

Wine: This Year's Virginia Expo Turns Up Some Surprises

By Dave McIntyre

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The King Family Vineyards 2007 Meritage earned the 2010 Virginia Governor's Cup during judging at Lansdowne Resort in Leesburg. (James M. Thresher for The Washington Post)

Virginia Gov. Robert F. McDonnell presented the 2010 Governor's Cup on Friday to [King Family Vineyards](#) of Crozet, near Charlottesville, for its 2007 Meritage. The ceremony at the Virginia Wine Expo in Richmond was an annual rite of celebration of Virginia's rapidly growing wine industry.

The King Family Meritage (rhymes with "heritage") triumphed over more than 200 other entries from 61 wineries. A total of 126 medals were awarded in judging that took place Jan. 23 at Lansdowne Resort in Leesburg. The 15 gold-medal winners were in contention for the cup. (Only red wines were included in this contest; the state's whites will be judged in the fall.)

Does this mean the King Family Meritage is the best red wine in Virginia? Not definitively; only about 40 percent of the state's wineries entered the competition. But it gives the producer well-deserved bragging rights. A contest such as this is valuable as a snapshot of how Virginia's industry and individual wineries are doing, and the gold-medal list contained some surprises.

New names on the list included Fairfax County's [Paradise Springs Winery](#), which won gold for its 2008 Norton; and [Rosemont of Virginia](#), in LaCrosse, near the North Carolina border, which took gold in its first Governor's Cup try for its proprietary red blend called Kilravock, made from cabernet franc, merlot and chambourcin. Only three of the gold-medal winners were varietally labeled cabernet franc, long considered Virginia's best red. Five were made with a perfumy upstart, petit verdot. And Paradise Springs' was not the only Norton receiving high honors: [Chrysalis Vineyards](#) of Middleburg also took gold for its 2005 Locksley Reserve.

The overall quality of the entries impressed Jeff Siegel, the wine columnist for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram who blogs as [the Wine Curmudgeon](#). "The best wines, in a blind tasting with wines from other parts of the world, would more than hold their own," Siegel wrote. "Virginia is developing a first-class wine industry, with distinctive terroir."

In fact, Virginia wines have been showing well against wines from around the world. At the prestigious San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition in January, Virginia wineries captured 23 medals, including golds for the Philip Carter Winery Chardonnay 2008, the Doukénie Vineyards (Purcellville) Cabernet Franc 2007 and the Pollak Vineyards (Greenwood) Cabernet Franc 2007.

King Family Vineyards is a repeat Governor's Cup winner. It took the top prize in 2004 for its 2002 cabernet franc. That wine was made by Michael Shaps, now of Virginia Wineworks, who made the wines at King Family from its start in 1998 through 2006. The 2007 Meritage was made by Matthieu Finot, a French-born winemaker who took over at King Family early in 2007.

Finot, 35, arrived in Virginia in the extremely wet year of 2003. "I really wondered what I was doing here and how anyone could make wine in such conditions," he said, recalling [Hurricane Isabel](#). "The reason I decided to stay here is that Virginia challenges my skills. It's hard to make wine here because of the weather. But I love Virginia in dry years. We've had three great years in a row, and I'll take that anytime."

In the past seven years, Finot said, he has seen tremendous improvement in the quality of Virginia's wines, as better vineyard practices have helped growers ripen grapes more consistently.

The 2007 growing season was long, hot and dry. (Remember drought years?) Finot crafted his Meritage from merlot, petit verdot, cabernet franc and malbec. It is dark but not opaque. The aromas blend dark berry fruit and oak, and the palate is beautifully balanced with a long, ripe, sweet finish. (I was not a judge at this year's contest, but I did taste a sample provided by the winery.)

As Finot's impressive debut effort at King Family Vineyards, this outstanding wine is an example of what Virginia can accomplish.

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