red wine producers in Austria is Weingut Umathum. Philipp Blom writes that "... Josef Umathum is also one of the few growers to tame the difficult St Laurent and make it into wines of considerable, almost Burgundian complexity. Perhaps it is this which leads him to think that St Laurent is a clone of Pinot Noir developed here by monks in the middle ages." With the lack of documentary evidence for the true date for the origin of St. Laurent, we are left with only Regner's genetic profile of the variety as an offspring of Pinot Noir ... though one with its own ampelographic and cultural differences.

Josef Umathum, as one of Austria's leading proponents of St. Laurent, has probably done the most work in identifying different clones. "For some time now we have been intensively involved with the selection of the indigenous Austrian grapes, St. Laurent and Zweigelt" the Umathum website states.

"To that end, we began observing old grapevines, and choosing a select few for our own base-vineyard, where our new vines will come from in the future. Especially at the present time, when human ingenuity is threatening to destroy genetic diversity, it is enormously important to have a reli-

able supply of plant-material at hand. It is our own private 'gene-bank' of plants with all the summers and winters of the past few decades stored within them, like nature's memory.

"The plants will slowly adapt to the new climatic and soil conditions, gaining the typical 'terroir' character, that unmistakable flavour that distinguishes one wine from another, a symbiosis of soil, microclimate and grape. This is why particularly the 'old' grapes and grapevines bring forth the best wines year after year. The whole thing requires a great amount of patience and observational talent and is incredibly exciting."

Officially there is only one clone of St. Laurent, but as Weingut Umatham states publicly, they have undertaken their own clonal selections. In kindly answering a questionnaire for this report, Josef Umatham confirmed his selection programme, and said "We have six different clones registered."

Any such clonal diversity in Canada hasn't yet been noticed, though random cane selection for grafting and the severe conditions and vastly different soils St. Laurent has endured likely has introduced variations that may one day become more apparent.

### St. Laurent: Here and There

"... St-Laurent" writes Jancis Robinson in her 1986 book *Vines, Grapes & Wines*, "is today almost exclusively grown in Austria – to good effect, it would seem, to judge by some of the smoothest, deep-coloured, velvety versions produced in the vineyards of the Voslau district of Lower Austria."

A decade later, in her *Guide to Wine Grapes*, she adds: "It has been known in eastern France and in the German Pfalz region, but is grown in much greater quantity in Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, where it is also known as Vavrinecke, or Svatovavrinecke."

Philipp Blom concurs with Robinson, stating that "the best St. Laurent is grown on the northern shores of Lake Neusiedl, where it occasionally reaches truly international stature and where it finds the light and chalky soils it prefers."

Oz Clarke's *Encyclopedia of Grapes* adds a few other notes and wishes ... including one specific one County growers might take heart in: "It is particularly popular in Thermenregion and in southern

Burgenland. With Blaufrankisch it is a parent of Zweigelt ... Germany also has some and it is one of the few red varieties to find any success in the cool climate of the Czech Republic. I'd like to see some planted in areas like southern England and Canada."

Though there are plantings in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (and at least one in Italy, at Casata Monfort in Trentino, where it is called San Lorenzo, and said to have been brought to Trentino from Austria "during the first half of the 19th century."), it is primarily Germany and Austria that produced the most noted examples,

Germany, according to Stephen Brook's *The Wines of Germany*, has about 270 hectares or 670 acres, and it really only underwent a revival in the 1970s when a grower in the Pfalz found an unknown variety in his Portugieser rows which turned out to be St. Laurent; plants began to spread from this discovery in 1974.

Austria has – according to a 2003 report – 415.07 hectares of St. Laurent, making it the sixth most planted red in the country. By provinces, distribution is primarily in Burgenland (184.56 ha) and Niederösterreich (216.60 ha), with tiny holdings in Steiermark (5.63 ha), Wien (7.48) and all other provinces accounting for less than another hectare. (This is nearly the exact same regional distribution of the 408.93 hectares of Pinot Noir in Austria – it's seventh most planted red variety. Zweigelt – the parents of which are St. Laurent and Blaufrankisch – is by far the most popular red, with 4,349.73 hectares.)

Overall, St. Laurent accounts for less than a percent of Austrian vines (.86%), just a smidge above Pinot Noir (.84%).

Philipp Blom's book *The Wines of Austria* is likely the best source for those interested in locating the best St. Laurent winegrowers in Austria. Josef Umatham and Axel Stiegelmar (Juris) have already been mentioned. Walter Glatzer in Carnuntum would also be added to the list. Almost all the eight members of the Pannobile association (invented by Hans Nittnaus (from 'Pannonia', an old name for the geographic region centered around the Neusiedlersee town of Gols, and the latin word for 'noble') are known for St. Laurent, and include Paul Achs, Helmut Renner, Gernot Heinrich, Gerhard Pittnauer, Hans Gsellmann, as well as Nittnaus. To

many of these already listed, Oz Clarke would add Willi Opitz as well.

(Few of these St. Laurents ever make it into Ontario, and the only reason some members of the Prince Edward County Winegrowers Association managed to taste Umathum, Heinrich and Glatzer St. Laurents was because member Jeff Connell could find these wines in New York.)

In Canada, British Columbia was the initial entry point for St. Laurent, and is still home to the oldest commercial vines and the best example of the wine on the continent at Nichol Vineyard in Naramata.

The first St. Laurent vines were brought into the province from Germany for the famed Becker Project of 1977-1982, the result of Dr. Becker, head of the Geisenheim viticultural school in Germany, visiting the province in 1976. Being impressed with what he saw, Becker offered a collection of German cultivars for field trials. Following a tasting in 1984, St. Laurent was one of 10 varieties selected as “most promising for one or more of the B.C. wineries.”

John Vielvoye, then Provincial Grape Specialist of the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, along with Gary Strachan and Lyall Denby of Agriculture Canada at Summerland, and the B.C. Grape Growers Association Viticultural Committee were closely involved in the Becker Project.

Alex Nichol was not originally associated with the Becker Project, but became involved sometime later. John Vielvoye, who eventually got St. Laurent vines into Nichol’s hands, described the process to me:

“I’m told that Alex’s interest in St. Laurent resulted from a wine tasting conducted by Gary Strachan. Gary felt that St. Laurent and Limberger (Blaufanisch) were two interesting selections in the project, but chose to present St. Laurent for tasting rather than Limberger because Limberger was more neutral in taste. Doug Sperling [the brother of Malivoire winemaker Ann Sperling], one of the grape growers in Kelowna and a member of the Becker Committee had selected St. Laurent earlier as a suitable wine variety as a result of another wine tasting. He obtained propagation material via the Quarantine Station and planted vines for his own use. Alex’s expression of interest in the variety resulted in my request to Doug to propagate the

plants and the subsequent delivery of about 70 plants to Alex. Alex looked after them, planted them, and has maintained them to this day. Doug Sperling removed many vines as a result of the removal program in 1988 and 1989 (a result of the Free Trade Agreement), including St. Laurent. There was no interest in St. Laurent by wineries at the time, and Doug does not have his own winery.”

