



THE HISTORY OF ALEXIS BAILLY VINEYARD

ORIGINAL THOUGHTS ON STARTING A WINERY IN MINNESOTA

By David A. Bailly (1986)

The history of Alexis Bailly Vineyard is a history of my involvement in grape growing and wine making at least up until my daughter, Nan Bailly, got actively involved beginning in the early 1980's. I was first a wine lover and appreciator. Starting in the late 1950's, my wife and I began drinking the lesser Bordeaux as selected by Fritz and Benny Haskell. Gradually, we expanded our palettes into the other wines of Europe with the aid of Grossman's Guide to Wines, Spirits and Alcoholic Beverages. The best wine we could get from California was Almaden Cabernet (the Haskell's maintained that they pasteurized red wine in California and thus they were not only inferior but bordering on unpalatable). Gradually, Louis Martini, Charles Krug, Inglenook, and Beaulieu Vineyards became available in Holtzermans, Haskell's only retail competitor at the time.

Grossman's was a bible to me. It was the most comprehensive and detailed book of its kind. From it I gradually got involved in fermentation. At first with beer making and then with hard cider and apple wine. My 1962 "Spapple" (it had a slight spritz) was still quite a hit some ten years later.

In 1971, two events set my course as a serious grape grower and wine maker. The one was my first visit to Europe and the second was a house move. After 3 weeks in Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland, convinced me I needed a "business" that would bring me periodically to Europe at tax-deductible expense. Of course, the wine trade was the first and most logical choice.

The purchase of a larger home with more yard and grounds also was important. A side yard opened onto the street. In looking for a suitable method of fencing it off, I hit upon the idea of a green wall of vines – grapevines. Thus began my search for a Minnesota hardy wine grape. I knew the Vinifera did not grow well outside California and I under no circumstances would think of growing Labrusca vines. I had to find out what else there was. I recalled that back in 1967 I had tasted a bottle of Boordy Red from Riderwood, Maryland. It was the first time that I had drunk a non-California, American wine that was not foxy and the only eastern wine that had a European style. If such grapes as that made that wine could grow in Minnesota, I would be more than satisfied.

In 1971, I wrote to the University of California at Davis, California and Cornell University in New York asking each if they knew of any wine grape that might survive Minnesota winters. The University of California wrote back with a one word answer – No. Cornell University said they did not know that much about Minnesota, but they expected injury on many varieties when winter temperatures drop to -15°F for even a few minutes. With -30°F anticipated every winter at the site I had in mind, it was hardly encouraging.

Cornell had done a comprehensive study of the French Hybrids both as to growing characteristics and as to wine quality. The Kuhlmann 188-2 and the Maréchal Foch, seemed the most winter hardy and appeared to make as good a wine as anything contained in their study. Their 1969-70 "Vineyard and Cellar Notes" described Maréchal Foch wine as having "consistently high rating over at least 4 years of testing". However, I had to drink the wine myself, as I had no confidence in New York palates with all their foxy wine. Fortunately, I found that Richard Vine had bottled a 100% Marechal Foch from the 1971 harvest at his Niagara Falls Wine Cellars. The wine had a true Burgundian style. At a blind tasting it was thought to be a Beaujolais by more than one of the judges. In any event, it was more than good enough for me. In 1973, I bought 500 Maréchal Foch from Foster Nursery, Fredonia, New York and 1500 from Mori Nursery, Niagara-on-the Lake, Ontario. The vines constituted the first plantings at our Alexis Bailly Vineyard, Hastings, Minnesota.

I made my first hybrid wine in 1973 from grapes grown by Elmer Swenson, Star Prairie, Wisconsin and David MacGregor, South Haven, Minnesota. They had both purchased what they understood to be the Kuhlmann 194-2, the Léon Millot from the Boordy Nursery in Maryland. The wine I made from those vines I like even better than Richard Vine's Maréchal Foch. So in 1974, I purchased 2000 Léon Millot vines from the Foster Nursery, Fredonia, New York (not knowing there was a difference between the vines being sold by Boordy as Millot and the vines being sold by Foster as Millot). Since 1977, my daughter Nan and I have been making varietal Léon Millot and Maréchal Foch under our Alexis Bailly Vineyard label. In addition, we have been growing the Kuhlmann 149-3 (Lucie Kuhlmann) and the Kuhlmann 187-1 (the Maréchal Joffre) on an experimental basis.

From the beginning, the Léon Millot has made the best wine and the Maréchal Foch has been the most winter hardy.



