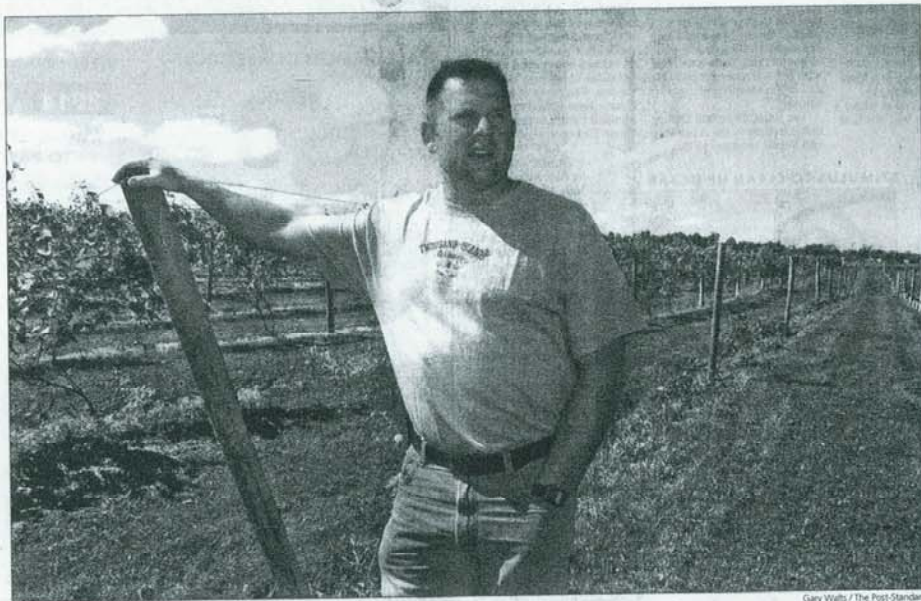


FROM PAGE ONE



Gary Waltz / The Post-Standard

STEVE CONAWAY, owner of Thousand Islands Winery in Alexandria Bay, looks over some of his vines. One acre of vineyard in the region is worth an estimated \$300, compared to \$3,000 in the Finger Lakes, \$50,000 on Long Island and more than \$250,000 in Napa Valley, Calif.

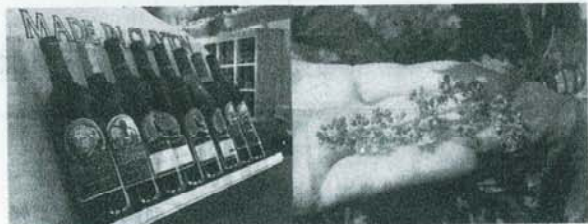
0 BELOW ZERO? NORTH COUNTRY GRAPES SCOFF AT THE COLD

Don Cazentre
is Drink editor

Like all farmers, the grape growers in the Thousand Islands-Seaway area of New York keep a constant watch on the weather. In this, the state's newest and northernmost wine region, there's a special concern. The vineyard owners and winemakers do not know that the grapes they plant can stand temperatures of 40 below zero in winter and still produce wine the following year.

That's quite a benchmark. In the Finger Lakes, a New York wine region that has led in popularity and production in recent decades, the minimum temperature in winter is closer to 10 below.

"It's not a grape you want to grow here less it produces after 40 below," says Nick Surdo, owner of Yellow Barn Winery at Sackets Harbor, one of four wineries on the three-year-old Thousand Island-Seaway wine Trail. "We do cold-weather varieties.



That's what gives us our signature."

These fledgling wineries in Jefferson County are building their hopes for a tourist-friendly wine industry on the strength of cold-hardy grape varieties developed by researchers at the

NORTH COUNTRY, PAGE A-4

A SELECTION of wines (left) is displayed at Coyote Moon Winery in Clayton. At the Thousand Islands Winery in Alexandria Bay (right), grapes began last month to take form.

