

The Concord Grapes

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Domesticated grapes having their origins in North America belong to a relatively few species, the most predominant of which is *Vitis labrusca*. Linnaeus the North American Fox grape. Concord is perhaps the most famous of this group and certainly the most widely grown. Its wide adaptability has resulted in its production in almost every grape-growing state. True to its parentage, Concord has an epidermis that easily separates from the flesh or pulp and seeds that do not. This "slipskin" characteristic is in contrast to European or *Vitis vinifera* grapes whose epidermis adheres to the flesh of the fruit. Although Concord is commonly accepted and described as pure *labrusca*, there is a reasonable probability that it is a hybrid with another species. In fact, most of the older American type grapes are thought to involve more than one species. Therefore, *Vitis labruscana*, L. H. Bailey, is now commonly used to designate American grape cultivars having *labrusca* parentage (2, 3). Botanical characters of Concord include continuous tendrils and a white to rusty tomentum on the under side of the leaf blade (2, 7). Other well known cultivars which fall into this group include Catawba, Niagara, Isabella and Ives. Examples of North American grapes in which other species characteristics predominate are: Norton (*aestivalis* x *labrusca*), Delaware (*aestivalis* x *bourquina*—*labrusca* x *vinifera*), and Elvira, Clinton (*vulpina* x *labrusca*) (7).

The origin of Concord is well documented and has been told many times.

Certainly, it has a history that compares to any of our famous and outstanding fruit and must be retold here in order to properly complete our story.

In the early history of our country many attempts were made to introduce the European or *v. vinifera* cultivars into the eastern U.S.. For well documented reasons (winter temperatures, phylloxera and disease) all were doomed to failure. Winemakers struggled with the abundant but poor quality wild, native grapes. The rapid spread of Catawba throughout the east and midwest testifies to the need for a better quality wine grape (4,5,8). Thus it would not be unusual to find that Ephraim Bull, a grape connoisseur from Concord Massachusetts, had Catawba growing in his garden. As the story goes he dug up a wild native *labrusca* grape growing nearby and planted it in his garden where other grapes were growing, including Catawba. In the fall of 1843 he gathered seed from the fruit of this wild vine and planted it. Among the seedlings that grew was one of outstanding vigor and character. Initial production was obtained in 1849. Eventually it was named Concord. As quoted by Mr. Bull himself in a letter to C.M. Hovey, editor of the *Magazine of Horticulture* in January 1854: "The Concord grape is a seedling, in the second generation, of our native grape . . . being at that time the only seedling I had raised which showed a decided improvement on the wild type . . . The seedling from which the Concord was raised grew near a Catawba, and it is quite possible was impregnated by it,

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it having the flavor of that variety" (11). As mentioned previously, Concord's characteristics are strongly *labrusca*. However, it has upright stamens (perfect flowers) and is self fertile, which is not typical of some wild *labruscas*. The character of many of the seedlings also leaves some doubt.

History indicates that Concord was exhibited for the first time on the 20th of September 1853 before the Massachusetts Horticultural Society on Boston Common; three years after it had produced its first fruit. In 1854 it was introduced by Hovey and Company of Boston. During this period horticultural societies were in frequent contact with one another on new fruit varieties and cultural practices. Also, the numerous farm journals of this period provided on additional source of information.

From this time Concord spread quite rapidly throughout most of the eastern and midwestern states. By 1867 the Ohio Horticultural Society was writing about the extensive plantings of the 'noble Concord' in Ohio and Missouri (6). By the mid 1870's more Concords were planted in the northeast than all other varieties put together (5). It had become the outstanding grape for both fresh and processed use. Fruit was shipped from the grape belts of the Lake Erie region to most of the major U.S. cities. Yet, in the same breath it was berrated as being no good for shipping, wine, etc.

In Ohio prohibition had a rather interesting effect on grape acreage and grape varieties. Concord, the predominant grape for table use, but thought of as the 'other grape' for winemaking, now came into prominence. Catawba, although it was a superior wine grape, was not as well known to the home winemaker. Thus, a transition occurred. Concord acreage increased while Catawba vineyards were being abandoned or quickly replanted to Concord. Concord grape juice was in demand and sold with specific instruc-

tions on how to avoid fermentation, which was certainly the reason for making the statement in the first place.

Concord has been used as a parent in many breeding programs. As stated by Hedrick (7), Concord is the progenitor of many other varieties. Among the more familiar names are Moore's Early, Diamond, Worden, Niagara, Brighton, Martha, Cottage, Highland, and many others.

Today, 143 years after its creation Concord still stands as the predominant grape of the east. According to a review of grape production in the U.S., more than 70% of the grapes produced in the north east, north central states and north west are of this cultivar (1, 4, 9, 10). The flavor of Concord remains as the standard of quality for all processed grape products from jams and jellies to soft drinks.

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