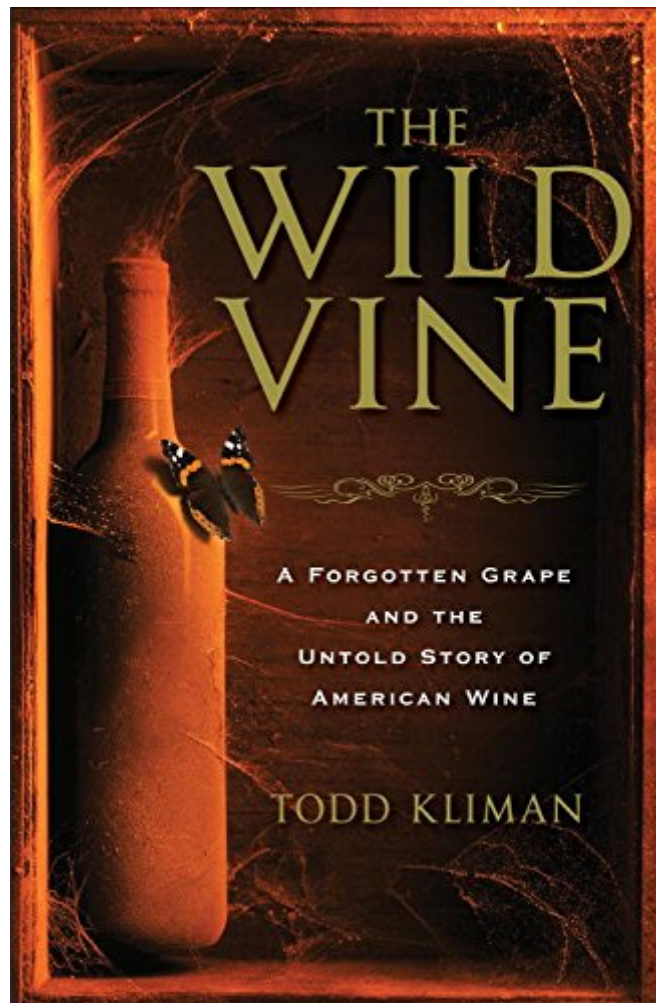


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# The Wild Vine: A Forgotten Grape And The Untold Story Of American Wine



## Synopsis

A rich romp through untold American history featuring fabulous characters, *The Wild Vine* is the tale of a little-known American grape that rocked the fine-wine world of the nineteenth century and is poised to do so again today. Author Todd Kliman sets out on an epic quest to unravel the mystery behind Norton, a grape used to make a Missouri wine that claimed a prestigious gold medal at an international exhibition in Vienna in 1873. At a time when the vineyards of France were being ravaged by phylloxera, this grape seemed to promise a bright future for a truly American brand of wine-making, earthy and wild. And then Norton all but vanished. What happened? The narrative begins more than a hundred years before California wines were thought to have put America on the map as a wine-making nation and weaves together the lives of a fascinating cast of renegades. We encounter the suicidal Dr. Daniel Norton, tinkering in his experimental garden in 1820s Richmond, Virginia. Half on purpose and half by chance, he creates a hybrid grape that can withstand the harsh New World climate and produce good, drinkable wine, thus succeeding where so many others had failed so fantastically before, from the Jamestown colonists to Thomas Jefferson himself. Thanks to an influential Long Island, New York, seed catalog, the grape moves west, where it is picked up in Missouri by German immigrants who craft the historic 1873 bottling. Prohibition sees these vineyards burned to the ground by government order, but bootleggers keep the grape alive in hidden backwoods plots. Generations later, retired Air Force pilot Dennis Horton, who grew up playing in the abandoned wine caves of the very winery that produced the 1873 Norton, brings cuttings of the grape back home to Virginia. Here, dot-com-millionaire-turned-vintner Jenni McCloud, on an improbable journey of her own, becomes Norton's ultimate champion, deciding, against all odds, to stake her entire reputation on the outsider grape. Brilliant and provocative, *The Wild Vine* shares with readers a great American secret, resuscitating the Norton grape and its elusive, inky drink and forever changing the way we look at wine, America, and long-cherished notions of identity and reinvention.