See a gallery photo-syracuse.com

North Country wine region built on hardiest of grapes

NORTH COUNTRY, FROM PAGE A-1

University of Minnesota. Some of these grapes, such as Frontenac, Brianna and La Crescent, have already produced wines in such unlikely places as South Dakota and Quebec.

Starting this venture in the state's freezer chest required some imagination and a lot of hard work.

"I'm very impressed with how smart these wineries and vineyard owners have been as they start up," said Jim Trezise, who has helped guide the growth in the state's various wine regions as director of the New York State Wine & Grape Foundation. "They've all done their homework."

Trezise is cheerleading the effort, since he sees nothing but good things coming from more wineries and more wine regions in New York. The state is closing in on 300 wineries, about one-third of which debuted in the past decade, and has wine regions along Lake Erie and the Finger Lakes, in the Hudson Valley and on Long Island.

In the Thousand Islands, it's all still fairly new: Vineyards have been planted in Jefferson County only within the past decade, and now there are about 50 different growers.

The first winery — Thousand Islands Winery — opened within sight of the Thousand Is-

lands Bridge in Alexandria Bay in 2004. It was followed by Yellow Barn in 2006, Otter Creek Winery in Philadelphia in 2007, and the newest, Coyote Moon Vineyards in Clayton, this summer.

Trezise predicts the area will grow as a wine region.

"I said last fall that we could see 10 to 15 wineries in that area within 10 years," Trezise said. "Even with the economy as it is now, I think we can see that kind of growth."

And on the experiments with cold-hearted grapes will continue.

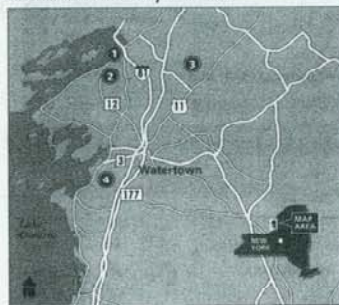
"I've planted things that work, and I'm sure I'll be planting some that don't work," said Steve Conaway, the retired Army captain who owns Thousand Islands Winery. "This business is all about trial and error."

Despite the brutal winters, many parts of Jefferson County are subject to the moderating influence of Lake Ontario or the St. Lawrence River. Large bodies of water that don't freeze over can produce what are known as "microclimates" that can keep vines slightly warmer for longer periods than in surrounding areas.

"People said you couldn't grow grapes in the North, but that's been disproven," said wine journalist Hudson Cattell. "Given the proper microclimates, it's possible."

Cattell, who has followed East Coast winemaking for 30 years, said relying on Minnesota varieties is a smart move for North Country wineries. "They have proven their worth and good wine can be made from them."

Thousand Islands-Seaway Wine Trail



The Post-Standard

- 1 Thousand Islands Winery**, 43239 Seaway Ave., Alexandria Bay, (315) 482-9306. www.thousandislandswinery.com. This was the first winery in the area, opening in 2004, and it remains the largest, producing 30,000 gallons of wine in 18 varieties. The top-sellers are the pioneering North Country Red and La Crescent, a cold-hardy white. It won the 2009 "Winery of the Year" Award from the state Wine & Grape Foundation.
- 2 Otter Creek Winery**, 33109 Rudes Road, Philadelphia, (315) 642-0622. www.ottercreekwinery.com. It's operated by 26-year-old Kyle Hafemann, the state's youngest winery owner and has a wine slushy machine on site. It opened in 2007. Top-sellers include a sweet Adirondack Red and a semi-sweet La Crescent.
- 3 Yellow Barn Winery**, 18876 County Route 66 (Salt Point Road), Watertown (but closer to Sackets Harbor). www.yellowbarwinery.com. Nick Surdo turned his former dairy and crop farm into a vineyard and winery, opening in 2006. He's aggressively using Jefferson County-sourced grapes, such as those in his Frontenac, a dry red.
- 4 Coyote Moon Vineyards**, 17371 County Route 3 (Eastline Road), Clayton, (315) 886-5600. www.coyotemoonvineyards.com. This winery owned by the Randazzo family has the largest vineyard, at 11 acres, but just opened with vines to sell in June. A best-seller is the Twisted Sister Frontenac,

an Italian-style, somewhat sweet red.

