



Stephen J. Conaway, owner of Thousand Islands Winery, Alexandria Bay, prunes vines next to the winery.

NIKO J. KALLIANOTIS ■ WATERTOWN DAILY TIMES

## North country winemakers bucking cold weather problems...

### ▶ From Page B1

Mr. Smith and Mr. Surdo said that after they were told grapes would not survive the extremely low temperatures of Jefferson County, they obtained "cold-weather-hardy" vines like Frontenac and La Crescent that were bred at the University of Minnesota to survive brutally frigid winters while retaining the taste of European wine grapes.

"It's not a simple thing of just picking a cold variety and planting it, though," Mr. Surdo said.

The two men experimented with vine density per acre, root depth and different soils. After learning a little bit about how to give the cold-hardy strains the best chances to produce significant quantities of grapes, Mr. Smith, a full-time visual arts teacher at Carthage High School, started his nursery.

He said that during the winter, he cuts off pieces of mature vines and wraps them in moist newspaper, then in plastic, and when spring comes he puts the cuttings in his warm greenhouse to encourage root development. When the cuttings begin to root they can be planted.

Mr. Smith has 500 vines and 30 varieties and has sold 2,000 cuttings to people like Mr. Conaway and property owners who want to keep using their old farmland for agricultural purposes.

"That's not massive, but we don't have a culture of growers here yet," he said.

William R. Bourquin has 400 vines planted on one acre of property near his house in the town of Clayton, and although he has no plans to open a winery, he said, he would like to sell grapes to Mr. Conaway. In the spring, Mr. Bourquin will plant 7,800 to 2,500 more vines, of which about 1,600 will come from Mr. Smith.

"For us it's something the family enjoys," Mr. Bourquin said. "It's good for looks and I bet it will increase the value of our property. It does take some labor and it's not cheap to get into, but the vines should live at least 20 to 25 years if they're pruned properly."

According to many experts, vineyards have more than just an aes-

thetic value.

Michael D. Linehan, president of the Yates County Chamber of Commerce in the Finger Lakes region, said the wine industry has had a "dramatically" positive impact on the Finger Lakes since it first began just over 20 years ago. Before the Finger Lake wineries became successful, the region mainly attracted families during the summer and closed up during the winter, but following the grape explosion, the market niche has changed for the better.

"We still attract families for vacations during the summer, but where we've seen growth is in couples traveling without their children who are 35-60 years old with average incomes over \$65,000 a year," Mr. Linehan said.

He said "steak and chop" restaurants have been replaced by "eclectic" eateries that support local farmers, and run-down Victorian homes have been renovated into bed-and-breakfasts. He added that people from outside the area would be amazed at the number of ancillary businesses that pop up around vineyards, such as companies that make labels and bottles.

Spurring this development is the fact that Finger Lake wines now enjoy an international reputation for excellence. Dr. Konstantin Frank's Vinifera Wine Cellars, Hammond-sport, won a gold medal and best in class for its Rkatsiteli in the 2003 Pacific Rim International Wine Competition and a gold medal at the Los Angeles County Fair in 2002 for its Salmon Run Riesling, among many other awards.

J. Thomas Challen, who owns Cayuga Ridge Estate Winery with his wife, Susan J., said Jefferson County can probably develop a regional market for its wines, but he doubts the area can compete with vinifera, or European strains, in terms of quality and worldwide appeal.

"Even if the wines out of Minnesota have some characteristics of Chardonnay or vinifera, it's going to be difficult to market," Mr. Challen said. "If they're trying to compete with California, Australia and France, it's not going to work."

Mr. Challen acknowledged that experts once said that the Finger

Lakes Region wines could never compete with the products of California and France, but he said the difference is that the Finger Lakes can produce vinifera grapes while vinifera grapes will not survive in Jefferson County because of the cold weather. He said even if a winery owner makes a great wine from a non-vinifera grape, the prejudice against such wines is so stiff that it will not be recognized as a superior product.

Even knowing this, local experts believe that planting grapes is a solid investment.

"It's a way to instead of letting the farmland go back to the wild, to have it stay in production and allow farmers who are not doing so well with traditional crops to grow a value-added product," said Susan J. Guise, horticulture educator at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County. "I think it's definitely something that has a future."

She said farmers could also produce table grapes and grapes for jam, jellies and non-alcoholic juice.

Mr. Hafferman senior, who has a 185-acre sheep farm in Philadelphia, said he plans to plant 1,400 vines a year for the next five years and believes that other farmers

could also benefit from starting vineyards.

"It's going really well right now, and I think it's going to do well," he said. "The only difference is that we're milking grapes instead of cows. The impact on this area will be amazing."

Vines are typically mature after about four years, and once mature they produce about a gallon of wine per vine. A gallon of wine equals about five bottles.

"It's going really well right now," Mr. Conaway said. "We're all across the north country and into Syracuse and Rochester. We're even engaged in talks to ship wine to China."

He said he had 16 seasonal employees last year and will have 25 this year.

Even though Mr. Surdo, Mr. Smith, Mr. Conaway and the others have learned a great deal about grape production in the north country, they are still experimenting in an attempt to perfect their craft.

"Ideally I would like to have this thing go ballistic in this area," Mr. Smith said. "After that I'll just have to buy more land and quit my day job."

## Roots of vines in Minnesota...

### ▶ From Page B1

The university's viticulture program began in 1908, but the efforts to create cold weather resistant strains of grape vines "geared up" in the 1980s and since then, the school has developed four strains of hardy vines.

"It's gratifying to have some varieties that are ready to go off into the world and see people plant them and have them show up in bottles," Mr. Hemstad said. "The northern people are starting to realize that we have some good vines."

The university developed Frontenac, La Crescent, Frontenac Gris, a white strain of Frontenac, and Mn 1211. Frontenac was not patented and a patent is pending on Mn 1211.

Mr. Hemstad said the four cold-weather varieties were developed by breeding European grapes such as Pinot Noir with vitis riparia, a wild grape also known as riverbank grapes that are native to cold-

weather climates in the United States, including Minnesota and New York. The two varieties are bred together and then only the offspring with the hardness to survive winter and the taste of European grapes are selected to breed again.

"The most enjoyable part is naming them," Mr. Hemstad said.

Cornell Cooperative Extension, which in the past has not concentrated on producing grapes that can survive temperatures of minus 35 degrees, but only minus-10-degree strains, may also start exploring cold-weather varieties.

"Even though Cornell has been focused on grape production in the Finger Lakes and Long Island, there is a new initiative to study cold-hardy grapes," said Susan J. Guise, horticulture educator at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County. "We've got their attention now and there's the potential for this to be a big thing and a new industry."