

# IN VINO VERITAS: AREA WINE IS IN SERIOUSLY GOOD HEALTH

November 29, 2009 12:36 am

By: Jason Tesauro

RICHMOND

I first visited Monticello in 2001. There I was, a Jersey boy, soaking in a jewel of the commonwealth, welling up with patriotism as a guide told the story of Thomas Jefferson's last words, "Is it the Fourth?" before he died on Independence Day. Combine this Jeffersonia with stunning vistas, my affection for regional delicacies, and the date (July 3), and you've got a red-hot customer for Virginia souvenirs.



Not one for a "Go Cavaliers!" snow globe, I popped into a gour-met shop for local comestibles. There, I beheld a kaleidoscopic wall of Virginia labels: blue dogs, unicorns, and butterflies. A devoted Italophile, my eye stopped on a bottle of sangiovese, the great grape of Chianti. I'd spent years studying wines and spirits, but none of my books had devoted space to Virginia. Like a commemorative spoon, I took home this bottle on a lark. It mentioned Jefferson and an Italian wine-maker--how bad could it be?

Months later, perhaps because I was out of "good" wine, I opened it. Hot damn, it rocked. I "Googl-ed" the 1998 Barbourville Vineyards Sangiovese Reserve and pulled up oodles of info. So how come I never heard about Virginia vino before? Since I would've loved to have been the pioneer who brought Oregon pinot noir to the East Coast, or the Johnny Grapeseed who spread word in America of New Zealand sauvignon blanc, I pitched myself to this emerging region, quit my job, and moved to Virginia. Eight harvests later, I'm still amazed by the number of Virginians who haven't explored the rich wine country right in their backyard.



*Wines from Virginia vintners are receiving favorable reviews, which has led the state to promote wine tourism*

According to the Virginia Wine Board marketing office, only 4.3 percent of wine consumed in the state is produced here. However, sales have increased steadily. Virginia wine sales from ABC stores, wineries, and the trade (restaurants, retailers, and the like) totaled 157,675 cases in the first half of 2009, a 7.9 percent growth over 2008.

Look more closely, and the 94,925 cases (a case equals 12 bottles) sold from winery tasting rooms in the first half of 2009 represent a healthy 14.6 percent increase from 2008. These numbers are particularly encouraging given that the growth of

overall wine sales (Virginia, California, France, Australia, etc.) rose by only 2.4 percent over the same period. In short, the state is drinking modestly more in all categories, but bunches more Virginia wine, especially at the wineries themselves.

Growth comes as no surprise to those who've visited any of the state's 157 wineries, nor to anyone behind Vision 2015, The Virginia Wine Industry Strategic Plan established by Gov. Mark Warner's 2004 Wine Work Study Group. This blueprint chiefly established a commitment from the wineries to improve quality and uniqueness, increase market share, and enhance rural character and beauty through wine industry expansion.

Look at it this way: As long as their Spotsylvania Claret continues to draw revenue, no one is turning Lake Anna Winery's 75 acres of rolling hills into a strip mall. In 2007, the General Assembly assessed the Virginia wine industry's economic impact at \$347 million, including more than 2,700 jobs, \$35 million in taxes, \$57 million in tourism, "while preserving rural communities and sustaining the environment."

What does this mean to you? Part of Vision 2015 is a promotional push to establish identity-based wines in Virginia. Just as oenophiles associate Australia with shiraz and Germany with riesling, winemakers and grape-growers statewide are aiming to make Virginia synonymous with cabernet franc and viogner. Fortunately, Fredericksburgians need not use up their frequent flyer miles to taste some.

Hartwood Winery, Lake Anna, Mattaponi Winery, Potomac Point Vineyard & Winery, and Ingleside Vineyards are a 30-minutes-or-less drive all growing franc. At the very least, hit The Virginia Wine Experience for a deep retail selection of Virginia wines, or belly up to the counter at the Kybecca Wine Bar where Virginia wines are dispensed via cool Enomatic machines.

Indeed, Fredericksburg is the most centrally located Virginia metropolis when it comes to vino tourism. Three main clusters of wineries--Monticello American Viticultural Area, Northern Neck George Washington Birthplace AVA, and the confluence of producers peppering Fauquier and Loudoun counties--are all within a 90-minute drive. When it comes to inexpensive, romantic, sophisticated fun, there are few things with better dollar-to-pleasure ratio than day trips with picnic baskets to nearby wineries. With \$5 tasting fees abounding, see how Europeans and Californians have entertained themselves for ages.

Localvorism has introduced many to the bounty of Virginia's produce, meats, and cheese--what of the wine? Eating local isn't just good for you, it's good for the local economy, too. Hence, a challenge: Thanksgiving is just past, but Christmas will soon be here. See if you can adorn your table with only Virginia-made goods though the Jersey in me grants clemency on your imported cranberry sauce.

---

Jason Tesauro is co-author of "The Modern Gentleman: A Guide to Essential Manners, Savvy & Vice," and is marketing director at Barbourville Vineyards.

Copyright 2009 The Free Lance-Star Publishing Company.