



The International Wine Review

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Report #45: Virginia Wine Comes of Age

Introduction



The Virginia wine industry is coming of age. Although still relatively young, it has grown fast, and the quality of its wines has steadily improved. From the mid-1970s to the present, more than 230 bonded wineries were established in the Commonwealth, many of them during the past 15 years. Virginia wine's star also rose with the involvement of big name investors like John Kent Cooke, Steve and

Jean Case, Patricia Kluge, Dave Mathews, and Donald Trump, all deeply committed to improving the quality of Virginia wine.

Although Virginia's largest wineries such as Barboursville, Williamsburg and Chateau Morrisette produce 40,000+ cases annually, winemaking in the Commonwealth is essentially a cottage industry. Most of the wineries are small and family-owned enterprises, producing about 2 thousand cases annually, mostly direct to tourists or to local restaurants and wine shops through the Virginia Wine Distribution Company. While wine is mainly produced by bonded wineries, Virginia also has custom crush facilities like Virginia Wineworks, which produce wine for hotels, museums and private customers. In total, Virginia produces 485 thousand cases of wine annually, making it the 5th largest wine producer in the United States.

The quality of Virginia wines today is far superior to what it was fifteen years ago. These improvements are the result of lessons learned from experience and research at Virginia Tech on how to grow grapes in Virginia's climate and soils, where best to site vineyards, and which grapes grow best in different regions and how to integrate that knowledge into wine production practices. Old World experience, especially from France, has been transmitted by European consultants and interns. Today, a new generation of young well-trained winemakers with broad experience in wine making in France, South Africa, Italy, and California are making wine in Virginia.

In this Issue

Introduction	1
Top-Rated Producers	3
The Evolution of Virginia Wine	5
Geography and Climate	8
Viticulture	9
The Grapes of Virginia	12
Winemaking	16
Virginia Wine and American Cuisine	18
The Virginia Wine Market	19
Virginia's Producers and Their Wines	21
Annexes	
1. Map of Virginia Wine Regions	40
2. Principal Virginia Appellations	40
3. Temperature and Rainfall Maps	41
4. Barboursville Octagon Vertical Tasting	43

In this report, our objective is to provide an in-depth look at recent developments in the Virginia wine industry. The goal is to inform consumers and the trade of the exciting qualitative improvements that have taken pace in Virginia wine, both in the vineyard and the winery, and to identify those producers and wines that best exemplify these improvements. A list of the top-rated wineries resulting from our tastings is provided below.

We begin this report by examining how the wine industry has evolved over the past 30 years and the important contributions of pioneers such as Luca Paschina of Barboursville, Jim Law of Linden Vineyards, Patrick Dueffler of Williamsburg Winery, Dennis Horton of Horton Vineyards and several wine industry advisers

Introduction

Continued from page 1

and consultants, primarily from Virginia and France. We then examine the geography and climate of Virginia to explain the growing conditions for wine production in different parts of the state. Virginia is not an easy region for premium grape growing as local winegrowers will tell you. However, with good site selection, choice of grapes, clones and rootstock, and competent vineyard management and winemaking, it is certainly possible to produce first-class wine in several regions of Virginia. The best vineyards today are mostly sited in the foothills of the Blue Ridge and the northern Piedmont, but there are other promising areas in the Shenandoah Valley, Southwest Virginia, the Eastern Shore and perhaps the Tidewater that have yet to be fully explored.

The report also examines the market for Virginia wine and the industry's prospects for the future. We explore the growing demand for Virginia grapes and the slow growth in supply. We look at the continuing challenges in marketing Virginia wine in national and international markets. And we examine the prospects for further growth in the quantity and quality of Virginia wine.

In the final section of the report we provide profiles of the key winemakers and their wines. In preparing this report we focused attention on those wineries with a reputation for producing quality wine. Many of them have distinguished themselves with consistently high quality winemaking over the years and by winning medals in the Virginia Governor's Cup and other national wine competitions. We tasted their wines and held extensive discussions with many of the winemakers. With the large and growing number of Virginia wineries, it was not possible for us to visit every winery and taste every wine for this report. However, we will continue to taste Virginia wines and visit producers on an ongoing basis.

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