After reading the Larousse entry on St. Laurent, it wasn’t until 1995 that I discovered in Tony Aspler’s *Vintage Canada* that the Nichol Vineyard grew it in British Columbia. I contacted them to purchase cuttings for spring 1996, the same time one Niagara nursery also arranged to buy cuttings; this was the first time anyone had expressed any interest in getting material from these remaining St. Laurent vines.

In the years since, St. Laurent has spread out in small amounts to Ontario and in British Columbia.

Beginning in 2001, Paul Jacobson, now of Judge Rock Wines in Central Otago, New Zealand, had secured funding for the introduction of St. Laurent from British Columbia. The problem was that “Central Otago is dependent on one high quality red grape variety, namely Pinot Noir. There is a need to have an alternative grape that will reduce risk by ripening grapes earlier than Pinot Noir.”

Jacobson, in his preliminary research, had contacted me and had independently come to the same conclusions I had about the suitability of St. Laurent as a secondary red variety for an area primarily focussed on Pinot Noir. The Kiwis even flew in bottles of St. Laurent and Pinot Noir from Austria and the Nichols in B.C. for comparative tastings to help convince Central Otago growers; both main tastings (the first of St. Laurent only; the second of wines made by growers with both St. Laurent and Pinot Noir) have been posted on the internet.

The first planting of own-rooted St. Laurent vines in Central Otago went in the ground in 2003; grafted vines will begin to go in in 2005.

There is also the beginnings of some interest in St. Laurent in the United States, within the cooler, more challenging regions of Minnesota and Puget Sound. In September, 2001 the American Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms added St. Laurent to the list of prime grape variety names for use in designating American wines. The petitioner

was Robin Partch of Northern Vineyards Winery in Stillwater, Minnesota. The supporting documents included reference to the existence of St. Laurent in the collection of the University of Minnesota, and research viticulturalist Peter Hemstad's belief that "he expects St. Laurent to become more widely planted in cooler climates. He further states that he would recommend St. Laurent to growers in cooler climate states such as Minnesota, Michigan, and New York."

On a website maintained by the Puget Sound Wine Growers, Steve Snyder of Hollywood Hill Vineyards wrote of St. Laurent:

"This is another Austria specialty. It's origin is thought to be from France, but it is no longer grown there. It shares many common traits with Pinot Noir and is thought to be related to it. So far the juice from St. Laurent is darker than Pinot Noir. Commercial examples from Austria have mostly been at least as dark as most Pinot Noirs. It is supposed to ripen 7-10 days ahead of Pinot Noir, but we have not seen that it ripens any earlier so far. It has thicker skins than Pinot Noir, helping to keep the rot away. It is very early budding and frost can be a problem. Commercial examples from Austria and Germany have been excellent. Recent tastings from Puget Sound grapes have shown that St. Laurent can reliably ripen here with slightly more sugar and lower acids than Pinot Noir, with a darker, full bodied wine. More plantings are warranted."

So, though Prince Edward County likely has the largest number of St. Laurent vines in the New World at the moment (maybe about 10,000 as a rough guess in 2004), there are other regions looking to adopt it. This is both a spur to increase plantings and focus on matching or exceeding the Austrian template for the variety (though the Nichol Vineyard does that now with its St. Laurent) and a helpful marketing development.

### What Can St. Laurent do for Me?

Certainly answers to this question can be found throughout this report. There is also the vine's name (St. Laurent/St. Lawrence is the mighty river at the centre of Canadian history which starts just to the east of us at Kingston), and some romantic elements around the selection of the sobriquet (the beginning of verasion traditionally with "the saint

who is celebrated on the night of the shooting stars" according to the website of Casata Monfort in Trentino" – the event known as The Persiads, or Tears of St. Lawrence.)

As important as some of the key viticultural advantages are (thicker skin, earlier ripening), it is the wine quality that must be kept in mind.

Jancis Robinson does take pains to point out St. Laurent "...shares many of Pinot Noir's characteristics (juicy fruit and relatively low natural grape tannins) and is thought by some to be related to the great red burgundy grape. It ripens well ahead of Pinot Noir, however, and can be cultivated on a much wider range of sites. Its thicker grape skins also help ward off rot, although coulure can be a problem. Its only major viticultural disadvantage is dangerously early buddings, although this is no great problem in Burgenland in the warm south eastern corner of Austria, where it is capable of producing deep-coloured, velvety reds with sufficient concentration – provided yields are limited – to merit ageing in oak and then bottle. Lesser versions can be simply and soupy sweet but the variety has been successfully blended with such fashionable varieties as Cabernet Sauvignon, Blauburgunder (Pinot Noir), and also with Austria's livelier Blaufrankisch, notably on the shores of the Neusiedlersee."

In Michael Edwards book *The Red Wine Companion A Connoisseur's Guide*, his praise of Josef Umatham's St. Laurent is worth remembering, as he writes it "...is a class act similar in aromatic potential and subtle flavour to its distant relative, the Pinot Noir, but often more deeply colored and fuller-bodied than the latter...Umatham's best offering to date, a 1992 St. Laurent from the Vom Stein vineyard, is a very exciting glass of red wine, so much so that at a recent international wine gathering for connoisseurs, it was mistaken for a Ruchottes-Chambertin – méthode ancienne, of course."

In his tasting notes for this particular wine, Edwards notices "Deep Victoria plum color, scents of briary fruit, spices, and vanilla, new wood lending a touch of sweetness to the ripe berry flavors – all beautifully judged for, though full, the wine remains refined and long-flavored, in no way overextracted. Outstanding. Rating \*\*\*\*\*"

Philipp Blom agrees with Edwards, and states that with Umathum, “Very much in the French style, his best wines come from separate vineyards...”. And that is something to remember. Much of what applies in growing Pinot Noir (yields, gentle vinification and ageing) is what seems to work best to achieve excellent St. Laurent. Blom again: “If vinified in the traditional way, in large barrels, it reaches its full maturity after two to five years. Recently, however, it has been given the full barrique treatment and has demonstrated that it benefits from new oak and can develop into a much more complex wine with greater ageing potential.”

