

New table grape varieties for Ontario could diversify market Ontario growers have only had one main short-season variety to grow

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By Lilian Schaer



Michael Kauzlaric, technology scout with the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre said the Jupiter variety is looking especially strong for Ontario. Photo: Lilian Schaer

There's lots of unrealized potential in the table grape market in Ontario, as one variety has dominated production. That's about to change.

Ontario's main homegrown fresh table grape is a variety called Sovereign Coronation, a semi-seedless blue grape that's ready for market over a six- to eight-week period in late summer and early fall.

Driven by demand primarily from farmers, the Ontario Fresh Grape Growers' Marketing Board and Vineland Research and Innovation Centre (Vineland) teamed up four years ago to find new table grape varieties for the Ontario market.

Why it matters: Growers want to extend their season so their crop isn't competing with all the other Niagara fruit coming to market at that same time of year, and retailers are looking for new local fruit offerings.

They needed cultivars that could grow well in Ontario's climate, fit within the current infrastructure of Ontario's fresh grape growers, and satisfy taste, quality and appearance needs. That means a seedless, sweet and crunchy fruit on a good sized bunch than can be offered to consumers at a reasonable price.

According to Fresh Grape Growers Manager Sarah Marshall, three green and three blue seedless grape cultivars from Arkansas were planted at Vineland's campus in 2014.

"These would be comparable to Sovereign Coronation. Our goal is to give growers some other varieties to grow," she said.



*Jupiter grapes are the leading candidate in research trials to be grown in Ontario.
photo: Lilian Schaer*

They've all been growing well over the last three years, with zero vine losses in last winter's fluctuating temperatures. Bud hardiness tests conducted by Brock

University's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute have shown the new varieties are hardy to the -24 C to -26 C range.

One variety in particular, Jupiter, has caught the attention of growers, retailers and researchers as being particularly promising, and was the focal point of an information session at Vineland in September.

It meets one key criterion for sure, Vineland's technology scout Michael Kauzlaric told the gathered group keen to get to know Jupiter a bit better: it's ready for harvest later than Sovereign Coronation, which is good news for growers.

"Coronation starts around Aug. 20 or so and Jupiter is ready in early September — we started picking these Sept. 4, 7 and 10 to get samples for today," he said.

It was also popular with Ontario and Quebec consumers in testing conducted by Vineland in an effort to find out what people want from the fresh grape market.

According to Vineland's consumer insights lead, Dr. Amy Bowen, blue grapes aren't what usually jump to mind when consumers are asked about their grape preferences; invariably, they think green or red.

"People want local and they want flavour, so this is a huge opportunity for us not to compete with imports if we can create blue grapes for consumers who want local," Bowen explained. "People love the taste and flavour of Jupiter."

That will make in-store tasting crucial to get consumers aware of the new variety and interested in buying it, she said. A key step is selecting a name that will resonate with consumers. Jupiter is the working name chosen by the breeder.

Tregunno Fruit Farms of Niagara-on-the-Lake planted 1.5 acres of Jupiter last spring, and crop from those vines should be available for the market in small quantities next year.

"We are always looking for new things to try. Retailers want new things and we try to grow what retailers want," said Jordan Tregunno. "We currently grow Sovereigns so we are trying to extend the season. They are growing well and look promising."

Vineland will be starting additional trials next year with varieties from Spain that Kauzlaric said are more cold tolerant. Imported Spanish table grapes were sold in grocery stores this year, so consumers are already somewhat familiar with their taste and characteristics.

Fresh Grape Growers received federal funding for the research under Growing Forward 2, Marshall said, and are now waiting to hear whether they'll receive new funding to support the trials with the Spanish varieties.

In 2017, 90 Ontario growers grew 2,045 tons of table grapes with a farmgate value of about \$5.3 million.

<https://farmtario.com/crops/new-table-grape-varieties-for-ontario-could-diversify-market/?module=carousel&pgtype=homepage&i=1>