

Lenoir Gains Recognition

A Pierce's disease-tolerant winegrape succeeds in the South

By Fritz Westover

Lenoir is perhaps the longest standing commercial red winegrape variety to survive in the South. Lenoir is often planted in areas of the country where *Vitis vinifera* (European grapevines) would quickly succumb to Pierce's disease—and where it was previously believed that only the hardy Muscadine species (*Muscadina rotundifolia*) could survive. The Lenoir winegrape has a long history in the southern United States, and its progress in the wine industry continues to evolve and expand as its wine quality gains recognition.

Southern roots of Lenoir

The history of Lenoir (pronounced Leh-nwahr) is quite possibly one of the most mysterious of the PD-tolerant winegrape varieties in the South. Many Lenoir enthusiasts have researched the parentage of this *vin-*

ifera-like grape, yet its exact history remains unresolved. The details of vine movement and potential crosses with European *vinifera* grapes are far too intricate to cover in this space, but there are a few details of Lenoir's past where there is general consensus.

The National Grape Registry lists the species of Lenoir as *Vitis bourquiniana* and its pedigree as *V. aestivalis*, *V. cinerea* and *V. vinifera*. Most will agree that the likelihood of *vinifera* parentage is very high based on cluster and seed characteristics, vine growth habit and wine quality. However, it is not known if the crossing with *vinifera* was intentional or accidental—or if it occurred in the New or Old World. Gougie Bourquin wrote in the late 1800s about a "blue" and a "brown" grape (referring to Lenoir and Herbemont, another PD-tolerant grape, respectively), which were said to have come from France when Georgia



More than 120 acres of Lenoir are in production

was first settled. This does not necessarily mean that the vines were hybridized in France. Growers have used several synonyms for Lenoir (Black Spanish, Jacquez and Ohio, for example), though the TTB-approved name remains simply "Lenoir."

Lenoir production has been documented in Alabama, California, Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana and Texas. Perhaps the oldest planting of Lenoir in Texas is thought to be that of the Qualia family of Val Verde Winery in Del Rio, Texas, which dates back to the 1880s. With more than

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100 years in production, California's Pagani Ranch may be home to the oldest surviving Lenoir vines, which are processed by winemaker Richard Kasmier of Kaz Winery in Kenwood, Calif.

Currently, Texas is leading the industry in production of Lenoir, with more than 120 acres in production in the eastern and southeastern parts of the state and more than 20 commercial wines. Growers across the southeastern United States have expressed an increasing interest in Lenoir because they view the variety as a unique alternative to

Muscadines with wine characteristics that are more similar to red *vinifera*.

Lenoir in the vineyard

Lenoir is a moderate to highly vigorous grape variety that has a vertical growth habit adaptable to either vertical shoot positioning or downward sprawling vine-training systems. Lenoir clusters are large and compact, with small berry size. Lenoir typically has two clusters per shoot, with an average cluster size of about 0.45 pounds per cluster. Depending on the soil vigor and vine-training system, yields can range from about 4 tons to 8 tons per acre. In Texas, Lenoir usually is grown on vertical shoot positioned training systems, although there are also successful plantings on high wire cordon and Geneva Double Curtain.

Lenoir is most commonly planted on its own roots and is well adapted to a wide range of soil pH. Vigorous and productive vineyards have been planted in central Texas on calcareous soils of pH 7.5 and in acidic wooded areas of east Texas on soils of pH 5.5. The wide adaptability of Lenoir to soil type and pH has made it an attractive option

for using as a PD-tolerant rootstock. Lenoir has been growing in regions of Texas that experience temperatures of 0°F and, as a result, it is thought to be cold hardy enough for planting in any of the southeastern states where Muscadines currently grow.

Lenoir retains high titratable acidity even in hot growing climates. Winemakers selectively harvest Lenoir between 20° and 25° Brix, 7 to 12 grams per liter titratable acidity and pH 3.2 to 3.6, depending on the wine style desired. As with Blanc Du Bois (see "Blanc Du Bois Takes Root" in Wines & Vines' February 2012 issue), a wide range of accepted fruit chemistry allows for a long harvest period that can target several wine styles—or a total harvest early in the range, if needed, to avoid late-season rots caused by excessive rain near harvest.

The large and compact cluster morphology of Lenoir has led to some challenges in the Texas Gulf Coast area. In 2007 and 2010, more than 3 inches of rainfall per month in June through July resulted in berry splitting and complete crop loss of Lenoir in some vineyards. Well-drained, sandy loam soils on slopes tend to show fewer rot problems than heavy clay soils,

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which indicates that appropriate site selection further improves the ability to extend ripening of Lenoir for table wine production.

Although Lenoir tolerates PD, it is still susceptible to a wide range of foliar and fruit diseases found in the southeast including anthracnose, black rot, downy mildew and phomopsis. Powdery mildew, however, has not been documented on either fruit or green tissue. Susceptibility to downy mildew appears to be more problematic in wet spring conditions leading into bloom. Lenoir is susceptible to Phymatotrichum root rot, which is a problem on calcareous soil with high clay content found in some areas of Texas. The most common insect pests in Texas are grape leaffolders and grape berry moth.

