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U of M, Minnesota's wine industry and State Fair to offer first international wine competition

Minneapolis-St. Paul (2/12/2009) – Winemakers using grapes grown in cold climates will have the opportunity to enter a new professionally judged international wine competition as part of the 2009 Minnesota State Fair.

The first-of-its-kind competition is a partnership between the Minnesota Grape Growers Association, the State Fair and the University of Minnesota, where several of the cold-hardy wine grapes were developed.

Judges will do a blind tasting of the wines before the fair begins and award gold, silver and bronze medals; the winning wines will be displayed at the fair. The competition will be judged by internationally recognized wine experts.

The Fair's annual winemaking competition, with categories for amateur and professional winemakers, will continue as a separate entity.

"Cold hardy wine grapes represent a niche agriculture market with significant economic potential for the Midwest," said Thomas W. Martell, president of the Minnesota Grape Growers Association. "A professional international competition spotlighting these varieties will accelerate consumer awareness and acceptance of these new wines. It will also encourage winemakers to develop and market high quality wines featuring these new varieties."

Minnesota's grape and wine industry is expanding rapidly and contributed \$36.2 million to the state's economy in 2007, according to a study conducted by U of M economists. Since 1995, the number of wineries has grown from 7 to 26, the study found. More than 632 vineyards are planted statewide.

"We're excited about being involved with the professional wine competition, as it enhances the fair's agricultural component while showing our visitors a piece of Minnesota's varied industry," said Steve Pooch, deputy general manager at the Fair.

The competition is more evidence of the increasing quality of cold-climate grapes, said Jim Luby, a professor in the U's department of horticultural science and one of the scientists developing the grapes. "A number of grape varieties with improved potential for high quality wines have become available in the last 15 years. This competition is an opportunity for winemakers to showcase their skill and imagination in transforming these varieties to superior wines in a rapidly growing new industry."