

*Virginia Wine:*  
400 Years Young  
and World-Class

by Richard Leahy

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Virginia wine officially turned 400 years old last year, and in 2012, at the Virginia Wine Summit, renowned British wine writer and taster Steven Spurrier declared: "Today, Virginia is my favorite North American wine region, because it makes the kinds of wines I like to have a second glass of." Between 1619 and the present, the evolution of quality wine in Virginia is a remarkable story of determination, defeat, resurrection and perseverance.

*Growing Wine Grapes in Colonial Virginia*

At the Jamestown Assembly of 1619, "Acte Twelve" (sic) mandated that all heads of household plant at least ten vinifera grapevines each. The English Crown had just taken ownership of its lands in the New World from the Virginia Company, and were so eager to start native American vineyards (to supply the mother country with wine) that if anyone failed to plant their grapes, a punishment would be decided by the Governor.

European *vitis vinifera* evolved in the semi-arid Caucasus. Virginia has twice the annual rainfall of Bordeaux (42 inches vs. 21 inches). The high relative humidity allows fungal diseases such as Phomopsis, black rot, downy and powdery mildews to prey on grapevines. In addition, Virginia's ample wildlife, from birds, yellow jackets, deer, raccoons and even bear love to prey on young shoots, leaves and of course, ripe fruit. This all adds up to make Virginia one of the most challenging environments in which to successfully grow commercial wine grapes, especially of the delicate European vinifera varieties.

This largely explains why, despite 400 years of documented history, Virginia's wine industry took centuries to become sustainable, and then, commercially and critically successful. Grapevines are a perennial plant that require three years to yield their first (small) crop. The Jamestown settlers, watching the vines being devoured by deer and the fruit by birds, can't be blamed for switching to tobacco as a cash crop, which was not only an annual seed crop but a native plant, impervious to many of the problems of viticulture.

And yet, the dream (and chauvinism) of starting a Virginia wine industry persisted. Thomas Jefferson, who became a lifelong advocate for fine wine after tasting the top French wines when he was American ambassador there, he planted vinifera vineyards at Monticello and nearby Colle starting in 1771, but never harvested a crop from them, showing that the original challenges of the Jamestown settlers still remained.

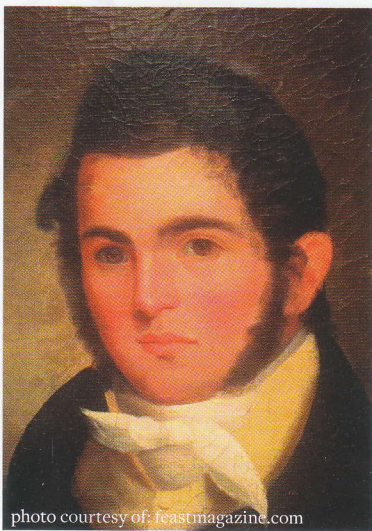


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## ***“Dr. Norton’s Virginia Seedling” and a Successful Local Hybrid***

The first game-changer for a sustainable Virginia wine industry came with the hybridization of the Norton grape circa 1830, an accidental cross of a native *vitis aestivalis* grape with a *vitis vinifera* in the nursery of amateur botanist Dr. Daniel Norton. “Dr. Norton’s Virginia Seedling,” with its native genes, was very disease-resistant, and the fruit, while distinctive, is

quite different from Concord and made a high-quality table wine. The Monticello Wine Company of Charlottesville, founded in 1873, was a commercially successful cooperative which made a “Virginia claret” based on Norton, and operated until it was shut down by Prohibition in 1916. The Norton was commercially re-introduced to Virginia by Dennis Horton of Horton Vineyards in the early 1990s.

