

The Story of the Concord Grape*

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To the horticulturist, and lover and grower of fruits, Concord, Massachusetts, is the place where the Concord grape originated from seed planted by Ephraim W. Bull in the fall of 1843, and which bore fruit in 1849.

Until the Concord appeared, grape growing in the East had had a difficult way. To be sure, New England and the northeastern section of North America abounded with a vigorous-growing native grape known as the Northern Fox grape (*Vitis labrusca*)—the same grape which, growing wild in such profusion, caused the exploring Norsemen first to christen the land “Vineland.” And there were other native grapes to the south and west. But none of these carried the clear vinous flavor recognized by Old World connoisseurs of grapes and wines. For several hundred years, Americans had tried unsuccessfully to transplant the European types, better known to Americans as the meaty, California grape (*Vitis vinifera*).

What we now recognize as mildew, black rot, and other fungus troubles, plus attacks of the phylloxera root louse spelled one defeat after another for varieties of this *Vinifera* type grape. It had not yet been learned that fruits, to be successful in America, must somehow carry in their blood a dash of the resistance and of adaptability to the conditions of the New World. Such varieties as Isabella and Catawba which had made a limited grape industry possible, did carry a blending of both the native American

and the Old World grape. But the range of these varieties was limited, and the grape was still something to be hoped for by Americans who still clung closely to European ties, tastes, and customs.

At all events, it was a vine of the wild, native *Labrusca* or fox-type which Ephraim Bull of Concord, Massachusetts, dug up from where it was growing beside a field fence and transplanted it into his garden where other grapes were growing, including the Catawba. He gathered seed from this wild vine and planted it in the fall of 1843, and among the seedlings that sprang up was one vine which was outstanding and which he named and introduced as the “Concord” grape.

Or, to put it into the words of Mr. Bull, himself, contained in a letter to C. M. Hovey, editor of the *Magazine of Horticulture*, and dated Concord, Massachusetts, 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 to a Catawba, and it is quite possible was impregnated by it, it having the flavor of that variety.”

The reason for quoting directly from Mr. Bull is that many persons have wondered how so excellent a variety as the Concord sprang from seed of the wild fox grape, since no grape so good as the Concord has ever

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been discovered in the wild. Although the Concord is commonly accepted and catalogued as a "true *Labrusca*" is there a chance that it carries a dash of the European grape by way of pollen from the Catawba, as Mr. Bull suggested? Is it really a hybrid?

Those who contend that it is a pure *Labrusca* point to the plant characters, which surely are outstandingly *Labrusca*. And those who have a doubt of its purity point to the following facts: No wild *Labruscas* have been found which carry perfect flowers, that is flowers with both the male and female parts of the same flower. Sterile male vines are commonplace among this species. But the Concord has perfect flowers, as do vines of the European grape, *Vitis vinifera*. From where did the perfect-flowered character come?

Again, the berries of wild *Labruscas* are commonly oblate (flattened) or roundish—never oval. Yet if seed of the Concord which has been derived from selling that variety is planted, vines will grow which carry *oval* berries. Where did the oval character come from?

And still further, out of 286 varieties of grapes of American origin which have been of some consequence in grape culture, there is hardly a one that does not show signs of *Vitis vinifera*.

Be all this as it may, it is because the Concord carries such a high degree of native blood that it is the cosmopolitan American variety. It is adapted to eastern American conditions, where European varieties are not. In fact, the vineyards of Europe have been on American roots ever since the importation of the minute phylloxera laid waste the vineyards of Europe about 1880.

In 1852, three years after the first fruit was borne, the Concord variety

was exhibited before the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. In 1954, it was introduced by Hovey and Company of Boston. In 1855 it was found to be growing in the Middle West. By 1860 it had been planted in the Chautaugua grape section of Western New York. In 1865 it was awarded the Greeley prize and called prophetically by Horace Greeley, "the grape for the millions."

Today after 100 years, it stands heads and shoulders above all competitors and it is found growing from coast to coast for and by people who still insist that "Concord flavor" is something all by itself, whether in fresh fruit or juice. It is still being propagated and planted, and its end is nowhere near.

As a progenitor of other varieties, too, Concord has a claim to fame. Among the more familiar sorts of Concord parentage are Worden, Martha, Cottage, Niagara, Diamond, Moore Early, Highland, Colerain, Brighton, and Black Eagle. A score of others are either directly or indirectly linked to the family tree of Concord.

And as for the ground on which the grape grew, and the home and land of Ephraim W. Bull, they are sacred to those who have a sentimental touch for plants and horticulture. To slip quietly into this place to pay homage, perhaps even privileged to spend a night in the home where Ephraim Bull lived, is a part of living.

Here is where the originator of the Concord grape lived quietly for 90 years, beloved by his neighbors from his birth in 1805 to his death in 1895, and where his good has spread in all directions to the profit and satisfaction of many.