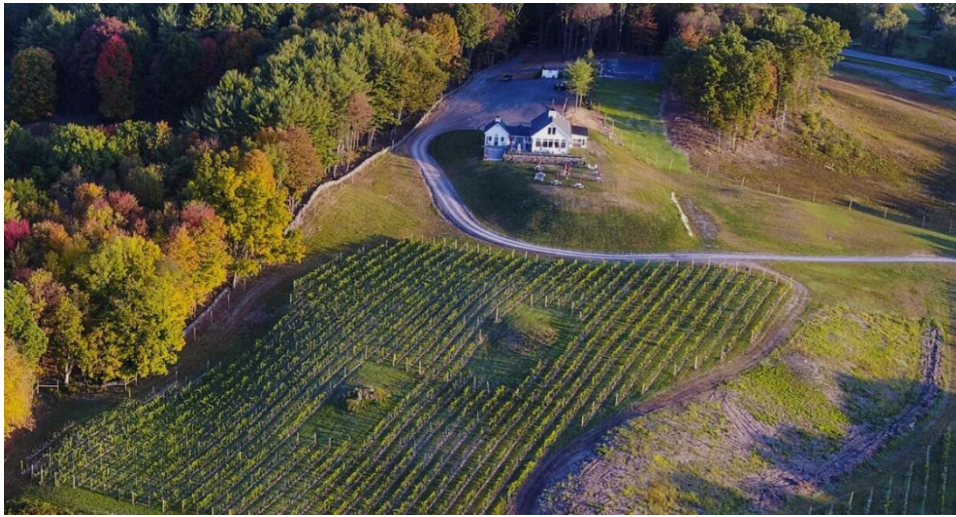


Heritage Wines of the Hudson Valley

Jim Meyers, ENYCHP



Milea Estates (<https://www.mileaestatevineyard.com>)

American viticulture and wine culture is rooted in the 19th century northeast. New York, in particular, produced the first commercial wines in the United States at a time when several grape breeding programs were active in the Hudson Valley. Despite this history, your local wine shop is not selling wines made from the old cultivars of New England and New York. Today, most of the products found in the wine shop are made from traditional European cultivars (e.g. Cabernet Franc and Riesling is readily found on shelves), even when grown and produced in New York.

Having said that, there are plenty of wines grown and made in New York using non-traditional European cultivars, but it is unlikely that you will find them in a local wine shop, as they are mostly sold directly by their producers. Patrons of New York winery tasting rooms are familiar with French-American hybrid cultivars such as Baco Noir, Noiret, or Traminette. Those living in the northern parts of the state are certainly familiar with Marquette and La Crescent.

The collective effort to produce wine everywhere in New York has led each region to adopt the cultivars that work best for them. In simple terms, most growers want to make wines that resemble European wines. To that end, New York vineyards that are capable of growing European cultivars typically do that, but outside of Long Island and the lower Hudson Valley most vineyards are too cold for European cultivars. Thus, they grow the familiar cold hardy varieties that are found in tasting rooms across the state. These cultivar selections are also influenced by the fact that susceptibility of European cultivars to American native pathogens complicates viticulture.

While these 'standard' cultivars have enabled New York's current robust wine industry, they obscure historical events and cultivars. Have you ever come across a bottle of wine made from 19th century favorites such as Croton, Iona, Black Eagle, or Eumelan? Almost certainly not. There are, however, some people who are putting substantial effort into changing that. One of those people is local grape grower

and wine maker, J. Stephen Casscles who, in partnership with [Milea Vineyards](#) in Staatsburg NY, is Project Director of the Hudson Valley Heritage Wine Project.

J. Stephen Casscles and Hudson Valley Heritage Wine Project

Stephen Casscles has been growing grapes in the Hudson Valley since he was in High School in the 1970s. A long-time professional and hobbyist wine maker, Stephen first learned about 19th century Hudson Valley grape varieties from his grandfather, Joseph Casscles, who was a fruit grower in Marlboro, NY. His grandmother, a fruit broker, sold some of these cultivars at the Boston Market and Hunts Point – including Bacchus, Croton, Iona, Jefferson, and Dutchess.

