



# THE ASKING PANEL

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## The New Spirits

# Thin-dustry

## Legitimizing the Low-cal Category

Bethenny Frankel thinks thin in front of a 300 case display of Skinnygirl Margarita at the Stater Bros. grocery store in Huntington Beach, CA.

PHOTO: ROB BROWN

# Old Dominion, New Prospects

ALL SIGNS INDICATE VIRGINIA COULD  
BECOME A TOP U.S. WINE STATE

story and photos by Fred Minnick



The award-winning Barboursville Vineyards Petit Verdot Reserve, crafted by winemaker Luca Paschina, is one of Virginia's top wines.

As Gabriele Rausse walked up to the podium at the 2011 Virginia Wine Expo to accept the Virginia Agribusiness Council's Distinguished Service Award, he was overtaken with emotion. Rausse, referred to as the "father of modern Virginia wine," tried to crack a joke. "If you fail, people leave you alone," he said to a crowd hanging on to his every word. "Unfortunately, that didn't work out. Now, we have the Virginia wine industry."

Everybody, including Virginia's First Lady and the state's Secretary of Agriculture, laughed at his witticism. But Rausse, who immigrated to America in the 1970s from Vicenza, Italy, to work at the Barboursville Vineyards, could no longer overcome his joy. He hoisted the award, tears forming in his soft brown eyes, and said, "Thank you for another magical moment."

Virginia was once a promising terroir that was home to the native Norton grape; a varietal Norton was named "Best Red Wine of All Nations" at the Vienna World's Fair in 1873 and another was honored with a gold medal at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition. But Prohibition destroyed Virginia's potential.

In an effort to bounce back, winemakers experimented with vinifera plantings

A dormant vine at King Family Vineyards in Crozet, Virginia. King's wide range of wines shows Virginia's varietal diversity.

## VIRGINIA

throughout the 1950s. But it wasn't until Italian vintner Gianni Zonin hired Rausse to help with Barbourville Vineyards that the industry was on its way back. Rausse helped bring Virginia wine out of the Thomas Jefferson biographies and back into the hands of consumers. Barbourville became the first commercial seed that would grow Virginia into the burgeoning American wine region it is today.

### State of the State

While Rausse was experimenting, learning which grapes grow where, he helped others create their own vineyards. By 1995, there were 46 vineyards across the state. Virginia now boasts more than 190 wineries.

Although the majority of Virginia's wines are still sold from local tasting rooms, in recent years Virginia labels have been popping up on menus in New York, Washington D.C. and throughout Maryland. Leading the way as it did in the 1970s, Barbourville Vineyards is

moving beyond the regional market and will soon be available in eight states and England. Significantly, it is the first U.S. winery represented by Broadbent Selections Inc., which imports some 2,000 wines from Europe and South Africa.

"Virginia wines will start cropping up on wine lists now that we represent Barbourville. It is the first U.S. winery that we decided to represent, which should tell you how I perceive the future for Virginia," says CEO Bartholomew Broadbent. "I believe Virginia could become the most important U.S. wine-producing state after California, Washington and Oregon. Barbourville has proven that great wine can be made consistently."

### Terroir on Tap

Virginia has five distinct climates that range from a 160-day growing season in the Shenandoah Valley to a 200-day season in the Blue Ridge. Clyde Housel, owner of Hidden Croft Vineyards, says Cabernet Franc grows especially well

in his vineyard's microclimate influenced by a nearby mountaintop. "A lot of the thunderstorms skip over us," he says. "We have a drier microclimate, which lends itself to more robust red wines." Hidden Croft grows Cabernet Franc, Chambourcin, Traminette, Chardonnay and Vidal Blanc.

Other than the Eastern Shore, which has sandy soil, most Virginia vineyards grow in loamy soil with a component of gravel or granite. "This gives us good drainage," explains Matthieu Finot, the French-born winemaker for King Family Vineyards.

### A Sense of Adventure

Virginia winemakers are an adventurous bunch who are cultivating more than a dozen varieties and are boxing on average 2,000 to 4,000 cases a year. Almost all of them grow Cabernet Franc and Viognier, two French varieties that have earned Virginia winemakers gold medals in international competitions.

Beyond those two grapes, it's a free-for-all. Vineyards such as King Family



Garbiele Rausse accepts the Virginia Agribusiness Council's Distinguished Service Award. Known as the father of modern Virginia wine, Rausse was the first winemaker at trendsetting Barbourville Vineyards.



Winemaker Matthieu Finot of King Family Vineyards comes from a long line of French winemakers. Born in Crozes Hermitage, in the Rhône Valley, he studied viticulture and enology in Burgundy.



**Cooper Vineyards owner Geoff Cooper and his daughter Rebecca. Cooper earned a gold medal in the 2011 Virginia Governor's Cup for red wine for its varietal Norton.**

Vineyards, Barboursville and Pollak Vineyards are carving out nice niches with Petit Verdots that are earthy and peppery. Afton Mountain Vineyards is the only Virginia brand growing Sangiovese and Gewürztraminer.

Virginia winemakers are also attempting some unusual dessert wines. Pollak Vineyards, in the Monticello region, makes Mille Fleurs, a blend of eau-de-vie and late-harvest Viognier. King Family Vineyards makes 7, a Porto-style Merlot fortified with brandy and aged in retired Woodford Reserve barrels.

### Virginia Real

Meanwhile, vineyards such as Horton Vineyards, Cooper Vineyards, La Grange and Weston Farm are trying to bring back Virginia's native grape, Norton. Geoffrey Cooper, President of Cooper,

says that Norton has a lot of potential.

"Norton is being planted across the country, but it does not have universal appeal," Cooper notes. "With exuberant fruit up front, Norton is Virginia's Zinfandel. It's not going to be Cabernet Sauvignon."



Back at Barboursville Vineyards, Italian winemaker Luca Paschina is picking up where Rausse left off. Paschina's Octagon—a blend of Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot—has won numerous awards and shows Virginia's grape-growing diversity. But most importantly, he says, "it has helped show the world how great Virginia can be." Just like Rausse did so many years ago.

## Some Virginia Gold Medal Winners

**Keswick Vineyards 2009 Cabernet Franc** (\$21.95) With vibrant aromas of black pepper, black currant and strawberry jam, this Keswick wine is followed by subtle spice and a soft tannin frame.

**Afton Mountain Vineyard 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$25) Very French in style, Afton's Cabernet Sauvignon brings out aromas of chocolate and toasted caramel. It opens up quickly on the palate with intense dark fruits and ends with a nice, crisp finish.

**Fox Meadow Winery 2008 Red Meritage** (\$29) The winner of the Governor's Cup, this blend of 50% Cabernet Franc and 50% Merlot hits the nose quickly with concentrated aromas of fig, dark cherry, blackberry and raspberry. Similar flavors follow, but oak pleasantly reveals itself during the finish.

**Cooper Vineyards 2008 Norton** (\$22) It's amazing to think this varietal once represented the best in American wine. The long-forgotten grape shows great promise in this Cooper vintage, with brilliant aromas of dark cherry, blackberry and anise, followed by a well-balanced finish.

**Barboursville Vineyards 2008 Petit Verdot Reserve** (\$25) This lovely 100-percent Petit Verdot makes us wonder why there are not more varietal Petit Verdots on the market—and whether Virginia can make this grape its own, as Oregon did with Pinot Noir. This very elegant wine meets the eye with a deep purple and gives the nose wonderful sensations of blueberry, coconut and chocolate. Medium-bodied, it has a smooth apple and mineral finish. ■■