



Is Virginia Wine Overpriced?

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Virginia wine is overpriced. I hear this refrain often during discussions with some of my local wine friends when asked why they don't drink more Virginia wine. Like all wine regions, Virginia does have its share of crappy, overpriced wine, but I feel the 'good' Virginia wines provide an excellent value for the dollars spent.

When I hear '*Virginia wine is overpriced*' I wonder if people are really referring to the **value** a particular wine provides, or, are they really saying the wine is overpriced solely because it's **from** Virginia. I have a wine friend who has held the opinion that '*Virginia wine is overpriced*' as long as I've known him. I believe he thinks Virginia wine is overpriced just because it's Virginia wine (*sound familiar*). To test him – and to prove a point – I setup a mini-blind tasting (3 flights, 3 wines per flight) and my friend selected a Virginia wine as his favorite in two of the three mini-flights as I suspected he would. I concede that this mini-blind tasting was far from scientific, but it did prove a point – when compared to similar priced wines from more notable regions; Virginia wines match up very well.

The topic of the price of Virginia wine came up during a recent conversation with Andy Regan, winemaker at [Jefferson Vineyards](#) that began as a result of a comment by someone on Twitter during a live tasting. We both lamented about these Virginia wine is overpriced comments, and talked about a comparative tasting at some point. The day after our conversation I received an email from Andy about the tasting – a blind comparative tasting with similar priced wines from across the world and Virginia.

In his initial email, Andy noted that the intent of the tasting would not be about determining the 'best' wine in each flight (*which would be impossible to do*), but more about providing an opportunity to evaluate Virginia wine relative to comparably priced wines from around the world.

As a passionate wine enthusiast and huge advocate of the value and quality of Virginia wine, I jumped at the chance to participate in such a tasting. In addition to other bloggers including my friends from [Swirl, Sip, Snark](#), Andy had an excellent group of tasters for the event: Bruce Zoecklein, Virginia state enologist and enology Professor at Virginia Tech; Jim Raper, wine writer for The Virginia-Pilot newspaper; Stephanie Williams from **flavor Magazine**; Stephen

Barnard, winemaker at [Keswick Vineyards](#); Kat, also from Keswick; Kath Younger from Kath Eats blog, as well as several other wine enthusiasts.



Stephen Barnard (Keswick Vineyards), Me, Andy Reagan (Jefferson Vineyards)

The tasting included 14 tasters/scorers evaluating each wine on seven criteria – aroma, fruit, acidity, tannin, mouthfeel, finish, and overall complexity along with our opinion on whether or not the wines were priced reasonably based on the quality. Each taster was also asked to identify the region/country of each wine. For me, the Virginia and French wines were easy to identify, but I had a more difficult time identifying the wines from California, South Africa and Argentina.



Tasting setup at Jefferson Vineyards barrel room.

Flight One: Pinot Gris (price range of \$18 to \$22):

- Eola Hills Pinot Gris 2009 Oregon
- Pollak 2009 Pinot Gris Estate (Virginia)
- Jefferson 2009 Pinot Gris (Virginia)
- Charles Schleret 2005 Alsace Pinot Gris (France)
- Adelsheim 2009 Pinot Gris Willamette Valley Oregon

Though I am not a fan of Pinot Gris (*moonlights as Pinot Grigio in Italy*), and typically only drink it by accident or when included in formal tastings such as this one, I gave this flight my all, but couldn't muster true interest. All of these wines would definitely be at the very high end of what I would be willing to pay for Pinot Gris/Pinot Grigio. Thankfully there were only five

entries in this flight. Finishing at the top of my tasting sheet – the Jefferson 2009 Pinot Gris. The overall group of 14 tasters scored this flight as follows: 1. Jefferson, 2. Pollak, 3. Eola Hills, 4. Charles Schleret 5. Adelsheim. The Eola Hills Pinot Gris is the only wine in this flight outside the price range, with a retail price of \$13.99.

