

# Buy the Bottle

Pushing an industry forward at the Virginia Wine Expo.  
by Deveron Timberlake

"I happen to be a white wine drinker," Gov. Bob McDonnell reveals, just before awarding the state's top prize for a wine that is red. (The white ones get their winner during wine month in October.) McDonnell tells a small crowd of mostly industry and media reps at the Virginia Governor's Cup Grand Tasting on Feb. 26 that in his first 40 days in office, "so far I've had four blizzards and four billion dollars in debt," so a chance to drink anything seems to be a good distraction. Rows of gleaming stemware are at the ready for the night and the kickoff to the Virginia Wine Expo weekend, and the Richmond Convention Center is awash with grapes fermenting and fomenting.

McDonnell proclaims Love By The Glass week March 22-28, and makes an improbable threat: "We're only sixth in the country now [in wine production], but look out California, we're going to be number one!" Incentives for the industry are "sailing through well" in the General Assembly, he assures the audience, and "we intend to make wine promotion and tourism a very significant part of the economic recovery. You grow grapes and you grow jobs." With 160 wineries in the state, this is one of the fastest-growing sectors of Virginia agriculture, and quality is up significantly from those first years when it was difficult to take local wine seriously.

No one realizes this as much as King Family Vineyards in Crozet, whose meritage at \$28 a bottle is crowned with the 2010 Virginia Governor's Cup, outperforming nearly 200 entries judged by a panel of national experts. Tasting notes explain the winner's character: "The wine was aged in French oak for 18 months. There are dark fruits, especially black cherry and raisin, on the nose with a hint of toast. Full mouth of black cherry, smoke and clove. Perfect structure with firm, balanced tannins. The finish is smooth and lingering. It is recommended that you drink this wine now through 2015."

Naturally, the King Family's supply at this event sells out — only 615 cases were made — while expo guests sip and spit their way through hundreds of bottles. They sample wine-friendly nibbles, including nuts, chocolate and cheese and warm, wintry fare from handful of restaurants. The Jefferson Hotel serves bison short ribs with Ashland grits, the Bull and Bear Club's Michael Hall pan sears lamb chops in a blueberry zin glaze, Palladio's Melissa Close Hart spreads wine-braised beef onto polenta squares, Savor's Elli Basch serves Indonesian braised beef in coconut milk, and Millie's offers white bean cassoulet spiked with andouille. Jazz in the background and a generally festive spirit help ameliorate the sense that too-bright lighting and concrete floors do not an intimate wine tasting make.

The proof, though, is in the selling. This year's event is the biggest yet, with the largest number of vendors and 75,000 customers. More than a hundred medals, awarded earlier, are on display. Local vineyards such as James River Cellars (gold for its 2007 petit verdot, silver for its merlot, bronze for its chambourcin) get bragging rights and exposure among consumers and restaurant buyers looking to expand their lists of local varietals. Because Virginia wineries are mostly boutique or artisanal in scale, there's a limit to what's available. Most wineries here make fewer than 8,000 cases a year — a fraction of what megaproducers make in California, for example — which makes it trickier to compete and to keep product lines on a buyer's radar.

Still, momentum is tangible, and recent mentions in national wine and travel magazines make these vintners and their devotees more enthusiastic than ever. After years of trial and error, this is now among the top five emerging wine regions in the world, and the prizes are in not only the bottle, but also an increasingly robust bottom line. Virginia terroir has never tasted so good.



Local winery James River Cellars served its medal-winning varietals at the Virginia Wine Expo last weekend.