That is precisely what Umathum and Helmut Renner stated in their replies to my questions. Josef Umathum, squeezing in answers during a busy summer, simply states “You can do it like Pinot Noir.” Renner ferments in closed stainless steel tanks for up to three weeks, depending on the year, and then ages in barrels (“30-40% max new wood”); in 2004 he was going to do a trial with native yeasts.

To release the potential top quality critics such as Jancis Robinson recognize in St. Laurent it must be treated like a top grape.

Yields are kept to between 2 to 3.2 tonnes per acre for Umathum’s 6 hectares of St. Laurent; Renner brings in approximately 1.3 to 1.5 tonnes per acre for his 1.2 hectares (He has one vineyard with 40 year old St. Laurent vines in it, and two new vineyards planted in 2000 and 2003).

Vine densities in Austria tend to be lower than in France, and Umathum has about 1400 to 1600 plants per acre; Renner has about 2323 vines per acre (2.3 metres X 0.75 metres). At Renner’s spacing, that means each vine is producing about 2.84 lbs of fruit, and gives an average cluster weight of 161 grams. (Isn’t Canada’s mix of metric and imperial measurements fun?)

As for problems with St. Laurent, Umathum answers that “The berries are very close and so Botrytis is a big problem”; Renner states that “It requires a lot of leaf-work, and in deep soils grapes often burst, and there is a high danger of botrytis.”

The attractions are the same to both growers. Renner writes that with “early maturity, [the] variety is ideal for our area; related to Pinot Noir, possibly coming from France and originally planted by

monks – same as Pinot Noir, we see it as one of the oldest varieties in Austria ... and a variety very important for the future too.”

The vine is not without difficulties. One official Austrian description of St. Laurent points out that “Fine, unmistakable aromas of amarelle cherries and dark berries distinguish this indigenous Austrian red-wine variety” but goes on to say “Because of several unpleasant qualities, such as its susceptibility to blossom drop and Botrytis, this grape variety is rightfully considered to be difficult and has fallen into disfavour in recent years. Particularly in dry years, this grape produces very noble and supple wines in the wine-growing areas of northern Burgenland and in the Thermenregion. To a certain extent it resembles a more powerful variant of the Pinot Noir and thus is undergoing a certain renaissance at the moment. With its delicate tannins, the St. Laurent can give red-wine blends added flair.”

I remain bullish on this variety as a second ‘quality’ red for Prince Edward County. It does require a grower who also relishes the challenge of Pinot Noir to bring it to success each vintage. Like Pinot Noir, it will never be a heavy cropping, easily managed vine; those seeking higher crops and easier viticulture would do best to adopt the St. Laurent offspring Zweigelt.

Philipp Blom also doesn’t shy away from some of the problems with St. Laurent, but still agrees on its role in Austria:

“Late frosts, rain during the flowering period and mildew present considerable hazards for growers, though its thick grape skins protect it from rot...”

“St. Laurent is a capricious and difficult grape variety, and most growers think it is not worth their while, particularly because of its dangerously early flowering, making it sensitive to late frosts and unreliable in quantitative terms. It does, though, tend to ripen much earlier than Pinot Noir and can therefore reach full ripeness also in less warm years.

“Some Austrian growers feel, with some reason, that it may yet prove to be one of the best Austrian red varieties, together with the two other indigenous varieties, Blaufrankisch and Zweigelt.”

I believe it may also prove to be one of the best Prince Edward County varieties, too.

# REPORT ON MEUNIER

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## Pithy Quotes about Meunier

“The hardier Pinot Meunier is best suited to the colder soils of the Vallée de Marne where it is grown for its high yield and spicy flavor. Meunier accounts for nearly half the Champagne vineyard; like the Mafia it is everywhere, but nobody talks about it. This is rather silly, seeing that Meunier is an important source of wines for non-vintage champagnes from the very best houses such as Krug, Roederer, Pol Roger, and Billecart-Salmon.”

**Michael Edwards**, *The Champagne Companion*,  
Quintent Publishing, 1995

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“If ever a variety lived its life in the shade of another it is the (Pinot) Meunier. Cabernet Franc may be patronized by many as a mere country cousin of the aristocratic Cabernet Sauvignon, but it does at least lead an independent existence in all corners of the globe...Poor old Meunier has to resign itself to playing an entirely secondary role to the more reputable Pinot Noir in just one corner of France.

**Jancis Robinson**, *Vines, Grapes & Wines*,  
Mitchell Beazley, 1986

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“The fact is, some winemakers actually try to hide the fact that they’re using a perfectly respectable grape. They’re ashamed! Of a grape!

While certain champagne producers still adamantly deny using Pinot Meunier in their blends, more and more winemakers are stepping forward to embrace this misunderstood grape. At last, Pinot Meunier is coming out of the closet.”

**Tina Caputo**, *Pinot Meunier: Out of the Closet*  
from *Wines & Vines*, December 1998

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“One of France’s dozen most planted black grape varieties (even though it and its common synonym Pinot Meunier are hardly ever seen on a wine label.)”

**Jancis Robinson’s Guide to Wine Grapes**,  
Oxford University Press, 1996

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“We have never hidden the fact that we use Pinot Meunier, but most companies did and some of them still do! Pinot Meunier gives splendid fruit, and when tasting still wines, it stands quite well against the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. It is not rare that, at Deutz, in the blind tasting of the ‘vins clair’ we rank some of the Pinot Meunier at the very top of the list. Pinot Meunier displays fruity notes on the nose and offers aromas of ripe apple, sometimes tinged with strawberry aromas. With age it can display a wonderful complexity, mixing candied fruit and toffee notes. It always shows an attractive roundness and suppleness in the mouth.”

**Fabrice Rosset**,  
president and CEO, Champagne Deutz,  
in Tina Caputo’s *Pinot Meunier: Out of the Closet*  
from *Wines & Vines*,  
December 1998.

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“Handley is now on its third vintage of Pinot Mystere, a 100% Pinot Meunier still red wine; 844 cases of the latest vintage were produced...It has intense fruit and spice accents, with a soft, long finish...Pinot Meunier is earlier to ripen, and has larger berries than Pinot Noir. It seems to develop its fruit flavors at slightly higher maturity levels than in Pinot Noir. The flavors are fruity but slightly neutral, with a little of the spice that one gets in Pinot Noir grapes. The grapes, and therefore the wine, have lower tannins than Pinot Noir. The wine seems to have more color – and more stable color – than with Pinot Noir.”

**Milla Handley**, winemaker, Handley Cellars,  
in Tina Caputo’s  
*Pinot Meunier: Out of the Closet*  
from *Wines & Vines*, December 1998.

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“Bonny Doon produces not one, but two Pinot Meunier still wines: the Pinot Meunier Sonoma Mountain and the Blanc de Meunier...Pinot Meunier can make a really sublime red; more interesting than Pinot Noir.

