

# Opening Remarks

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In November, 2006, grape growers from 15 far northern countries came together in Riga, Latvia for two days of meeting each other and sharing viticulture experiences. It was the first time that such a global meeting of cold climate growers had happened. Hosting the conference in Riga, a major city of the former Soviet Union, was symbolic. Grape growing in the former Soviet Union had been isolated from the West for 50 years. We all knew that we shared similar problems of climate- cool short seasons and harsh winters. Yet we didn't share our experiences. Each of us knew that the other existed out there in the email world and maybe had similar interests, but the communication barriers posed by written media and language had prevented us from really sharing what we knew about cold climate viticulture. Meeting in person at the Riga conference changed all of that. When we all finally met in person, we discovered that there is a worldwide brotherhood and sisterhood of grape growers in the Far North. We all suffer through the same climate challenges and share the same goals and dreams of having new industries in our home countries based on grape and wine production. Unique grape varieties to produce unique wines that bear the signature of our local climate. There was an outpouring of experiences and information. Lifelong bonds were established between attendees. We had finally found each other, global connections in the northern grape growing world. At dinner on the last night of the Riga conference, we decided that we had to do this again in three years. Our grape growing friends in Quebec stepped up and volunteered to host a meeting in 2009. And so we are here in Saint-Hyacinthe today for VitiNord, the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Northern Viticulture.

So skeptics will question the value of our international cooperation. And so I feel obliged to offer up some examples of how international cooperation helped our global viticulture in the Far North. Consider the example of a variety called *Hasansky Sladky*, which was developed 50 years ago in Vladivostok by an amateur grape breeder, A.K. Bous. It migrated to Estonia and Latvia where it grew in absolute obscurity for 30 years. But it survived the winters there and ripened fully for wine. Their experience told us that Hasansky is quite possibly the earliest ripening grape in the world. It gave us ideas about where else it might grow. It now thrives in such diverse places as Madeleine Island, Quebec in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the prairies of North Dakota. It ripens in the ultra-cool climates of Norway, Sweden, Estonia, and Latvia, and produces very decent wine everywhere. Interestingly, it seems to produce the best wines in the coolest climates.

Consider also the example of the varieties *Severnyi* and *Zaria Severa* developed in the early 1940's by Potapenko and Zaharova at the Central Genetics Laboratory in Michurinsk, Russia. These varieties were never of great commercial value in themselves. But they were used in grape breeding everywhere. *Severnyi* is the seed parent of many varieties: *Ranny TCXA* from the Timiresev Horticulture Academy in

Moscow; *Kosmonauts* from Belarussian Institute of Fruit Culture in Minsk; *Holubok*, a very advanced hybrid wine grape from Novocherkask, and, much more recently, Tyler Kaban's *Selection "C-16"*, the very first cold hardy grape selection from the University of Saskatchewan program. The other variety from Potapenko and Zaharova, *Zaria Severa*, is the seed parent of *Muscat Ustojczyvyj* from Filippenko and Stin at the Central Genetics Laboratory in Michurinsk, Russia. It is also the seed parent of the Geisenheim, Germany variety, *Rondo*, which you will hear a lot about tomorrow in the panel discussion on varieties for extremely cool short season climates.

And it goes on, this East to West tech transfer. Let's consider China. From Wang Li Xue in Inner Mongolia we learned about how the formation of "anti-freeze" carbohydrates is increased by grafting on the roots of the old Minnesota variety *Beta*. Prof. Wang also taught us about the benefits of deep planting to improve root survival in cold and dry winters. We also discovered the huge national collection of *Vitis amurensis* at Zuojia in the northeastern province of Jilin, China and were shocked at how these selections defied Western stereotypes of *Vitis amurensis*. Contrary to prevailing views, many of these vines had very little mildew, good cluster size, and moderate acidity. And note that Jilin has a climate almost identical to Montreal. These selections from the wild of northeastern China were being used to produce commercial wines which we tasted and discovered, much to our surprise, to be quite promising. The Chinese have made pollen available to us and we are now incorporating these genes into our North American hybrid grapes.

So how about some examples of tech transfer from the West to the East? Back in 1901, Brother William, a monk at St. John's Abbey in St. Cloud, Minnesota selected an accidental hybrid grape that was growing in the woods near the abbey. He called it *Alpha* and produced sacramental wine from it. Forty years later, Stalin sent grape researchers to the U.S. to search for a vine that would grow anywhere in the Soviet Union. They brought back Alpha. To this day, if you travel around the countryside in Russia and Belarus, you will see many homes with a big old vine of Alpha still growing on the fence in the garden.

Consider Louis Suelter's contribution to modern viticulture. Back in the 1880's and living in Minnesota, he developed a variety called *Beta*. For most of the next century it was the most common "backyard" grape throughout the Upper Midwest region of the U.S. Then, Beta started to spread to other parts of the world, including China. During my travels in northern China, I discovered that the rootstock of choice there is none other than Beta. There are literally hundreds of thousands of *vinifera* grapevines growing in large commercial vineyards on roots of Louis Suelter's Beta.

There are many more examples, but enough of justifying international cooperation. We are here today because innovation and creativity in viticulture are not confined to the United States. Good ideas run rampant around the northern grape growing world. So we are here to meet each other and share our experiences and our great ideas. As my dear friend Elmer Swenson always said, "Everyone, no matter where they live, should have grapes and wine." Let's make that happen through our global cooperation in grape growing. Have a great conference. And do not let it end here in Saint-Hyacinthe. May the friendships you make here continue on to VitiNord 2012 and for many years to come.