



BY DAWSON RASPUZZI

## COLD CLIMATE GRAPE GROWING

### Choosing the right vines and being prepared

Even the most ideal climates for growing grapes face certain hardships, but growing vines in colder climates definitely have more than their share. Get tips on what to grow and what precautions to take from three pros in various colder climates.

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Coenraad Stassen is the Vintner at Brys Estate Vineyard and Winery in Traverse City, Michigan. He grew up in the Western Cape, South Africa and attended Elsenburg College (now named the Cape Institute for Agricultural Training) in Stellenbosch where he graduated at the top of his class in the Senior Cellar Technology program. After eight years honing his winemaking skills in the Klein Karoo Region, Coenraad joined the international exchange program through Ohio State University in 2003 and shortly thereafter started working at Brys Estate.

**T**here are just shy of 50 acres planted on our estate. We focus on European *vinifera*, including Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, and Gewürztraminer. The Old Mission Peninsula of Michigan does not have the longest track record when it comes to growing grapes, so in a sense we are still dialing in the varieties that work, in our climate. The most important aspect for me is finding *vinifera* varieties that can handle our winter temperatures well enough to produce a world class wine. We are focused on early to mid-season ripening varieties. Another factor is to find a nursery that can provide strong and healthy planting materials to ensure that you can see the vine through to maturity and producing premium grapes for wine production.

Each climate has its own unique challenges and for us it is no different. We are just bouncing back from back-to-back disaster vintages from 2014 and 2015. During the winter we saw temperatures plummet as low as -22 °F (-30 °C) with a wind chill much colder than that due to a Polar Vortex. We followed that up with a spring frost of 27 °F (-3 °C) after bud break. In August we had a storm system move through that was the biggest in over 100 years. We reached wind speeds of 95 mph accompanied by large hail. Rain fall amounts have also increased during late summer and early fall right before harvest. I think as the climate keeps changing, we will be facing spring frost more often due to the vines budding out earlier. All that said, when we do get a good vintage, it is something to

experience. We are left with wines that express the soil and are packed with a punch of beautiful aromatics and fruit flavors and the perfect amount of acidity to create a mouthwatering and perfectly balanced wine.

Each fall after harvest, we select two to four canes and tie them to the irrigation wire. The reasoning behind this is that if we receive 18–25 inches (46–64 cm) of base snow, the canes will be insulated. We also have a special snowplow that we put on the front of our tractor to cover the canes. The coldest temperatures occur during January and February. During that time I like to have some buried canes. For our area it is safe to anticipate a loss of around 1% of your total vines each year. We just finished our replants and we were around a total loss of 0.8%.

For me, trellising depends more on the varietal you grow as well as the winemaker's input on the wines he or she will be producing than the climate. We use VSP (Vertical Shoot Position). It works well for the wines I produce.

We do not grow any hybrids on our property. I can see hybrids being a nice component as a blending varietal in years where you have a less-than-desirable growing season. However, I have yet to hear a convincing argument that proves you can compete in the upper tier market for fine wines with hybrids. I just don't see the potential for building a following for such wines in that particular market. We have seen great success through vineyard management with our *vinifera*, but it is more site-specific. Maybe down the line we would need to experiment with other varietals, but for now we continue to keep the *vinifera* train going.