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It has more soul, more earthiness, more strangeness...more spiciness and funkiness. Our '97 red is sensational – more Burgundian than any Pinot Noir in California...It's the same as Pinot Noir to grow. That is to say, it's hard. They have the same problems."

**Randall Graham,**  
winemaker & president for life,  
Bonny Doon Vineyard,  
in Tina Caputo's *"Pinot Meunier: Out of the Closet"*  
from *Wines & Vines*, December 1998.

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"It has merit on its own, but it's best in a blend. Our style is based on blending as many distinct variations on Pinot Noir as possible. But we do make a 100% Pinot Meunier wine as a still red wine. It's a very small thing; we use it exclusively in the restaurant and visitors center. We use to give it to our friends and ask them what they thought it was, and they'd say that it's like a Pinot Noir, but with spice, orange peel and the earthiness of a Rhone variety. We make the still Pinot Meunier to deconstruct the blending process for people – for the educational aspect. Also, it's really quite a delightful wine!"

**Dawnine Dyer,**  
winemaker, Domaine Chandon,  
in Tina Caputo *Pinot Meunier: Out of the Closet*  
from *Wines & Vines*, December 1998.

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"The vine's growing characteristics suggest it might have been planted more widely if growers had tested it earlier. The variety buds late, avoiding spring frosts, and ripens early, which is precisely why it grows extensively in Champagne's cool, challenging climate. 'It ripens beautifully here,' St. Hubertus winemaker Cheri Jones has discovered. That Kelowna-area winery has more than three acres of this variety, having found that the early-maturing red always gets ripe and, in a good year achieves the ripeness that yields a satisfying table wine."

**John Schriener,**  
*Chardonnay and Friends:*  
*Varietal Wines of British Columbia,*  
Orca Book Publishers, 1998

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"The red-wine grape most favoured in Germany is the Blue Burgundy (Spaetburgunder). Its wine is dark, strong and finely spiced. It flourishes on the

Rhine, on the Ahr, and above all in Baden. Next in flavour comes the Mueller-vine (Black-Schwarz-Riesling) in Wuerttemberg."

**S.F. Hallgarten,**  
*Rhineland Wineland,*  
Arlington Books, 1951 & 1965

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## Why Meunier?

Few people are familiar with this vine, and that's somewhat understandable. Jancis Robinson reports that Meunier is "One of France's dozen most planted black grape varieties (even though it and its common synonym Pinot Meunier are hardly ever seen on a wine label.)" In 1994 official French estimates in 1994 had Meunier covering 11,200 ha.

This is a regrettably overlooked, nearly invisible workhorse grape. Though it is snubbed and denied entry onto the small list of 'noble' varieties, as the first or second most planted vine in Champagne (James Wilson's Terroir lists it as slipping to second [35%], behind Pinot Noir [37.5%]; most texts still list it as the variety with the most acreage), Meunier certainly is comfortable in its own skin. Meunier not only rubs shoulders with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay within that region's vine rows, it often lives with these two princely grapes in Champagne bottles themselves. From experience, I would urge that growers consider it as an attractive, resilient and flexible variety.

Meunier is attractive for its viticultural characteristics and its nearly indistinguishable performance in bottle compared to Pinot Noir. It is resilient in its ability to withstand winter cold, in its later budding, its fruitful secondary buds, and its slightly earlier ripening. Meunier has great flexibility, either field-mixed as a clone of Pinot Noir (recommended in New York State), grown and vinified separately as a still red varietal, or used as a base wine for sparkling production.

## Meunier: The Grape

The *Larousse Wines and Vineyards of France* entry on Meunier lists numerous synonyms: "Pinot Meunier, Gris Meunier or Auvernat Gris in Loiret, Blanche Feuille, Farineux, Morillon Taconé in Marne, Plant de Brie in the Paris area, Fernaise in Lorraine, Noirin Enfariné in Doubs, Frésillon in Alsace." To these, Jancis Robinson's *Guide to Wine*

*Grapes* adds: "Plant Meunier, Munier, Farineux Noir, Morillon Taconé (France); Mullerrebe, Schwarzriesling (Germany); Blaue Postitschtraube (Austria); Rana Modra Mlinaria (Yugoslavia)."

From the comprehensive *Larousse Wines and Vineyards of France*, we get a description of Meunier:

"Growing tips open, felty white. Leaves medium sized, orbicular, finely bullate; deeply five-lobed with concave and sometimes denate lateral sinuses; petiolar sinus lyrate, more or less closed; dentation convex, medium sized; underside of blade downy. The foliage reddens partially in autumn.

Green shoots ribbed, downy at the tip, mahogany red in sunlight; tendrils thin, medium sized.

Bunches small to medium sized, cylindrical-conical, compact; grapes small, spherical, blue-black, thick skinned, with soft, very juicy flesh; ripening period: first epoch.

The Meunier is of average vigour. It has late budbreak, and this is a valuable feature; in Champagne, for example, it can be grown on badly situated north-facing slopes and in chilly, frost-prone hollows. Its wine does not have much colour, and is less fine and lower in alcohol than that of the Pinot Noir. Consequently, in Champagne, its grapes fetch a lower price than do those of the Pinot Noir. It is susceptible to oidium (powdery mildew) and to grey rot (botrytis), but its frost resistance makes up for these weaknesses.

Two registered clones have been approved: numbers 458 and 791. The Meunier is classed as 'recommended' in Champagne, the Loire valley and Burgundy. Plantings of it are increasing and it is now grown on more than 10,500 ha. It is one of the specified grape varieties for the Champagne and Touraine AOCs, and for the Vins de 'Orléanais VDQS.'

David Jackson's & Danny Schuster's *The Production of Grapes & Wine in Cool Climates* writes of Meunier that it's:

"A quality black grape of central Europe, grown in Champagne and certain German areas. It is a rather similar variety to Pinot Noir, though buds burst slightly later and its

smaller grapes ripen with a lesser amount of acidity. The Meunier wine has a soft, aromatic character, with less depth of colour than Pinot Noir. It is perhaps most suitable for blending with similar but more acid wines of Pinot stock, such as Pinotage or Pinot Noir. Young shoots are distinctively white tipped and mature canes are greyish brown.