## ***Blazing New Trails for Virginia Wines and Grapes Since 1990***

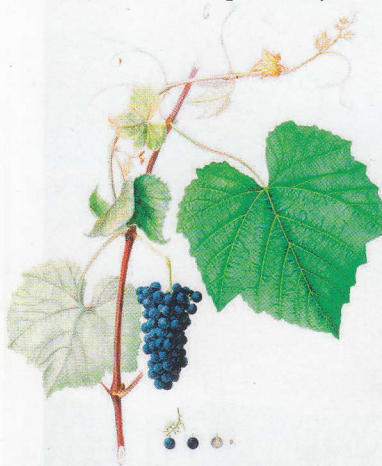
Since 1976, Barbourville Vineyards in the town of that name has been growing only *vinifera* grapes, and made a lasting reputation with its “Right Bank”-style blend, Octagon, always made with about 60% Merlot and a mix of other red Bordeaux varieties. At Linden Vineyards, Jim Law has made terroir-driven Chardonnay that is long-lived and remarkably Burgundian, as well as a Cabernet Sauvignon based Meritage-style blend, both named “Hardscrabble” after the estate vineyard, since 1985. In 1993, Horton Vineyards’ 1992 Viognier won more medals for that grape than any other in the country, and it put Virginia on the map for that esoteric Rhone grape overnight.

In 2012, there were only 200 Virginia wineries; today there are over 320. The pioneers mentioned above (and others) have blazed a trail for fine wine which began in the late 1960s with the French hybrids, shifted to mostly *vitis vinifera* by the 1990s. Since 2010, Virginia wines have seen an international reputation established for wine quality and distinctive regional style. Recently, esoteric *vinifera* grapes shown to grow well in Virginia but are seldom seen elsewhere as varietals, have made increasing strides to help define a regional style and specialty for the Old Dominion, such as Petit Verdot, Tannat and Petit Manseng, an aromatic, high-acid small white grape from the Jurançon region of France.

In addition, new hybrids from Cornell University such as Traminette and Chardonel have proven they are more disease-resistant and prolific than their *vinifera* parents (Gewürztraminer and

Chardonnay, respectively) and are helping make viticulture more sustainable in an increasingly wet climate.

One of the key elements in enabling the transition of the Virginia wine industry from a curiosity mostly practiced by “gentlemen farmers” with little or no viticultural or winemaking training to a world-class regional wine industry was the Farm Winery Act of 1980 and 1985. The act taxed Virginia wineries to fund the work of Dr. Bruce Zoecklein, enologist, and Dr. Tony Wolf, viticulturist, at Virginia Tech. Their work over the past 35 years has been key in demonstrating to the industry what practices are necessary in the vineyard, in Virginia, to ripen healthy grapes, and what particular issues (such as unripe seeds) need to be addressed in the winery.



Norton's Virginia

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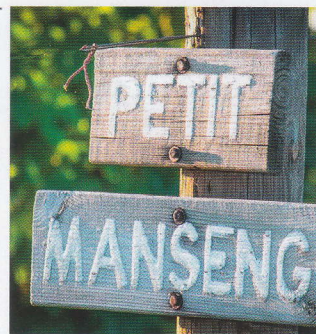


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## ***A Snapshot of Virginia Wine Today***

In 2020, Virginia has about 3,200 acres of wine grapes across the Commonwealth. Most wineries are small, making under 10,000 cases annually. Most of the state's vineyards and wineries are along the Upper Piedmont, from Loudoun County on the Potomac River in the north to Nelson County south of Charlottesville. This region has well-drained soils favorable to viticulture, as well as fine views of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and draws thousands of visitors from the D.C. metropolitan area, Richmond, Tidewater and nearby states. There are seven American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) in Virginia. The major ones in use are the Shenandoah Valley (the largest), Monticello (the counties adjacent to Charlottesville and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello home), Virginia's Eastern Shore, the Northern Neck, and Middleburg, a subsection of Fauquier/Loudoun counties. The Shenandoah Valley is the largest and also consistently the coolest of the AVAs. The Northern Neck, with the maritime influence of the Chesapeake Bay, has a long growing season and ripens late-season red grapes like Petit Verdot well. Monticello is the "hot spot" that makes many of the best red wines in the state, as well as Viognier, the official state grape.

Virginia wineries are now one of the top tourist attractions, and agriculture (including viticulture) has become the Commonwealth's largest economic sector. From 2010 to 2015, winery visitation rose 39% to 2.25 million annually. Due to the proximity of the Blue Ridge Mountains, many of the wineries near hiking trails encourage "wiking", or hiking followed by relaxing at their winery.

## ***Best-Known Wines by Reputation***

Stylistically as well as geographically, Virginia is half way between the Old World and the West Coast, with a moderate climate that ripens classic varieties well but is still cooler than most regions on the West Coast, resulting in wines with classic acid/fruit balance and moderate alcohol.