Flight Two: Viognier (price range from ~\$18 to \$30)

Jefferson 2009 Viognier Reserve Monticello (Virginia)

Keswick 2009 Viognier Estate Reserve (Virginia)

Francois Villard De Poncins 2006 Condrieu (France)

Blenheim 2009 Viognier (Virginia)

Porter Creek 2007 Viognier Russian River Valley Timbervine Ranch (Calif.)

Yalumba 2009 Viognier (South Australia)

Chateau Camplazens Vin de Pays D'Oc 2007 Viognier (France)

Terra Blanca 2005 Viognier Yakima (Washington State)

As I've noted here many times, Viognier could be the future of Virginia white wine (*if you happen to disagree, it's ok, you've probably been wrong about other things as well 😊*). Given the quality of Virginia Viognier, this was the most anticipated flight of the tasting for me, and Virginia did not disappoint. The Jefferson Viognier Reserve and Blenheim Viognier finished at the top of my score sheet with a slight edge going to the Jefferson.

Though the price range for this flight was roughly \$18 to \$30, Andy did include a lower and higher priced offering as well. Interestingly the most expensive Viognier in the flight – the \$75 Francois Villard from Condrieu – finished at the bottom on my score sheet, and didn't fare too much better in overall group scoring. Though I don't want to *Monday morning quarterback*, I would have liked more vintage consistency in this flight, and perhaps another round of eight Viogniers with more regions represented. I have no doubt Virginia Viognier would still have finished atop a flight of 16 Viogniers as well. One could argue that some Virginia Viognier may be underpriced relative to Condrieu and California in terms of price-to-quality. I often wonder why people pay the \$50 – \$75 price tag for Condrieu for such little quality relative to the price (*amazing what a French name on the label will do for rationalizing high price of wine*). The overall group ranked this flight as follows: 1. Jefferson Reserve, 2. Keswick, 3. Porter Creek, 4. Blenheim, 5. Francois Villard Condrieu, 6. Yalumba, 7. Terra Blanca, 8. Ch. Camplazens Vin de Pays d'Oc. Each of the three Virginia Viogniers in this flight were stellar, no surprise they took three of the top four spots.



Viognier Flight

Flight Three: Chardonnay (price range \$18 – \$29)

Jefferson 2009 Chardonnay Reserve Monticello (Virginia)

Champy 2009 Pouilly Fuisse (France)

Catena 2009 Chardonnay Mendoza (Argentina)

Hamilton Russell 2009 Chardonnay Hemel-en-Aarde Valley (South Africa)

Boring. Snorefest. I respect the fact that Chardonnay is a global workhorse, but I simply cannot *get into* this varietal. I realize there are many amazing Chardonnays throughout the world, but I would not consider any of the wines in this flight ‘amazing’ examples of Chardonnay. Overall scoring in this flight was very close – group rankings as follows: 1. Jefferson, 2. Tie Hamilton Russell and Champy 4. Catena

After three white flights, we moved on to the much-anticipated reds beginning with Cabernet Franc, followed by Merlot, and finishing with red blends.

Flight Four: Cabernet Franc (price range \$18 – \$35)

RAATS 2008 Cabernet Franc Stellenbosch (South Africa)

Jefferson 2008 Cabernet Franc Reserve Monticello (Virginia)

Lang & Reed 2008 Cabernet Franc North Coast (California)

Blenheim 2009 Cabernet Franc (Virginia)

Keswick 2009 Cabernet Franc Monticello (Virginia)

Frederic Mabileau 2005 Saint Nicolas de Bourgueil Eclipse (France)

Like Viognier, Cab Franc thrives here in Virginia so I fully expected the *home team* to sweep this flight. When the bottles were revealed, I was surprised by the origins of my top scorer – the RAATS 2008 Cab Franc from South Africa. In looking through my tasting notes from the last two years and plumbing my memory, I believe this is the first time I’ve had a Cabernet Franc from South Africa, and certainly will not be my last. Finishing second in my ranking was Keswick followed by the Jefferson Reserve. For our next tasting, this flight should be expanded to include more regions like [Chinon](#) and Long Island. No doubt Virginia Cab Francs would finish at or near the top of an expanded flight. The overall group ranked this flight as follows: 1. RAATS, 2. Keswick, 3. Jefferson, 4. Frederic Mabileau, 5. Blenheim, 6. Lang and Reed.