Soils: Well-drained soils preferred, suits calcareous soils

Vigour: Moderate

Pruning: Medium to long canes, avoid dense foliage by summer pruning

Diseases susceptibility: Downy mildew – low to fair; Powdery mildew – fair to high; Bunch rot and Botrytis – fair to high

Wet weather: Induces disease at harvest time

Rootstocks: Moderate to vigorous

Yields: Moderate"

David Lett, in *Oregon Winegrape Grower's Guide*, has an entry under 'Viticulturally Established, Market Potential' in his essay on varieties for Oregon:

**"Pinot Meunier (Period 1)**

This variety is produced commercially as a still red wine in the U.S. at this time by only one winery in the Willamette Valley, and in only very small quantities. The wines from this variety are similar in character to Pinot Noir, but seem to mature more quickly than Pinot Noir in bottle. Grape maturity is somewhat later than Pinot Noir, and tonnage from the clone now producing is rarely over one ton/acre. There is no experience with virus-free vines. If such vines gave yields more reasonable than one ton per acre, this variety might be of interest to those considering the production of sparkling wines; Pinot Meunier is pressed white by some producers of French Champagne to 'marry' blends of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Certainly Pinot Meunier is a variety to consider for sparkling wine production in Oregon."

Over in New York State, R.M Pool and company note in their paper *Pinot Noir Clonal Research in New York*:

**“Meunier”**

Average Yield: Moderate

Typical tons/acre: 4.5

Typical tonnes/ha: 9.8

Typical Brix/Harvest: 19

Red Wine Quality: Moderate/Good

Typical Comments: In normal years low color and bunch spoilage; in dry years good color, taste and spicy aromas.

**Clones with limited recommendation:**

Meunier strong points:

Cold hardiness

Good yield

Good quality when ripe, but attained only in certain years (primary use for sparkling wine).

Weak points:

Bunch rot susceptible”

In the official *Catalogue of Selected Wine Grape Varieties and Clones Cultivated in France*, the entry on Meunier states:

**“Ampelography**

–density of prostrate hairs at the tip of the young shoot; very dense

–green young leaves

– shoots with red stripes or red coloring on internodes, with medium to high density of prostrate hairs

– circular mature leaves with five lobes; slightly open petiolar sinus; deep upper leaf sinuses with often a tooth at the margin; medium anthocyanin coloring of veins; sparse to medium density of prostrate hairs on the upper side; medium density of prostrate hairs on the lower side

– roundish or short elliptic berries

**Phenology**

– Time of bud burst: 3 days after Chasselas B

– Time of maturity: 0.5 weeks after Chasselas B

**Agronomic behavior**

This fairly productive variety is rather resistant to winter frost. After a spring frost, secondary buds are fertile. Due to its iron chlorosis resistance, Meunier is well adapted to calcareous soils.

**Diseases, insects and mites susceptibility**

Meunier is weakly sensitive to phomopsis, downy and powdery mildew. However, it is sensitive to grape caterpillars and grey rot.

**Technological potential**

Clusters are small and berries are very small. Meunier gives essentially sparkling wines. These fairly acid wines become old rapidly.”

**CLONES**

**Clonal selection:**

Fifteen clones have been certified. Collections have been made in Champagne and central areas.”

Of these clones, the six most interesting have the following characteristics:

“458: small cluster weight, inferior and irregular production, superior sugar content, frequent mutations.

“791: superior cluster weight and fertility, inferior sugars, though good for sparkling wines, with more lobed leaves, medium vigour and early maturation.

“817: most planted clone, medium fertility and cluster weight, inferior sugar content, but early maturing with superior vigor; for good use in sparkling wines.”

The Catalogue also notes the inclusion of two clones from the Loire – ‘Gris Meunier’ types used for rosé or light reds:

“901 medium fertility, superior sugar content, for rosé wines.

“916 medium fertility, superior sugar content, for rosé wines.”

(There is also a clone 925 hailing from Loire as well, listed as good for sparkling wines.)

Of these official French clones, only 458, 925 are approved for entry into Canada.

There are a few older vineyards with unknown clones of Meunier in Niagara and British Columbia; British Columbia also has a small acreage of Samtrot, which is a hairless mutation of Meunier from Germany (it doesn’t have the downy, felt white ‘hair’ that distinguishes Meunier most readily from Pinot Noir.)

Examples of the various Ontario and British Columbia Meunier clones – along with Samtrot purchased from the federal vine collection in B.C. – have been growing in Hillier for at least 7 years now.

As for rootstocks for Meunier in Prince Edward County, that would fit the recommendations/benefits/problems I've outlined previously in the *Viticultural Primer* for vinifera. Personally, I believe Meunier on Riparia to be the best combination, adding to Meunier's winter-hardiness, and keeping its early-ripening characteristics. In France (primarily Champagne, where free lime is a serious problem) Jean Cordeau writes in *Creation d'un Vignoble, Greffage de la vigne et port-greffes* (Editions Féret, 1998) that "41B: Il donne toute satisfaction dans la plupart des terroirs avec les 3 cépages Champenois (Pinot noir – Meunier – Chardonnay)" and "Le Fercal en sol argileux, très chlorosant sur les calcaires durs de la Vallée de la Marne (excellent avec le Meunier)."

### Meunier: What is it?

Meunier is probably one of the easiest vines to identify just from its growing tips: these are quite often white with dense hairs, covering almost all the underlying green tissue. That is agreed upon all over the world where it grows. But how exactly this variety appeared in vineyards is still a debate in progress.

"Meunier's most common synonym," writes Oz Clarke "Pinot Meunier, bears witness to its probable origin as a mutation of Pinot Noir. True, the leaf now looks very different and far more indented. The leaves are also downy on the underside, giving them the floury appearance from which the vine takes its name: 'Meunier' means 'miller', and many of the vine's other synonyms – Farineux or Noirin Enfariné, or Mullerrebe or Muller-Trabue in Germany, right down to Dusty Miller in England – derive from the same characteristic. But it is possible to find canes bearing completely hairless leaves; this is taken by ampelographers as evidence of an origin in Pinot Noir."

This is the established opinion about Meunier – that, like Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc, it's just a simple genetic variation within the unstable genes of basic Pinot Noir. In John Winthrop Haeger's new tome *North American Pinot Noir*, (University of California Press, 2004), he outlines the basics of the current thought on Meunier:

"Pinot meunier, the staple grape of Champagne, which is occasionally made into a still wine, is taken

to be a 'chimera.' 'A mutation exists in the outer layer of cells,' according to [UC Davis researcher Caroline] Meredith causing the distinctive 'floured' leaf that gave the variety its name – 'but if you isolate an inner layer of cells and regenerate a plant from those cells, the new plant resembles a typical pinot noir.' One Austrian scientist advances a different view, however. Ferdinand Regner, of the Federal College of Viticulture in Klosterneuburg, published research in 1999 claiming that pinot meunier (known in German-speaking countries as schwarzriesling) is actually a parent rather than a mutation of pinot noir, and that pinot noir represents the crossing of schwarzriesling with traminer. This research is not accepted outside Austria, and Regner's results have not been replicated in other studies."

