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Wednesday, September 20, 2006



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Wine grapes ripen as crop idea for N.D.

By LAUREN DONOVAN, Bismarck Tribune

CARRINGTON -- The idea that the old North Dakota sod can push up vines with sweet grapes for winemaking seems crazy on the best of days, much less a winter one.

Not only can the old sod produce grapes, it does and about 70 people sat down on a brilliantly cold day to talk about a wine grape industry in the state.

Implement dealers don't need to stock up on mechanical grape pickers anytime soon, but there is a growing interest in wine grapes as a cash crop.

There are about a half-dozen grape growers in state, with something less than 10 acres planted to the vines.

It's a tough business and a labor-intense one, but it does have the potential to be an income booster for small acres, with something like 20 times the harvest value per acre compared to soybeans, for example.

A grape production meeting was held at the Carrington research extension center, which normally deals with topics like good legume feed for livestock and timing of fertilizer applications for sunflowers.

But grape wines may be a crop whose time has come, now that two wineries are open in North Dakota and several others will be soon.

Grape growers and wannabes got specific information about which grapes grow best and where and how to plant them.

But beyond the technical information, grape growers and those who want to, seem infused with something that wasn't included on the how-to sheets in the slide show.

Wine grapes, associated mainly with the rolling, sun drenched hillsides of California, have an ancient mystique about them as the tablefruit and intoxicating juice of the gods.

Rodney Hogan grows 120 grape wine vines on a small piece of rich soil near Buffalo that used to nurture the homely but staple soybean. Next to

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the rows is a picnic table, for sitting and contemplating the project, furniture never seen next to a wheat field.

"The grape plant almost has its own spirit," he said.

He's growing for the Maple River Winery, which plans to add grape wines to its fruit wines repertoire.

Hogan's also been infected by the spirit of the possible.

Hogan said he plans to expand the vineyard and build cabins, so that tourists and visitors can spend a night or so experiencing grape production on his sandy loam soil.

"This is not a two-year gig, but I enjoy farming and I enjoy people and people are attracted to vineyards," he said.

Another grower is so intrigued with the spirit of grapes, he's stealing it to name his operation.

Neil Neddermeyer has a small vineyard near Kindred, which he's naming "Kindred Spirits" to include a future winery.

"It's my intend to sell good quality wine. Any bad quality wine I will simply drink," he said.

Growing wine grapes is unlike anything else. "How fun it is to sculpt grapevines into perfect rows," he said.

He expects enough grapes to start making wine in five years.

Cryslynn and David Walker of Mohall are toying with the idea of turning their small 14-acre property into a vineyard to supply wineries.

They're researching and getting all the information they can. They both have jobs.

"This is labor-intense and long-term," said Cryslynn Walker.

Harlene Hatterman-Valenti, a researcher for the Carrington extension office, said she thinks grape production has a future beyond the "hobby thing."

Farmers can't necessarily increase the size of their farms, but they can increase their income with high value crops, even on small acreages.

Hatterman-Valenti said she's watched the grape industry grow in places like Iowa and Nebraska.

"North Dakotans aren't going to throw up their hands and say it can't be done," she said.

Now, that's the wine spirit.

(Reach reporter Lauren Donovan at 888-303-5511, or lauren@westriv.com.)

Comments

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Kristin wrote on August 24, 2006 2:09 AM:"Well i was searching for my friend Kelly Winn the snow boarder i meant from the max air show at a Carnival in Carbondale IL... i use to work with Harris Exoitics and we