## Book Information

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Essays

## Customer Reviews

When I ordered this book through the, ahem, Vine Program, I expected a rather straightforward story about the history of a little-known American grape, the Norton, and its inventor, Dr. Daniel Norton. To Todd Kliman's credit, he gives us that story and a whole lot more. We learn about the failed attempts over a 200 year period to make a decent wine in America. Mostly it was a failure because people wanted to make wine using European grapes. But grapes are sensitive and don't usually do well in areas they are not native to. So growing French or Italian or Spanish grapes in Virginia, say, didn't work out very well. The vines are attacked by diseases, besides the fact that the weather and soil are different. But when Daniel Norton tinkered with some native varieties and invented the Norton, he came up with a winner. When the wine made from the Norton was young it tasted good, and when it aged it tasted even better. The grape eventually made its way out to Missouri which, back in the middle 1800's, was THE winemaking capital of the United States. (Nothing against Missouri, but that fact knocked me out!) As Mr. Kliman explains, after the transcontinental railroad was built California took off as the winemaking hotspot of the country, as the product could then be shipped quickly and easily, and the California climate was admirably suited to growing European vinifera grapes. California eclipsed Missouri quite rapidly, and Prohibition in the early 20th century pretty much finished off winemaking in the East and Midwest, as federal agents dug up and destroyed the vines. (Come to think of it, Mr. Kliman doesn't explain why Prohibition didn't finish off California as a winemaking state, but I'm guessing that would be a long story and a good topic for a different book!

How many times have you come home from a long hard day at the office and said to yourself, "What I need right now is a thick, rare, grilled steak, a big refreshing green salad, a fresh baguette and a darned good bottle of \_\_\_\_\_"? Fill in the blank, and you might have said "Cabernet," or "Pinot Noir" or "Syrah"; possibly "Chambolle-Musigny" or "Cote Rotie" or "Barolo"; or any one of a hundred things. What you probably did not say was "Norton's Virginia Seedling," or just "Norton." That's likely because you haven't even HEARD of "Norton," the grape developed by Daniel Norton in Virginia in the first half of the 19th century. I'm not sure I had heard of it either. If I had, I'd long since forgotten about it, and I sure as heck had not ever tasted the stuff, much less given it a lot of thought. I'm not alone in that regard. I pulled out my well worn copy of Jancis Robinson's "Vines, Grapes & Wines," an extensive review of wine grape varieties from all over the world. In Robinson's ampelographic universe, the Norton merits a glancing mention in a one paragraph laundry list of "other red hybrids grown in the United States and occasionally encountered as varieties." No wonder "Norton" is not even a blip on my radar screen. This book will fill that gap in your wine education, as it did mine, in an entertaining way. It will take you from the early settlements in Jamestown to Jefferson at Monticello. From brooding, melancholic Daniel Norton, for whom the grape is named, to the productive and prosperous Missouri viticultural scene of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (founded in large part on cultivation of Norton vines), to the Prohibition era that drove a stake in Missouri's viticultural heart.

Is there such a thing as American wine from an American grape? Sure, the United States has its share of wineries; California, Oregon, Washington all produce excellent wines, equalling or surpassing their European counterparts. However, what they are growing are European grapes in America. Does America have a grape that is "native" and can produce a well regarded, drinkable wine? Actually, we do and we can. For example, Catawba. However, there is another grape that deserves attention, Norton. You can be forgiven if you have never heard of the Norton grape. But if you live in Virginia or Missouri and do not know of this grape, I am saddened and disappointed. It is a part of your state's history. In fact, Missouri has designated the Norton as the State Grape. The Norton takes center stage in Todd Kliman's *The Wild Vine: A Forgotten Grape and the Untold Story of American Wine*. Tracing the history of winemaking in the United States, Kliman takes the reader back in time to the time of the Jamestown settlers. One of their missions was to establish vineyards in the New World. Plantings of European vines were not suited to the climate, soil, or diseases of the new land and the efforts were in vain. However, that did not stop the settlers or those that arrived after them. Thomas Jefferson, who loved European wines, even tried his hand at growing

grapes, but those efforts ended in failure. A contemporary of Jefferson, Dr. Daniel Norton, creates a hybrid grape that withstands the harsh climate and produces a very good, drinkable wine. Dr. Norton has succeeded where so many before him, even the learned Jefferson, have failed. Dr. Norton's grape is added to the premier seed catalog of the time, where it is picked up by German immigrants in Missouri.

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