The papers from Regner and his team should not be completely dismissed, as they seem to be. In Austria, certainly, the research is recounted as fact on websites and in official publications where varieties are discussed, which may be discounted as chauvinistic...but I'm not so certain.

In *Genetic Relationships Among Pinots*, published in the American Journal of Enology and Viticulture, Vol 51, No. 1, 2000,

"With respect to the age of the whole Pinot family, one could easily argue that Schwarzriesling may be a Pinot mutant with more extensive alterations in the genome. Nevertheless, the characteristic allele of Schwarzriesling at loci VVS2 (129 bp) and VVMD36 (240 bp) indicates that the cultivar is not derived from Pinot by mutation. The length of the specific allele is different from that in all other V. vinifera, and negates the former assumption that Pinot might be the parental cultivar of Schwarzriesling. Since the differences in morphology, anthocyanins, wine components and even in the SSR profile are too extensive to be explained by clonal mutation, we consider a hybridization of Schwarzriesling with another cultivar to the origin of Pinot. With respect to available data, only the cultivar Traminer could be the possible second parent of Pinot. Only a combination of Traminer and Schwarzriesling includes all alleles of Pinot."

Meunier, however, is not a monolithic group, and was so noted by Regner: "Several Meunier samples from different collections showed differing

genotypes. Although in some cases Meunier is identical with Pinot, we also detected identity with Schwarzriesling and one Meunier genotype, with an individual SSR pattern, representing and outcross from Pinot. The second partner for this Pinot offspring could not be identified.” The differences, whether from outcrossing, or even genetic mutation of Pinot Noir expressing a somatic chimera of its parental Schwarzriesling, are possible explanations for why Regner’s theory is not easily repeated by other scientists. Adding to the complications is the observation that Samtrot and Farbklevner are in fact hairless types of Schwarzriesling. (Though Stephen Brook in *The Wines of Germany* notes that Samtrot as far back as the 1920s was recognized in Germany as a hairless version of Schwarzriesling, with lower yields and very small berries.)

Regner, in an email to me, did write that “We are still convinced about the results by genetic analysis. You are right no other group has confirmed our results. I suppose the reason is the close genetic relationship of Meunier (Schwarzriesling) and Pinot (Blauer Burgunder) and their own variability. Maybe in future – if some markers for specific traits are available – it should be easier to differentiate them and argue the proposed parentage.”

After years of growing various clones of Pinot Noir and Meunier, I tend to think that Regner and his team have solved the enigma of Meunier. The leaf shape, the different colour of green in its leaf, and the different colour of its mature canes are very noticeable. Then there’s the cultivar’s relationship to cold. Jancis Robinson also notes it, writing that “Viticulturally, Meunier’s strong suit is its ability to withstand spring frosts. It buds rather later than Pinot Noir and Chardonnay and the wood’s lower sap content makes it less vulnerable to frost damage. Meunier is therefore the obvious choice for those parts of the Champagne vignoble particularly vulnerable to frost, such as the Vallée de la Marne.”

The mature canes *are* different than Pinot Noir going into winter. Not only are they a greyer, lighter brown, they are ‘harder’ and drier. As noted this may explain its greater resistance to cold; it also reminds one of the situation with Cabernet Franc, an older variety than Cabernet Sauvignon, and recently one of that vine’s parents...and one with more cold resistance than other vinifera in Ontario

and Northeastern North America. If Meunier does *finally* emerge just as Regner theorizes – an older variety than Pinot Noir, and one of its parents – it would be an interesting similarity to Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon, with the ‘shadow’ variety in fact being the progenitor of the famed offspring. And it would also interestingly point to some of the oldest vinifera as being the most cold tolerant.

An odd footnote to the Meunier genetic tale appeared in 2002 when scientists created what was termed ‘A Dolly Grape’, referring obliquely to the genetic cloned sheep. Growing vines from the L1 layer of cells on Meunier, they ended up with hairy dwarf vines only 59 centimetres high, with few leaves but abundant bunches of normal grapes replacing the normal tendrils. From other cells in Meunier, the vine grew up to be indistinguishable from Pinot Noir.

Whether this is of any use in viticulture or anything more than an interesting oddity hasn’t been determined.

## Meunier: Here and There

Meunier exists in pockets around the world. In Germany in 1991, there was a reported 1,685 hectares of Mullerrebe, with 85.9 per cent in Württemberg. Recently about 2,400 hectares (4,000 acres) was reported, with 17% of vines in Württemberg given over to it. (Recent reports also had about 70 hectares (170 acres) of Samtrot planted in Germany.)

Jancis Robinson reports that Meunier “...is also grown in German-speaking Switzerland, and to a much lesser extent in Austria and former Yugoslavia”, and adds that “Curiously, in Australia Meunier has a longer documented history as a still red varietal wine (at one time called Miller’s Burgundy) than Pinot Noir. New-found enthusiasm for authentic replicas of champagne saved the variety from extinction in Australia and the odd, juicy varietal still red can also be found.”

In England, Meunier was found growing wild, and is called Wrotham Pinot. Dr. Richard Peterson brought cuttings of it to California more than a decade ago, and 2 acres were propagated and now produce a limited bottling of Napa Valley Sparkling Wine for the Napa Valley Winery. (More on Wrotham Pinot can be found in my old *Ottawa*

Citizen article *Is There an Anglo-Saxon Grape?* at the end of this paper.)

Aside from the two acres of Wrotham Pinot, in California there were a reported 275 acres (110 ha) of Meunier in 1992. In Oregon, David Lett introduced the variety to the state, and his Eyrie Vineyards and three other Oregon wineries produce small amounts of it. In New York State, Duck Walk Vineyards on Long Island produces a still red Meunier. Ontario wineries Thirty Bench and Hillebrand occasionally produce still Meuniers, while in British Columbia almost half a dozen still reds are offered. Oz Clarke's *Encyclopedia of Grapes* rates a number of Meuniers: "Best producers: (Australia) Best's, Seppelt, Taltarni; (Canada) Tinhorn Creek; (France) Billecart-Salmon, Blin, Charles Heidsieck, Alfred Gratien, Krug, Laurent Perrier; (USA) S Anderson, Roederer Estate, Schramsberg."

In France, Meunier was much more popular than it is today. Oz Clarke writes that "In the 19th century it was the great standby of vineyards all over the north, from the Paris basin as far as Lorraine – regions where no vineyards exist now. It is still occasionally found in the Loire and makes a pleasant smoky pale pin Vin Gris near Orléans, but there is much more in Germany, where it grows in Wurttemberg, Baden the Pfalz and Franken..." Jancis Robinson reminds us that "It has largely disappeared elsewhere in northern France, although it is still technically allowed into the rosés and light reds of Côtes de Toul, Moselle, Touraine, and Orléanais in the Loire valley."