Cab Franc Flight

Flight Five: Merlot (price range ~ \$20 – \$35)

Jefferson 2007 Merlot Reserve Monticello (Virginia)

Thelema 2006 Merlot Stellenbosch (South Africa)

Keswick 2009 Merlot Monticello (Virginia)

Sbragia 2007 Merlot Dry Creek Home Ranch (California)

Di Lenardo 2006 'Just Me' Merlot IGT Venezia Giulia (Italy)

Mauvais Garcon 2006 Bordeaux (France)

Blenheim 2009 Merlot Virginia

Te Awa 2004 Merlot Hawkes Bay (New Zealand)

Considering how the *Sideways Effect* has impacted Merlot prices in many regions, I worried if Virginia would be able to compete with equally priced Merlots from other regions. Once again Virginia wines showed well when tasted alongside similar priced wines from around the world. The Sbragio Merlot from Dry Creek Valley was my top scoring merlot followed by the Keswick Merlot. The overall group ranked this flight as follows: 1. Di Lenardo, 2. Keswick, 3. Thelema, 4. Jefferson Reserve, 5. Sbragia, 6. Mauvais Garcon, 7. Blenheim, 8. Te Awa.



Sniffing - Merlot flight. Jim Raper of The Virginian-Pilot to my left.

Flight Six: Bordeaux Blends (price range ~\$24 – \$34)

Bodegas Benegas Don Tiburcio 2006 Mendoza (Argentina)

Keswick 2007 Heritage Monticello (Virginia)

Chappellet 2008 Mountain Cuvee Napa (California)

Jefferson 2007 Meritage Monticello (Virginia)

Mulderbosch Faithful Hound 2006 (South Africa)

Chateau Cambon La Pelouse 2005 Haut Medoc (Bordeaux, France)

Bordeaux type blends are yet another area Virginia is excelling and turning out great wines at reasonable price points. The only exception to the \$24 – \$34 price range was the Don Tiburcio at \$13, which finished as my top rated wine of the flight. I liked the character of this wine – eucalyptus and dark fruits along with light vegetal components throughout. Excellent QPR at

only \$13/bottle. Tied for second were the Keswick Heritage and Jefferson Meritage. The overall group ranked this flight as follows: 1. Keswick Heritage, 2. Chappellet, 3. Jefferson Meritage, 4. Bodegas Benegas Don Tiburcio, 5. Mulderbosch, 6. Cambon La Pelouse.

** In the spirit of full disclosure I should note that I was able to pick out the Virginia wines – from familiarity of the aroma/flavor profile, or, perhaps a good random guess – in each of the blind flights, with only one exception. It's possible, but not likely, that my familiarity of these wines subconsciously weighted my scores in Virginia's favor.*

Once the wines were unbagged and the scores were tallied – Virginia wine was the clear winner (*not that this tasting was about winners or losers*)! Virginia wine finished atop three flights on my score sheet, and near the top in every flight. In overall scoring, a Virginia wine finished atop four of the six flights. Not only did a Virginia wine receive the most votes in four of the six flights, Virginia wines also consistently finished in 2nd or 3rd place in most flights.

I realize this one tasting does not prove that Virginia wine is reasonably priced or overpriced or whatever. There is no way to definitively conclude that Virginia wine is overpriced, or not, because we all have different economic circumstances that determine our wine budgets; we have different preferences, and of course different definitions of value. What I hope this tasting proves to those who feel '*Virginia wine is overpriced*' is that Virginia wine can go head-to-head with similar priced wines from more notable regions.

Having taken part in many blind tastings, this was one of the best I've participated in – a **big THANK YOU to Andy for organizing and hosting an amazing event!** I appreciate being included in the tasting with such a great group of wine enthusiasts. Photo Credit: All photos courtesy of Kat Schornberg Barnard – thanks Kat!



A big ol thanks to Andy for bringing out the great Riedel Th:Jefferson inscribed stemware for the tasting. Nice!