5 Otter Creek Winery, 33109 Rudes Road, Philadelphia, (315) 642-0622. www.ottercreekwinery.com. It's operated by 26-year-old Kyle Hafemann, the state's youngest winery owner and has a wine slushy machine on site. It opened in 2007. Top-sellers include a sweet Adirondack Red and a semi-sweet La Crescent.

6 Yellow Barn Winery, 18876 County Route 66 (Salt Point Road), Watertown (but closer to Sackets Harbor). www.yellowbarwinery.com. Nick Surdo turned his former dairy and crop farm into a vineyard and winery, opening in 2006. He's aggressively using Jefferson County-sourced grapes, such as those in his Frontenac, a dry red.

Wine from local grapes

As they've started up, the Jefferson County wineries have been importing much of the juice they use for wine from other parts of the state, such as Long Island and the Finger Lakes. That means they can make wines from grapes they are unable to grow in the North, such as pinot noir or chardonnay, or from blends using native grapes, like Delaware or Niagara.

At Thousand Islands Winery, for example, just 3,000 of the 30,000 gallons produced each year are currently coming from local vines. But that will change over time as the winemakers move to more locally sourced grapes.

It will take time, because typically vines don't produce wine until four years after they are first planted, and many Jefferson County vines are newer than that.

"Our goal eventually is to have only estate-bottled wine," said Phil Randazzo, owner of Coyote Moon in Clayton. Estate-bottled is a term that means the wine is made only from grapes grown by the winemaker and bottled on site.

In Randazzo's case, that makes sense, because his business started as a vineyard. He's planting La Crescent, Frontenac, Frontenac Gris and, new this year, Marquette grapes.

"We were a vineyard that became a winery, not a winery that planted a vineyard," he said. "For us, it's all about growing grapes."

Surdo, at Yellow Barn, also wants to move to locally sourced grapes.

"We could make Riesling or something else, by buying up some juice," he said. "But that's not what we're going to build on. We'll use the cold-hardy varieties now, even if we buy them, because eventually that's what we're going to be known for."

Again, that's smart thinking, according to Trezise.

"One of the things they can do to distinguish themselves is regional branding," he said. "They're getting together and deciding what is uniquely Thousand Islands and what they can do better than anyone else."



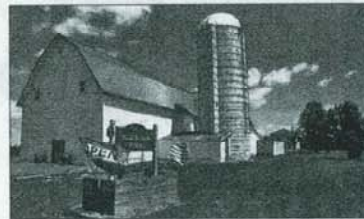
Gary Waltz / The Post-Standard

NICK SURDO, owner of Yellow Barn Winery, tests a Frontenac wine that has been aging in French and American oak.



Gary Waltz / The Post-Standard

PHIL RANDAZZO, owner of Coyote Moon Winery in Clayton, examines Marquette vines. His daughter, Kristina, works with vines in the background.



Gary Waltz / The Post-Standard

THE YELLOW BARN WINERY near Sackets Harbor.

Cold-hardy grapes

These are some of the cold-hardy grape varieties developed by the University of Minnesota that are now grown in the Thousand Islands-Seaway region:

Frontenac: Produces a red wine with aromas of cherries, currants and plum.

Frontenac Gris: A cousin of Frontenac. It produces white wines with hints of peach and apricot and some acidity.

La Crescent: Produces white wines with intense citrus aromas and high acidity that can be semi-dry or sweet.

Marquette: A relative of pinot noir, it produces ruby red wines with berry and spice aromas.

Brianna: Produces semi-sweet white wines with hints of apricot, peach, pineapple and honey.