While there are numerous examples of small quantities of still red Meunier through the world, the vast majority of the variety is to be found in Champagne, for production of sparkling wines.

### What Can Meunier do for Me?

Most of the Meunier in the world, as noted, is used for sparkling wine base...and almost all of that is to be found in Champagne. Where pockets exist, quite often – as in California – it is because it was originally planted to replicate the Champagne vineyard trio of Meunier, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. In a few places such as Germany Meunier is valued for its own qualities – primarily winter hardiness and wine characteristics – or has become recog-

nized as a good, attractive still wine in New World regions such as Oregon and British Columbia.

In Prince Edward County – and especially Hillier – with its numerous long east-west ridges, there are great possibilities in planting Meunier on the north slopes. That could provide a sparkling wine base for most years; in warm years the quality of fruit may easily allow the option of early picking for sparkling wine, or normal harvest for still reds. Prince Edward County's just barely suitable viticultural season for First Epoch grapes, and our slight differences in slope and aspect, can offer the benefits of welding together two regions – Champagne and Burgundy – on the same landscape.

Jancis Robinson's *Guide to Wine Grapes* explains the role of Meunier in Champagne:

"Acid levels are slightly higher although alcohol levels are by no means necessarily lower than those of Pinot Noir. Meunier is therefore the most popular choice for Champagne's growers, especially those in cooler north-facing vineyards, in the damp, frost-prone Vallée de la Marne, and in the cold valleys of the Aisne département..."

"Common wisdom has it that as an ingredient in the traditional three-variety champagne blend, Meunier contributes youthful fruitiness to complement Pinot Noir's weight and Chardonnay's finesse. Although the top drawer house of Krug is publicly enthusiastic about Meunier, few other producers boast of it, and few preponderantly Meunier growers' champagnes have any weight or staying power. Meunier is generally lower in pigments than Pinot Noir, and one of its common French synonyms is Gris Meunier."

In her earlier book *Vines, Grapes and Wines*, Robinson adds that:

"Meunier's chief attribute is fruitiness, something in which Chardonnay and often Pinot Noir are notably low. A preponderantly Meunier champagne may not age as well as one with more Pinot Noir, but it will have lots of youthful vivacity. Meunier also tends to be rather higher in acid, and slightly lower in alcohol, than Pinot Noir and so can bring useful crispness to a blend in a very ripe year. In some years, Meunier wine can take on almost too much flavour for a fine champagne. Certainly champagnes from areas known to grow a very high proportion of Meunier are relatively light and tart, and

are rarely capable of great development.

“Meunier flowers later than the less vigorous Pinot Noir (and is therefore less subject to coulure) but ripens before it, suddenly gaining sugar at a great rate just before harvest. Average yield (which is much less variable than Pinot Noir’s) is 10 to 15 percent higher than that of Champagne’s best publicized Pinot.”

In *Effect of Methode Champenoise Process on Aroma of Four V. vinifera Varieties* (American Journal of Enology and Viticulture, Vol. 49, No. 3 1998), the paper noted that for base wines, “Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier were higher in berry and vanilla/butter terms” and were separated from the white base wines with “floral, citrus and apple.” After transformed into sparkling wines, the differences were not as noticeable.

Terry Theise, an important American importer of German, Austrian and small Champagne growers notes of a primarily Meunier wine from L. Aubry Fil (Jouy-les-Reims):

“L. Aubry Brut, N.V.

60% Pinot Meunier – (‘don’t call it Pinot Meunier,’ they say, ‘but simply Meunier;’ this I henceforth do) – and 20% each Chardonnay and Pinot Noir...They give you this after the more powerful vintage wines; I imagine because it’s less dry and/or it has a tonic effect on the taster. Disgorged 4/03, it smells like fine British oat crackers! Aubry makes a strong case for taking Meunier seriously, and this wine stands with the Non Vintage from Jose Miche, Gaston Chiquet and René Geoffroy as the finest ‘basic’ Meunier Champagnes I know. Meunier is resistant to frost and thus it’s often planted in marginal vineyards and therefore despised! Treat it well and it responds with all those pretty flavours of pumpernickel and sorghum this wine has. It’s playful and lithe, like a dancer. It flies on a giddy trapeze of fruit, at once both tingly and velouté, almost starchy. The dosage is 10 grams per litre.”

Another wine from the same producer – 80% Meunier and 20% Chardonnay – gets the praise that “...there isn’t another wine even faintly like this in all of Champagne. It has a stop-you-in-your-tracks fragrance: sea-air, shells, mussels, and again simply amazing fruit. This 1998 has wonderful oyster grip, and made me think of strawberries, pork jus, kumamotos, even tomatoes.”

The other role for Meunier is as a still red wine. It is sometimes blended with Pinot Noir, as at Hanley Cellars in the Cuvée Primo made in 1997 and 1999, and John Haeger reports that “a few bottlings here and there contain tiny percentages of pinot meunier.” That is an option, and one, as mentioned, recommended by researchers at Cornell in New York. However as an alternative ‘pinot’, or even a special niche ‘pinot’, Meunier has great potential.

It is difficult to find examples of the British Columbia Meuniers in Ontario, but in 1997 and 1998 an absolutely superb example surfaced in the LCBO. It was from David Lett’s The Eyrie Vineyards, and came with a very rustic, handwritten label stating “This is a very limited bottling of 1992 Oregon Pinot Meunier”. Just 12% alcohol, being somewhat mature on release in Ontario, combined with Meunier’s innate ability to age a bit faster than Pinot Noir, the results were probably the most Burgundian – a cellared Burgundy at that – than I had encountered before. A number of pinotphiles grabbed them up, and served the wine blind to others, who also believed it an aged Burgundy. That this was new world ‘Pinot’ was something of a revelation.

In an article in *The Oregonian* by Katherine Cole (Sunday May 9, 2004), she writes “In a blind tasting, 90 people out of 100 would think it’s a pinot noir,” says Linde Kester, owner of Chateau Lorane.

“To those of us who have tasted the wine over and over again, pinot noir tends to have a lot of black cherry characteristics, while pinot meunier has more candied cherry. Pinot meunier tends to have a little more of a spicy character: little hints of nutmeg, cinnamon. But these are all subtle differences.”

Chateau Lorane produces barely 30 to 40 cases a year; Westrey in Oregon produces less than a dozen; the leader is WillaKenzie at about 300 to 400 cases a year. (Domaine Chandon in California produced 3,700 cases annually, though in 2002 that was down to 2,400 cases.)

