

# Enticing Virginia Viogniers

14 new reviews show the Old Dominion's vintners are having success with the white Rhône grape and providing value as well

*James Molesworth*

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If only Thomas Jefferson had been as big a fan of the Rhône as he was of Bordeaux—maybe Virginia's wine industry would be a little further along by now.

That's tongue-in-cheek of course, but a recent tasting of Virginia Viogniers did show that the state has potential with more than just Cabernet Franc. The group of wines I recently tasted (full notes and scores are listed below) was very consistent in quality, with the majority earning marks in the very good range (85 to 89 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale).



Courtesy of Horton Vineyards

Virginia's wine industry has been growing in recent years, albeit quietly and out of the limelight. The state now counts over 140 wineries, up from 46 in 1995 and behind only California, New York, Oregon and Washington. Virginia is the seventh-largest commercial grape-producing state in the country, harvesting 7,000 tons of grapes in 2008 (from 2,500 acres of vines), a 25 percent increase from the previous year.

"I think for Virginia, Viognier just loves to ripen here," says Andy Reagan, winemaker and vineyard manager at Jefferson Vineyards. "Our growing season is long and warm enough to get the desired phenolics and flavonoid development, yet not so long that we have too high of an alcohol content. It can be fickle in certain years, some inconsistency in yields, but most definitely worth the headache in the vineyard for what can be put into the bottle."

The group of wines below showed a consistent, fresh, varietally correct profile of peach, anise and melon, with plump, round textures. Most producers also seemed to lay off the oak treatment, allowing for a purer, more elegant expression.

Leading the way were two bottlings from Keswick Vineyards, where winemaker Stephen Barnard handles the 7,000-case annual production from this 400-acre estate (43 acres of vines). Both bottlings are made entirely from estate fruit; the Monticello bottling is a mix of both tank- and barrel-fermented fruit; the Les Vents d'Ange's Hommage à Geneviève is entirely tank-fermented and made in a slightly off-dry style.

Many of the Viognier bottlings listed here check in at under \$20, providing solid value. Some additional bottlings from Veritas Vineyards, including a solid Petit Verdot, are included here as well.

## **KESWICK Viognier Monticello 2009 Score: 88 / \$19**

Plump and round, with nice weight to the fennel, apple and anise notes, backed by a hint of bitter almond that adds freshness on the finish. There's good latent length as well. Drink now. 500 cases made. —*J.M.*

## **KESWICK Viognier Virginia Les Vents d'Ange's Hommage à Geneviève 2009 Score: 88 / \$17**

A very bright, juicy style, with a lively floral lead note backed by lots of yellow apple, honeydew melon and anise. Quince and fig check in on the just off-dry finish. A crowd-pleasing style. Drink now. 600 cases made. —*J.M.*

## **KING FAMILY Viognier Monticello 2008 Score: 88 / \$24**

Still quite fresh, with tropical quince, dried pineapple and persimmon notes laced with a hint of anise that lingers on the finish, adding length and definition. Drink now. 600 cases made. —*J.M.*

## **MICHAEL SHAPS Viognier Monticello 2008 Score: 88 / \$32**

A bright, high-toned style, with honeysuckle and fennel notes up front backed by yellow apple and melon rind flavors that stay juicy and focused on the blanched almond-tinged finish. Drink now. 250 cases made. —*J.M.*

**BLENHEIM Viognier Virginia 2009 Score: 87 / \$19**

Plump, with nice anise and melon rind notes and a juicy, salted butter-tinged finish. Drink now. 425 cases made. —*J.M.*

**SUGARLEAF Viognier Monticello 2008 Score: 87 / \$27**

Solid, with lightly firm-edged peach, apple skin and melon notes backed by a salted butter hint. The stylish finish has latent zip. Drink now. 93 cases made. —*J.M.*

**HORTON Viognier Orange County 2009 Score: 86 / \$20**

Forward, with a nice hint of peach pit holding the yellow apple, quince and melon flavors together, followed by a juicy finish. Drink now. 2,000 cases made. —*J.M.*

**VERITAS Petit Verdot Monticello Paul Shaffer 2nd Edition 2008 Score: 86 / \$29**

Juicy and crisp, with a lively mix of raspberry and blackberry fruit laced with tobacco leaf and briar notes. Fresh finish. Solid varietal character. Drink now. 248 cases made. —*J.M.*

**VERITAS Viognier Monticello 2009 Score: 86 / \$20**

Nicely focused, with good peach skin and nectarine notes framing the melon and salted butter flavors. Plump edge lingers on the finish. Drink now. 840 cases made. —*J.M.*

**WHITE HALL Viognier Monticello 2009 Score: 86 / \$17**

Nicely focused, with peach, tangerine and green melon notes and a fresh, floral-tinged finish. Drink now. 942 cases made. —*J.M.*

**JEFFERSON Viognier Monticello 2009 Score: 85 / \$25**

Ripe and a touch sweet in style, with persimmon, dried pineapple and quince flavors backed by a buttery edge. Yet stays fresh enough. Drink now. 850 cases made. —*J.M.*

**VERITAS Cabernet Franc Monticello Reserve 2008 Score: 85 / \$25**

This has good snappy tobacco leaf, pepper and black cherry notes that linger on the lightly firm finish. Drink now. 496 cases made. —*J.M.*

**VERITAS Sauvignon Blanc Monticello Reserve 2009 Score: 85 / \$25**

Nice weight and focus, with lemon verbena, chive and salt notes that linger nicely on the finish. Drink now. 250 cases made. —*J.M.*

**POLLAK Viognier Monticello 2009 Score: 84 / \$19**

Quite forward, with tropical flavors of pineapple and banana backed by modest butter and melon notes. Drink now. 400 cases made. —*J.M.*