Our first commercial vintage was 1977 and the Léon Millot from that year was sent to Wineries Unlimited in New York for their competition, but the wine never got judged as the bottle arrived broken. The 1978 Léon Millot won a gold medal, the 1979 a bronze medal, and the 1980 a silver medal. We were so proud of the 1981 Léon Millot that we decided to take it to Wineries Unlimited ourselves when the convention was in Washington, D.C. It won nothing. With the 1982, 1983 and 1984 vintages we decided to just send the wine and they all won awards. In short, the Léon Millot proved to be a winner year in and year out, nothing less than a wine of fine quality.

In the mean time, the Maréchal Foch was a problem. It had a tendency to be too strong in fruit flavor, developing an herbaceous quality. Eventually, we learned that, whereas the Léon Millot could and should be left on its skins until the alcoholic fermentation is complete, the Maréchal Foch must be taken off its skins as soon as there is good color. This together with some barrel aging brought the Maréchal Foch around to where the 1982, 1983 and 1984 wines each garnered an award at Wineries Unlimited, including a gold for the 1984. Today, we treat the Maréchal Foch as our popular red, our Beaujolais, keeping it as light as can be. And our Léon Millot as our top of the line, our Bordeaux, tying to give it as much character as we can.

The Kuhlmann 187-1, the Maréchal Joffre, is also grown to some extent in Minnesota. Most of the growers in Minnesota who grow the Maréchal Foch have had in their vineyard a few vines whose fruit turn color much earlier than the Maréchal Foch. The fruit is in loose, long clusters and the vine is generally less vigorous with less foliage than the Maréchal Foch. No one knew what the vine was until Lucie Morton, the Ampelographer, identified it as the Maréchal Joffre. Because the taste is very much like the Foch, what little of it we have is now blended in with the Maréchal Foch. It has its greatest potential in a short season location, as it can develop 18% sugar clearly a month before anything else is ripe. However, if you leave it until the Maréchal Foch is ready, the sugar of the two are about the same, 21 – 22%.

The Lucie Kuhlmann is for me the most interesting of the Kuhlmann hybrids I know because it has a fruit flavor that is very definitely Riparia. In Minnesota, the Riparia grows wild and can be found on fencerows and in wooded areas all over southern and middle Minnesota. Although it may be found in other parts of the world, as far as we are concerned, its home is Minnesota where it can "suffer" under -30° F every year and even an occasional -40° F without sign of injury. The Alexis Bailly Vineyard "Country Red" wine has always had some Riparia in it to give it a Minnesota Flavor. The Riparia can only be used in a blend because of its high acidity (3%) and its very strong fruit flavor. The Lucie Kuhlmann is a commercial Riparia; that is, self-pollinating and with workable levels of sugar, acidity and fruit flavor. Eugene Kuhlmann is said to have preferred the Lucie Kuhlmann to all of his other creations, as it was for him similar to the Cabernet Sauvignon. In this connection it is interesting

to note that a survey of Washington State varieties reported in the American Journal of Enology and Viticulture, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1974, page 97 describes Lucie Kuhlmann wine as having a Cabernet like flavor. Both the Cabernet and the Riparia have been referred to from time to time as having a "grassy" flavor, however, side-by-side they are not at all alike.

I have been unable to locate any commercial varietal Maréchal Joffre wine in either Canada or the United States. The Lucie Kuhlmann is commercially grown in Washington State, but to my knowledge only Mount Baker Vineyards has a varietal on the market. There is also some record of it being commercially grown in New Mexico.

All of the above vines cannot survive Minnesota winters when grown without winter protection. In Iowa, northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin they can get through the winter. If it never got below -20° F, I think we might be able to grow them in Minnesota without winter cover, but with -30° F every year and -40° F two out of ten years, it is impossible. The Maréchal Foch is without question the most winter hardy that can possibly be grown in Minnesota at a very protected site, but for us, the vines must be trained with long (8 to 10 feet) trunks, which are grown at a 45° angle to the ground so after pruning in the fall the vine can be laid down on the ground and covered with dirt or other mulch. Under such cover the temperature of the vine never gets much below 0° F. The system is called the Alma Method and is to my knowledge unique in the world.

Because of the situation in Europe, we plan to acquire as many of the Kuhlmann hybrids as are still in existence and make a permanent collection of them at Hastings, Minnesota. Recently, we have added cuttings of the Pinard (191-1), the Etoile II (237-2) and the Triomphe d'Alsace (319-1).