Eyrie Vineyards made just 98 cases in 2002. Matt Kramer wrote of it that “One of Oregon’s oldest and most distinguished wineries makes very small amounts of this special Pinot. Eyrie’s Pinot Meunier is a medium-bodied wine with complex and interesting flavours of red cherries, berries and

currants. The aroma has a spicy complexity and the finish has hints of spice and vanilla.”

Yields in the U.S. are given as between 2.1 to 2.8 tons (Not *metric tonnes!*), which means that it is not an inexpensive wine; it is, after all still really a Pinot. That means it will rarely be found in any serious form under \$20 a bottle, and most things below this will be diabolical and thin ... like most Pinot Noirs. Domaine Chandon’s Meunier is US\$29.00, WillaKenzie’s is US\$26.99, and Eyrie’s is US\$27.99. These are fair prices below the more premium Pinot Noirs ... and would give a good, entry level premium Pinot ... and one with a unique product placement given the variety’s limited production.

All in all, there is tremendous flexibility and attractiveness with Meunier for those in Prince Edward County already focussing on Pinot Noir. For growers or wineries looking for volumes above quality still red levels, Meunier does have the option of tolerating increased yields, lower sugars, and still retains the ability for a premium product when transformed into quality sparkling wine.

It’s time for this variety to step out from the shadows.

### “Is there an Anglo-Saxon Grape?”

First published in the *Ottawa Citizen*

“I’m always amused when I read headlines about the ethereal beings of the Parti Quebecois. Within these stories there’s always a promise of Jacques Parizeau or Bernard Landry hissing out the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in a way that’s meant to sting or shame. It’s a very galling, Gaullic attitude. Except for our adopted form of government and culture, most of us living in what is brusquely dismissed at Anglo-Saxondom are an array of peoples gathered from the corners of the world. It is pointed, and at the same time pointless, name calling.

“Anglo-Saxon can also appear as a needling little label in the world of wine. The very important Emile Peynaud wrote very important books on oenology and the taste of wine. Peynaud’s *The Taste of Wine – The Art and Science of Wine Appreciation* is considered a classic (and expensive) book that is still in print. In it, under a section titled *The Primacy*

*of French Wines*, Peynaud breezily wrote that “The Japanese imitate the Anglo-Saxons; full of curiosity and earnest application, they are making praiseworthy efforts to absorb this refinement of western culture.” It is amazing how the French get away with this stuff.

“Anglo-Saxons will never get any respect in the world of wine without having a wine grape of their own. The variety of grape or the blend of grapes in a wine determines most of how a wine tastes. Other much smaller variables include climate, soil, ripeness and the skill of the winemaker. Around the world just a handful of grape varieties are pretty much agreed upon as making consistently the finest of wines. Almost all of these ‘noble’ varieties are French, with just Riesling, and sometimes Nebbiolo cracking the line-up. It’s this near clean sweep that the French never let anyone forget.

“Given that no Anglo-Saxon grape comes immediately to mind, one might be created. Sidestepping the contentious question of genetic manipulation, slower methods of traditional plant breeders can be used to fashion new wine varieties. The Germans have bred hundreds of these modern vines. Only a handful have caught on. In Canada you might find bottles of perfectly decent scheurebe, ehrenfelter, kerner and optima, though rarely. Few of these novel varieties have even been allowed to grow in Germany because of the tight rules of the European Union, but they have done well in Britain’s small wine industry. There too, EU regulations threaten the use of these new vines, so creating modern wine grapes really isn’t the answer.

“But are Anglo-Saxons grapeless? The true genius of the reviled Anglos has been as the professional scouts of the best of everybody else’s wine grapes. Scholarly history of the wine trade since the middle ages is pretty much a recounting of what the British Isles were drinking. The grapes of Bordeaux, of the Oporto River, of Jerez, even of Hockheim all benefited from Anglo-Saxon thirst and the fact that the northern islands produced virtually no wine of their own after the destruction of the

monasteries. So the gradual emergence of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot, petit verdot, malbec, semillion and sauvignon blanc from Bordeaux, riesling and silvaner from Germany, and the melange of varieties from the Iberian peninsula can in a way be credited to Anglo-Saxons; they pretty much created the Bordeaux and Port industries single-handed.

“However a different situation developed when Anglo-Saxons began making their own wine in North America, Australia and New Zealand. Instead of just being powerful, influential consumers of grape wines, a few favoured varieties really took off, and profoundly influenced world viticulture.

“Chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon are now almost generic terms for white and red wine – so much so that these two varieties have been called the vanilla and chocolate of wines. There is no denying that this is because of that particular incarnation of Anglo-Saxondom called California. While the French will always hold the spiritual and mystical paternity of Burgundian chardonnay, and Bordeaux cabernet, they would have to admit to being forced into a joint custody with Anglo-Saxons because it is with the latter that these two varieties have gained such consumer appeal and insatiable demand.

“Equally mischievous but perhaps less resounding arguments might be made for the Anglo-Saxon body-snatching of Australian shiraz, New Zealand sauvignon blanc and Californian zinfandel. France would lose or share custody again with both syrah and the crisp white Loire specialty; the jury is still out on what exactly zinfandel is, and whether it came originally from Italy, or found its way back there after showing up first in America.

“However before our Gallic friends suffer strokes or apoplexy, I have another variety to offer up as an Anglo-Saxon grape. In Desmond Seward’s book *Monks and Wine*, one spots the following:

“In 1951 a flourishing vine was discovered at Wrotham in Kent. Now known as the Wrotham Pinot, it has been identified as the Pinot Meunier. At Wrotham there was a summer palace of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the ruins of which may still be seen, and the Benedictines of his cathedral priory could well have planted vines. It is not too much to suppose that the Wrotham Pinot is a survivor from an English monastery vineyard.’

“Here may be a solution: Anglo-Saxons should take over one vine, this very close relative of the pinot noir. The French are not doing much with it, other than in Champagne, where it makes up about one-third of the grapes along with chardonnay and pinot noir, and is considered to help ‘marry’ the flavours of the more famous white and black grapes. Now, some Germans might grumble, because they too grow meunier as mullerrebe (miller’s grape – the name comes from the many white hairs on the leaves and new shoots that make it appear to be dusted with flour), or schwarzriesling. But let them. They have *real* riesling. We have nothing!

“Meunier has been growing for centuries in Britain. The Australians used to make pinot meunier into what they called Miller’s Burgundy. And actually meunier is enjoying a bit of a revival in the U.S. and Canada: you can find excellent examples of Oregon and British Columbian meunier. Almost indistinguishable from pinot noir, they are definitely worth trying, especially if they convert more to this very just cause.”

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