

## A Grape Virginia Vintners Can Love

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Competitive wine tastings rarely make news, except when an upstart wins. The 1976 "Judgment of Paris," in which wines from California triumphed over some of France's best, helped establish Napa

Valley's reputation as a fine wine region. A much-less-heralded taste-off 15 years ago had a similar effect on Virginia's fledgling wine industry, when Horton Vineyards won a Viognier contest against wines produced by some of California's most celebrated winemakers.



"We really cleaned their clocks!" Dennis Horton, co-owner and namesake of the winery in Orange County, north of Charlottesville, recalled in a recent interview.

Horton's triumph electrified the Virginia wine industry, which began planting Viognier grapes with abandon. In 1993, the year Horton produced his prize-winner, the grape was so insignificant that the state did not track how much of it was planted. Tony K. Wolf, the state viticulturist and a professor of viticulture at Virginia Tech, recently estimated that there were fewer than 20 acres at that time. By 2007, the last year for which official statistics are available, Viognier plantings had grown to 180 acres. According to the Virginia Wine Board, a state marketing office, production grew by two-thirds from 2004 to 2007. That probably is an understatement, as severe frosts in April 2007 and then a long, dry summer kept yields low.

Viognier is popular among Virginia vintners because it has thick skin and grows in loose clusters, making it resistant to rot in the humid climate. Heavy rains at harvest time (tropical storm season) can wreak havoc with other grape varieties, diluting sugar and acid primarily. But Viognier remains steady, slowing its growth for a day or two and then picking up where it left off, Horton said.

"It is extremely suited to this climate, and it can remain balanced because it tolerates the heat and humidity," he said.

Viognier wine would not be a success, of course, if consumers didn't like it. A well-made Viognier smells of jasmine, honeysuckle and peach blossom. Two styles are emerging in Virginia. The first is lush and opulent with exuberant fruit, sometimes slightly sweet. The second is more austere and subtle in the classic fashion of the wines of Condrieu, Viognier's homeland

in France's Rhone Valley. The latter style demands your attention to appreciate the wine's nuances, an investment some drinkers might be unwilling to make. That would be a shame, for not only are these wines delicious now, but they have sufficient acidity and structure to improve in the bottle for four or five years.

Some winemakers age at least a portion of their Viognier in new oak barrels to give it some heft, though used barrels are generally favored to soften the wine's texture without adding overt woody flavors. Others avoid oak altogether in favor of freshness. An underripe Viognier tastes green and bitter, as if it had been made with the stems and someone forgot to add grapes. An overripe one can be flabby, lacking acidity.

To see if Virginia really is for Viognier, I recently joined four other judges for a taste-off organized by Tarara Vineyards of Loudoun County as part of the winery's 20th anniversary celebration. Todd Gray, chef and co-proprietor of [Equinox restaurant](#); Andrew Stover, sommelier at [Oya](#) and [Sei](#); Nycci Nellis of [TheListAreYouOnIt.com](#); wine educator Laurie Forster and I sniffed and slurped our way through 15 entrants to choose four that will join Tarara's at that winery's Fine Vine Festival on May 30.

The group's winners -- from Veritas, Cooper, Keswick and Casanel, a Loudoun County newcomer -- were all excellent. Overall, however, quality varied alarmingly. So I broadened my search, tasting several more Virginia Viogniers over the next few weeks. (Because I have my favorites and know several winemakers in the state, I tasted most of the wines "blind," with the labels concealed, as we had done at the Tarara tasting.) Again, one wine could be fantastic and the next so wildly disappointing it was difficult to believe they had been made from the same grape variety. That is perhaps as good a reason as any to visit Virginia wineries and search out the good ones.

In the end, it was difficult to trim my list of favorites to eight recommendations. Virginia's best Viogniers are superb.