

# Fetească Neagră



By Richard Rocca

Since ancient times vintners around the world have been searching for distinctive grape varieties to plant in their vineyards to improve the quality of their wine. Fetească Neagră, also known as the “Black Maiden,” is one such grape.

Many grape varieties such as Fetească Neagră have become such accomplished world travelers that they can no longer be identified exclusively with a specific wine region or continent. Growers constantly seek a grape variety that produces superior wine from a region with similar but not necessarily the exact climatic and agricultural characteristics as their area. Grape vines have the innate ability to translate every aspect of their growing environment into their fruit and ultimately display it in the wines made from that fruit, a phenomenon the French call “terroir.”

Jim Baker has a curious and adventurous nature. He is the owner and winemaker of Chateau Niagara Winery located on the Niagara Lake Plain, near Lake Ontario in New Fane, N.Y. He makes excellent estate wines from his vineyard, including some made from the exotic grapes, Saperavi and Turan. His latest bold venture centered around bringing legendary Old World grape varieties to his vineyard and began in the Eastern European regions of Romania with Romania’s most recognizable red wine grape, Fetească Neagră. Fetească Neagră, is not commercially planted outside of Eastern Europe but forward-thinking winemakers, like Jim Baker are changing that as they explore the possibilities obscure grapes offer. Jim is not aware of anyone else growing Fetească Neagră in North America. Reports from Romania tell of a growing excitement that their beloved red grape is taking root in the United States.

Recently, I had the opportunity to talk with Jim. I asked him to tell me about the newest grape in his vineyard.

**RR:** This year you will be bringing in your first harvest of Fetească Neagră, an exciting grape from Eastern Europe. Why did you choose to add this grape to your Chateau Niagara vineyard? Tell us what we can expect from this grape variety in the vineyard and cellar?

**JB:** Fetească Neagră is an ancient Romanian grape grown mostly in the southern section of Romania, primarily in the Dealu Mare region. This is a land of ancient traditions and wine is integral to the culture. It is a thin-skinned black grape, which is difficult to grow due to its sensitivity to powdery mildew.

So why would we add an obscure grape that is difficult to grow to our lineup? Several reasons, the first is that we have been developing a whole line of Eastern European wines for quite some time now, including a Georgian Saperavi, our Georgian style skin-fermented white, Du Monde, and Kagor. It seems to be an easy extension of what we do. Second, the name, while in Romanian, it is essentially unintelligible to Western ears, in English it means “Black Maiden,” which has a lot of very cool attractiveness to it.

When we first brought it into the nursery to try, I had a friend from Romania named Gabe. He thought it would be wonderful to make it here.

He said the climate is similar. He recanted tales of burly men consuming vast quantities, finally succumbing to the wine’s charms. It is much loved and Gabe said that the locals referred to it as “Bear Power” due to its propensity towards higher alcohol and intense flavor.

So we took the plunge! In 2019 we took cuttings from our mother vine, which we obtained from the National Grapevine Repository, and supplied them to the nursery that we work with. They did a custom graft for us and we planted 105 vines in the spring of 2020. This would be just enough to make a single barrel. They were very happy in the spot we selected for them and we were expecting our first vintage in 2023. We got hit with the late spring frost that year that took out most of our crop, so we must wait until 2024. We were able to harvest just a half bin of these little beauties. Much to our surprise they came in at 24 Brix while the remaining vineyard was struggling to get to 21 Brix. The berries exhibited deep color with an intense black currant and spice flavor, and these combine to let us peek at a vine that is itching to live up to its Bear Power name here in Niagara, NY.

I urge you to broaden your wine-drinking comfort zone by trying new grape varieties. We must support groundbreaking vintners so their efforts can aid the entire winemaking community. The art of viticulture and winemaking continues to evolve. With the specter of climate change no longer a debatable concept but a growing reality we must embrace adaptation in every phase of the winemaking process. While the path forward has challenges, it also has the incredible promise of things to come.



## About the Author

Rich Rocca is a Western Pennsylvania-based writer with a special interest in unusual wine grape varieties who also writes and publishes the wine blog [wpawinepirate.com](http://wpawinepirate.com). His degree in Nature Conservation provides him a unique insight into the growing movement toward organic and biodynamic viticulture. Rich can be reached at [wpawinepirate@gmail.com](mailto:wpawinepirate@gmail.com).

Grapes photo courtesy of: Rich Rocca