Stephen's interest in French-American hybrids motivated him to write the 2015 book "Grapes of the Hudson Valley and other Cool Climate Regions of the United States and Canada " which further advanced his interest in French hybrids, Hudson Valley Heritage grapes, and the history of their development and use. Stephen maintains his own vineyard of rare grapes, many of them sourced as cuttings from local vineyards, from the nursery catalog of Philip Wager of Boordy Vineyards, and cuttings from the Geneva Germplasm facility, including the 19th century Hudson Valley developed varieties.

A Heritage Wine, as defined on the [Hudson Valley Heritage Wines website](#), is "An indigenous, native or historically notable grape variety found in a region which becomes part of the region's cultural or historical legacy." Working with Milea Estate Vineyards in Staatsburg, NY, Stephen will be making his rare grape variety wines including Baco Noir, Chelois, Le Colonel, Verdelet, Bacchus, Croton, Jefferson, and Iona.

As explained by Stephen, the goal of the project is to encourage the study and production of locally produced wines from heritage grape varieties that

1. Were developed and bred in the Hudson Valley in the 19th century by pioneering Hudson Valley grape breeders from Newburgh, Iona Island, Poughkeepsie, Marlboro, and Croton Point,
2. Include French-American hybrid grape varieties that were introduced to the Hudson Valley from the 1950s to 1970s that helped to revitalize and greatly expand local grape acreage and the number of wineries established in the Hudson Valley, and which
3. Can be grown in an environmentally sustainable manner that helps to protect our Valley's ecosystem, but which are productive, fungus disease resistant, and produce unique and quality wines.

Moreover, the Heritage Wine Project seeks to conserve these beloved local and historically relevant grape cultivars for future generations, while simultaneously elevating their expression to new heights of world class wine quality.

Stephen believes that heritage grape varieties are worth preserving because, "many are winter hardy, fungus disease resistant, very productive, and can do well in our changing climate that is resulting in more violent weather patterns and widely varying rain and temperatures and frost dates. Further, many make unique and quality wines that will add a new dimension and depth to Hudson Valley wines

produced here that is unique to our area and are not being produced anywhere else in the United States or the world.”

Spreading the word and the wine

As Project Director, Casscles, along with Milea’s expert wine and cider making and culinary staff, will conduct wine tastings of Milea produced heritage grape wines at the winery. They will also sponsor symposia and dinners, whose themes will be about the history of fruit growing in the Hudson Valley and about the prominent role the Valley’s horticultural leaders, nursery owners, breeders, and growers had to expand the knowledge of plant sciences in the United States and Europe. In addition, the Milea Estate Vineyards website will regularly post information on the continuing work of our Hudson Valley Heritage Wine Project.

Potential showcase red wines include the French-American hybrids Baco Noir, Chelois, Le Colonel, Burdin Noir, and some red blends that include Leon Millot, Foch, Chambourcin, and SV 18-307. For hybrid whites, look for Seyval Blanc, Vidal, Vignoles, and Verdelet. Potential 19th century Hudson Valley red varieties include Bacchus, Clinton, Eumelan, and Black Eagle. Whites may include Jefferson, Iona, Empire State, and Croton. There will also be blended Heritage whites and reds produced in the French tradition.

Where to learn more

Additional information on the Hudson Valley Heritage Wine Project can be found at the [Hudson Valley Heritage Wines website](#), including a catalog of grapes with photos and cultivar details. Also, look for an updated release of Stephen’s book, “Grapes of the Hudson Valley and Other Regions of the United States and Canada” which will include two new chapters on 19th century Heritage grape varieties that were developed in New England. The book is expected to be available by Christmas of 2022. Stephen can be reached at cassclesjs@yahoo.com.