As with the other PD-tolerant hybrids, Lenoir is productive even if infected with PD. It acts as a host of the bacterium and will show leaf scorch symptoms typical of PD if vines become stressed. Because Lenoir and most other PD-tolerant varieties can act as symptomless hosts of Pierce's disease, it is not recommended to plant this variety alongside susceptible grape varieties.

Lenoir in the winery

Texas winemakers have found that Lenoir is adapted to many wine styles. Fruit harvested early in the season can be made into light-bodied rosés or off-dry red wines during years when extended ripening is not possible due to rain or the onset of rots. Historically, dry red table wine has been the most common style for the Lenoir grape, but the growing season must allow for ideal ripening and softening of acids in the fruit for table wines to be balanced and showcase varietal character. For more than a decade, winemakers have played on the Lenoir grape's complex earthy character, strong acid backbone and nuances of chocolate and cherry in the production of Port-style wines, which are now considered a signature style for this variety.

Recent efforts to improve winemaking practices for dry table wine production have led to increased quality. The introduction of oak, enzymes and enological tannins during primary fermentation has shown good potential to improve the structure and mouthfeel of Lenoir wines. Winemakers are also becoming increasingly aware of the importance of removing green seeds and stems from earlier harvested fruit to reduce vegetative character in finished wines. Co-fermentation with small amounts of *vinifera* or blending finished wines with small amounts of *vinifera* to impart additional tannin and fruit character has been key to producing wines that are more approachable to consumers not yet familiar with the varietal character of Lenoir. Typical blending partners from Texas fruit include Tempranillo, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon.

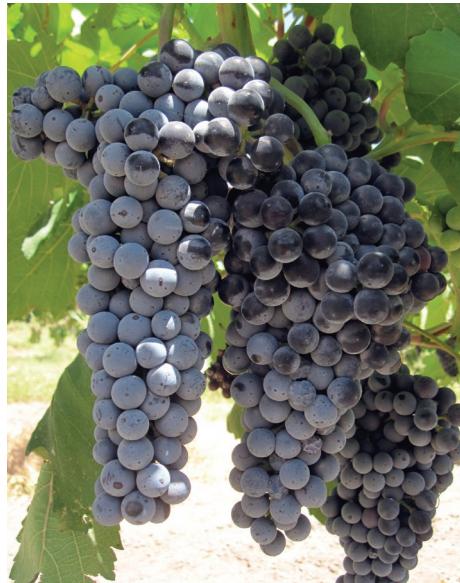
In an industry where *vinifera* is king, it is remarkable to see the success of several Texas wineries that have embraced the Lenoir grape for producing signature wines. The Bonarrigo family of Messina Hof Winery in Bryan, Texas, has been producing its flagship Ports from Lenoir since the early 1980s. The ruby, tawny and signature "Paulo Porto" Port-style wines continue to be best-sellers at Messina Hof, and recently production was increased to support a new line of rosé wines from its 15-acre Lenoir vineyard. Raymond Haak of Haak Winery in Santa Fe, Texas, also produces Port from Lenoir and branched into the production of Madeira-style wines in 2003 using their in-house "estufa," or heated barrel-aging room. In the Texas Hill Country, wineries such as Dry Comal Creek and Chisholm Trail have been producing signature dry table wines from Lenoir for more

than a decade, and growing enthusiasm from West Coast wineries such as at Kaz Winery in Kenwood, Calif., has broken the southern production boundaries of this variety.

The future of Lenoir

The quality and production of Lenoir wines have improved remarkably during the past decade, with vineyard expansion continuing to grow in Texas and other southeastern states. From 2007 to 2010, the total acreage of Lenoir in Texas increased more than 200%, with a new total of 120 acres in the state. Following the expansion trend of Blanc Du Bois, Lenoir is finding its way into other states in the southeast, with new plantings in the Piedmont and coastal regions of Georgia and Alabama, and in the well-established Muscadine-growing regions of North and South Carolina.

Research and extension efforts led by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service at Texas A&M University are focusing on the improvement of yields and wine quality of Lenoir. Ongoing projects include the evaluation of health benefits of Lenoir wine, the identification of sensory compounds typical



This grape variety was the subject at the Lenoir Symposium last May in Texas.

to the varietal character of Lenoir, the evaluation of vine-training systems and a wide range of grower cooperative projects to improve vineyard management practices.

The Texas AgriLife Extension Viticulture Team is collaborating with the Department of Plant Pathology and Microbiology to

initiate the submission of Lenoir wood to Foundation Plant Services at the University of California, Davis, to test for viruses and other pathogens that could potentially be propagated in vines, with hopes that clean plant material will be available for nurseries to propagate within a few years.

The Texas wine and grape industry has made a concerted effort to promote Lenoir wines. In May 2011, the Austin County Grape Grower Committee and AgriLife Extension held the first Lenoir Symposium in Cat Spring, Texas. Winemakers and grapegrowers gathered to share their experiences with Lenoir in the vineyard and winery. The expansion of Lenoir acreage in the southeastern United States is expected to increase with research efforts in Texas improving wine quality and vineyard productivity. **WE**

Fritz Westover is a viticulture program specialist at Texas A&M University. In addition to his duties in the Texas Gulf Coast region, Westover supervises three extension program specialists as part of a statewide team effort to provide educational programs and hands-on viticulture workshops for the Texas wine industry.

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