

# Aronia Berries for New Fruit Wine Flavors

November 17, 2015 by Mildred Culp, Ph.D



Ripe Aronia berries are midnight blue and about the same size as a medium blueberry. (Photo by Coldbrook Farm, Inc)

Aronia berries, a longtime favorite of wine and liqueur hobbyists, are now available in volume for wine production. Originally a fruit native to the eastern half of the United States, they're commercially grown from New England westward into the Dakotas. The wine potential of aronia berries is being tapped by wineries clustered mostly in the Midwest. Educators in universities in a number of states have supported increased production.

## EDUCATION

Mike White, viticulture specialist for Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, has a list of 21 wineries that have produced aronia wine in Minnesota, Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota, and one more each in Montana, Oregon and Maryland. "An aronia wine made in Nebraska won a competition in California," he points out. White is a team member of the ISU Midwest Grape & Wine Institute.

Another educator, Dennis Emslie Drummond, uses berries from a swath of 14 year-old aronia bushes at the Ag Center at Central Lakes College-Staples Campus, in Staples, Minnesota, where he is VESTA Coordinator. Two other wineries buy berries from the stand.

Drummond made his first aronia dessert wine in 2012, followed by another in 2013. "I'm planning to blend aronia with a neutral apple wine to dilute the astringency," he says. He teaches fruit wine production online and consults to a number of wineries.

## COMMERCIAL SUCCESS

Wineries, like other businesses, face a dual challenge of product and sales. This is true even when they grow their own fruit. With a newly introduced wine, however, the first step is to get a fine product. The next is to be paid for it. The two wineries discussed here charge \$15.00 (Montana) and \$13.00 (Nebraska) for their award-winning aronia wines.

How does aronia wine taste? Some people in Montana have found it evocative of pomegranate juice. They've sampled the aronia wine produced by Bob Thaden and his son Josh at Tongue River Vineyard & Winery, LLC in Miles City. Their Aronia Wine, made in 2014, won two bronze medals in 2015, one each at Finger Lakes International and the Mid-America Wine Competition (Iowa).

"(It's) recognized as a nice drinkable wine," says Thaden. "Almost all of our customers who taste our aronia wine end up buying some. People taste it and look at the incredible, deep color."

His formula for commercial success begins with:

- a top quality wine, as it helps lead to media exposure.
- engagement in your state's grape and wine association to build your winery's reputation.
- entry into competitions.
- promotion of your wine through social media.

In Scotia, Nebraska, Richard and Susie Hanson of Rockin' Rooster Winery Inc. have made two aronia wines, one with apple, Aronia Berry Apple Wine, their first in 2011. Their Aronia Berry Wine, made in 2013, won a 2014 Pacific Rim International gold. Their berries come from their own bushes.

"It is semi-sweet and uses the whole fruit," Richard Hanson says. "It's kind of a simple thing." The Aronia Berry Apple "is very rich in body," Susie Hanson says, "a very dark, heavy wine. If you like something dark and rich, this is your thing. It's sweet-tart. Not too sweet, or too tart."

However, the isolated central Nebraska location of the winery impacts sales, Richard concedes. "If everyone knew about this wine and tasted it, I couldn't make enough of it."



Aronia Blossoming. (Photo by Coldbrook Farm, Inc.)

Thaden increased the production of his Aronia Wine this year more than 36 percent and could offer last year's only to two retailers, because it was doing so well at the winery. He estimates that about two-thirds of their sales occur there – "not samples but one or two bottles," he mentions.

John Pilcher, a large Midwestern commercial aronia grower at Coldbrook Farm (ColdbrookFarm.net) outside of Momence, Illinois, first planted aronia berries in 2009, with a follow-up planting in 2011. He says that aronia berries are still so new to the market that winemakers may not know how to qualify a crop.

Pilcher states that the best Aronia is:

- irrigated, creating a milder flavor and requiring less work for vintners,
- planted in slightly acid, well-drained soil,
- grown in fields free from spray drift from herbicides and synthetic pesticides,
- harvested mechanically for efficiency and food safety in sufficient quantity for wine,
- and de-stemmed, cleaned, frozen and stored at an established fruit processing facility.

## WINECRAFT

Consumers and winemakers are learning more about aronia wines and aronia in wine blends. How does it fare in winemaking? "It's a really nice fruit to work with," observes Thaden. "Aronia is a very cooperative fruit like grapes. (The berries) stay fairly solid as you work with them so they press nicely, without a lot of excess pulp in the wine as you're producing it unlike raspberries and plums. When you press it, you get nice, clean wine to work with."

But the aronia wine he sampled about five years ago "was one of the worst wines I've ever tasted." He's since decided that the "bitter vegetative components" caused "a green grassy taste," probably because the winemaker "used too little fruit and the wine was allowed to oxidize. It lacked the nice fruity character we like to have in our wines."



Aronia Juice at Tongue River Vineyard and Winery in Montana.

Minnesota's Drummond cites a fruit wine recipe from Dominic Rivard's ebook "The Ultimate Fruit Winemaker's Guide," for a wine blending aronia, blackberries, elderberries and black currants (dominic@wineplanet.org, \$12 ). Rivard, a Canadian, is updating and expanding the second edition of the book for hard copy publication in 2016.

The 2015 crop from Drummond's small patch of aronia plants was good, and Drummond is now trying a blend. He cautions winemakers not to "over-extract, due to the astringency."

Thaden advocates using thawed frozen berries and, from his current batch of aronia fruit from two growers in North Dakota, he's making some semi-sweet wine without cooking, modeled on what he learned last year.

However, according to Thaden, Gilles Benoit a prominent Quebec winemaker, simmers the aronia, concentrates it, and then blends it with Marquette and some other wines for the tannin. "But we prefer raw extraction," says Thaden. "We also have 60 gallons of bone-dry aronia in a French Oak barrel where we'll keep it at least 18 months to soften up."

## HEALTH BENEFITS AND AVAILABILITY

"The health benefits are fantastic," explains Rockin Rooster's Richard Hanson. The USDA has found that aronia is an important source of antioxidants, which impact heart health. In the USDA ORAC Survey of 2007, aronia berries outscored cranberries and blueberries.

Winemakers no longer need to rely on Polish, Russian or Ukrainian concentrate. The supply of U.S.-grown aronia berries is sufficient. Pilcher says that aronia production has increased significantly in the past five years. American growers are prepared to meet the needs of the wine industry.

*Mildred Culp, Ph.D., is communications director at Coldbrook Farm Inc. Email mildred@coldbrookfarm.net. Copyright 2015 Coldbrook Farm, Inc.*

Homepage photo: Dominic Rivard, author of "The Ultimate Fruit Winemaker's Guide." Photo by Arvin Tian.