

## **Minn. contest spotlights wines from frozen north**

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(AP) — ST. PAUL, Minn. - If grapes need to suffer to produce fine wines, surely there are fewer places they suffer as much as Minnesota and other northern-tier states.

The region's harsh winters hardly bring to mind a sublime cabernet or a bright pinot grigio. Yet winemakers there say their vintages deserve respect, so 60 commercial wineries from 16 states sent in more than 300 entries for the first International Cold Climate Wine Competition.

It's no repeat of the historic 1976 Paris competition where California wines shocked the world by beating top French wines. But organizers hope it's a start-one that will bring some recognition to the vintners, give them an impetus to improve the quality of their wines and pique consumer interest, too.

Fifteen judges from a cross section of the wine world spent Tuesday at the University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus, sampling wines in 34 categories, finding some gems as well as some dogs.

Tom Martell, president of the Minnesota Grape Growers Association, and other organizers were quick to say they're not trying to compete against the world's top wines. Their more modest hope is to show that grape varieties developed to survive in frosty northern climates can produce fun, enjoyable wines.

"We're not trying to compete with California and the chardonnays and whatnot," Martell said. "We're taking the grapes, the varieties that grow well in our geography, in our climates, and we're creating a wine market."

Jim Luby, a horticulture professor who leads the University of Minnesota's fruit breeding program, said the main challenge, not surprisingly, is developing vines that can make it through the winter. Minnesota summers actually provide good conditions for ripening grapes, he said. Parts of the state get more heat and sunshine than some premier grape-growing regions around the world.

"We get some things that they don't get in France and Germany, and that's about 20 below in the winter," Luby said with a laugh.

The leading varieties bred at the University of Minnesota include the whites La Crescent and Frontenac gris, and the reds Frontenac and Marquette. Some wines made from them grabbed the attention of the judges.

Annette Peters, import director for local wholesaler World Class Wines, said she had developed a new appreciation for La Crescent. She said a couple that her panel tested were "really truly outstanding" with "fruity, rose-petal qualities" that reminded her of a Gewurztraminer or muscat. She said they could even compete with wines from France's Alsace region or Germany.

"They have that same kind of sweet-tart characteristic going on, a varietal aromatic quality that really kind of brings to light the fact that cool climate wines in Europe strike a parallel to, perhaps, cool-climate wines here," she said.

Michael Grabner, a wine buyer for Century Wines and Spirits, a store in suburban Chanhassen, said his panel blind-tasted an impressive Frontenac and gave it a gold medal. He said he was looking forward to learning who the producer was.

"It really tasted like I was having a Beaujolais, or the gamay grape, which I thought was an exciting aspect. A very flavorful wine," Grabner said.

The winners don't get money but they do get bragging rights that can be used in marketing. The award for the best red went to the Lincoln Peak Vineyard and Winery in New Haven, Vt., for its Marquette. The Mac's Creek Vineyards and Winery in Lexington, Neb., took home honors for best white for its Edelweiss. The WineHaven Winery and Vineyard in Chisago City, Minn., was honored as the best specialty or fortified wine for its 2008 La Crescent Slippery Slope Ice Wine. And the Governor's Cup for the best Minnesota wine went to Falconer Vineyards in Red Wing for its Frontenac port.

The winning bottles will be displayed in the Horticulture Building at the Minnesota State Fair, which runs Thursday through Labor Day. ---

On the Net:

International Cold Climate Wine Competition: <http://www.iccwc.org>

University of Minnesota Cold Hardy Grapes: <http://www.grapes.umn.edu>

Minnesota Grape Growers Association: <http://www.mngrapes.org>