Chardonnay is the largest wine grape by acreage in Virginia and is also the most popular wine. Virginia Chardonnay today demonstrates how the industry evolved from following the West

Coast model of new oak and ample malolactic fermentation, to following the Burgundian model, with higher acidity, little or no new oak, increasing use of native yeast fermentations, and a subtle, nuanced style that can also be long-lived. Top producers include: Linden Vineyards, Michael Shaps Wineworks, Early Mountain Vineyards.

Viognier is hard to grow successfully. Even in the northern Rhone Valley it is an uneven, fickle producer, and it needs a climate warm enough to ripen reliably to 23 Brix, without being so hot that the gentle honeysuckle aromatics get burned away. Dennis Horton proved that Viognier would produce classic varietal character in Virginia, and trained it on a lyre trellis for a divided canopy, doubling the yield per acre. The grape is delicate, aromatic and easy to drink, and was made the official state grape. Top producers include: Horton Vineyards, Keswick Vineyards, Veritas Vineyards, Michael Shaps Wineworks/Virginia Cellars.



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Meritage-style blends have overtaken varietal reds as the top category for Virginia red wines. The typical blend of today is either Merlot-based or has a dominance of Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, although wineries in Loudoun and Fauquier counties (like Linden) may have a Cabernet Sauvignon dominance. Petit Verdot and Tannat are growing as a ratio of the blend in many Virginia red blends. Top producers include: Linden Vineyards, RdV Vineyards, Barboursville Vineyards, Early Mountain Vineyards, King Family Vineyards.

Cabernet Franc and Merlot, the dominant grapes of St. Emilion and its satellites, shine well in Virginia as solo varietals, especially in the clay-dominated soils of the central Piedmont. While Virginia Merlot is elegant and very similar to the smooth, subtle wines of St. Emilion, Virginia Cabernet Franc could arguably be the best in the world, now that vineyards have been widely planted to French ENTAV-certified clones, and careful canopy management and site selection avoid the green pepper twang which was the bane of late 20th century Cabernet Franc. Top producers include: for Merlot; Michael Shaps Wineworks, Lovington Winery, Breaux Vineyards. For Cabernet Franc; Keswick Vineyards, Pollak Vineyards, Glen Manor Vineyards.

### *Virginia Specialty Grapes*

Norton is a Virginia native creation, and is grown now from the Mid-Atlantic to Missouri. It is low in tannin but high in malic acid, with deep damson plum aromas and flavors. Norton's bold fruity flavors and fresh acidity make it ideal to match with an All-American menu, from hot dogs and hamburgers, to mac and cheese. Norton has many devoted fans and is frequently used to make very prototypical-tasting port-style wine. Top producers include: Chrysalis Vineyards, 53 Winery, New Kent Winery, Paradise Springs Winery.

Petit Verdot is like Viognier, in that it needs a moderately warm, but not hot, climate for ideal varietal character, which Virginia has. It is an original, intriguing grape, with aromas of violets, herbs and black fruits, and like Merlot, has a smooth silky texture although it can handle a lot of oak. Its use in Virginia Meritage-style blends helps give them a distinctive regional character. Top producers include: Veritas Vineyards, Michael Shaps Wineworks, DuCard Vineyards. Tannat is originally from Madiran in southwest France, and the name has the same root as "tannin", because it is a very tannic grape, but makes a nuanced, full-bodied but smooth wine full of ripe black fruits. It is used in both blends and as a varietal since it makes very classy tannic reds while Cabernet Sauvignon is not nearly as reliable in Virginia. Top producers include: Fabboli Cellars, Michael Shaps Wineworks, Delaplane Cellars.

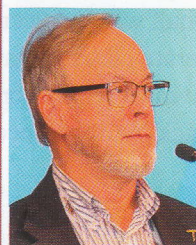
Four hundred years after it officially began, Virginia wine now offers wine lovers a wide variety of high-quality, regionally distinctive wines in vinifera and hybrid varieties, in all styles from dry to **sweet**.



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### *About the Author*

Author Richard Leahy has been writing about Virginia wine since 1986, and has a blog at [www.richardleahy.com](http://www.richardleahy.com). His definitive book on the subject, *Beyond Jefferson's Vines*, has a five-star review on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and is now available in an updated third edition there. He will present a seminar on Virginia wines with a tasting at the next AWS national conference, and will offer signed copies of the book.