

Winepress: Virginia vs California Wines: Closing the Gap

A couple of years ago, I was talking with a friend from [California](#) about wine, extolling on the quality wines my husband and I were finding in [Virginia](#). She flinched, scrunched up her nose as if she'd smelled something bad, and emitted the sentence I typically hear when bringing up Virginia wines: "Ewww. I think Virginia wine is terrible."

A few weeks later, I invited her to dinner and poured a rich, robust Bordeaux-style Virginian wine from Linden Vineyards. Of course, I didn't tell her where it came from.

She took a sip and began raving. "This is fabulous. What is it?" When I told her it was a Virginia wine, she nearly fell on the floor.

That's exactly the kind of reaction that Annette Boyd is trying to encourage. Boyd directs the Virginia Wine Board Marketing Office in [Richmond](#), and it's her job to tout the quality and diversity of Virginia wines throughout the state (and country).

Recently, I had the opportunity to interview her about similarities and differences between Virginia and California wines. The full interview will appear in the Spring 2010 issue of Virginia Wine Lover magazine, on newsstands this month, but the editor kindly allowed me to share some of our conversation with you in this column.

What do you think when you hear people comparing Virginia wine to California wine?

"I always have mixed feelings because the styles are so different. It's like comparing apples to oranges. The California style, because of its climate, is a higher-in-alcohol, higher-in-sugar and lower-acidity level wines. You hear these wines talked about as "jammy" and as "big fruit bombs."

"In Virginia, because our climate is different with hotter days and nights, our wines tend to be higher in acidity and more moderate in fruit flavors. They tend to be more Old World in style, leaner, so I think they go better with food."

"We always know that if someone tells us their favorite wine is an Australian Shiraz that they are not going to be overwhelmed with Virginia wines. But if they say they love Italian or Spanish or French wines, they will usually embrace and love Virginia wines because they are coming from a comparable palate."

Do Virginia wine growers/producers have any advantages over their counterparts in California?

"We have less expensive land. Beyond that, we probably have a better tourism base with which to start. If you build a winery nearly anywhere in Virginia, there is a strong network of tourists used to coming to that area. You can only get that in the classic wine regions of California, which is really costly."

"So yes, California has incredible weather and makes phenomenal wines, and yes, it's easier to grow grapes in California, but we also have stunning beauty here in the predominant wine areas, along with a network of tourist attractions. You can see Monticello and the Inn at Little [Washington](#) and [Mount Vernon](#) while visiting wineries. We have this interesting history that doesn't tie directly to the wine industry but the wineries broaden your visit. Plus, we back right up to [Washington, D.C.](#), so people can visit Washington and still visit wine country. It's a nice mix."

Could Virginia and California ever find themselves in a "Judgment of Paris" situation? What would it take to get there?

"Possibly. I think the wine landscape is so much more complicated now than it was 30 years ago. Back then it was France and no one else, so that's all California had to compete against. Today it's the wines of Australia and New Zealand and South America and Eastern Europe and South Africa and all 50 states. There are wines out of China. It's like comparing television 30 years ago when all you had were three networks to today when you have cable."

"Given how segmented the market is, though, I think it would be hard to duplicate a "Judgment of Paris" today. Still, I do think that Virginia wines are becoming much more sought after by the innovators in the wine market who are looking for what's next and what's different and who don't want the same thing. I'm starting to hear a lot of undercurrents about Virginia coming along and doing some really interesting things. I don't know if we're at the tipping point yet, but we're close."

Debra Gordon is a freelance medical writer who wishes she could make a living just writing about wine. Read more of

her wine writing at her wine blog, www.wineontuesdays.com, or in her book, "Wine on Tuesdays: Be a Serious Wine Drinker Without Taking Wine Too Seriously." Contact her at debragordon@yahoo.com.

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