

# The Washington Post

## Vineyards that are putting Virginia on the fine-wine map

By Dana Milbank  
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The sun rises over a valley of fog below RdV Vineyards in Delaplane, in Fauquier County.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



An aerial view of RDV Vineyards, on what is called the “Lost Mountain Range”  
between the Blue Ridge and Bull Run.  
Ricky Carioti /Washington Post



Sage, one of RdV’s resident dogs, tries to sneak a bite at the vineyard’s sommelier meeting and tasting  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



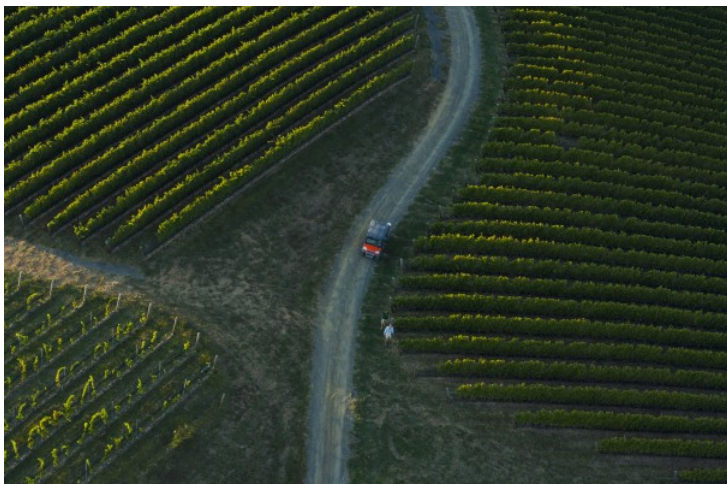
Jean-Philippe Roby (center), gives a talk to the participants in RdV Vineyards' sommelier meeting and tasting.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



Tai-Ran Niew, a participant in the sommelier tasting, loads grapes onto mechanical sorting equipment.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



Rutger de Vink, owner and general manager of RdV Vineyards, in the underground cave where wines are casked and stored.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



RdV Vineyards, where the land was labeled “not suitable for agriculture,” which suited its buyer fine.  
Ricky Carioti /Washington Post



Grapes from Glen Manor Vineyards in Front Royal.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



Fog floats in the valley below Glen Manor Vineyards. Crisp, cool, and dry weather makes for the best harvest.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



Harvest at Glen Manor Vineyards.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



Glen Manor is located on a western ridge of the Blue Ridge Mountains  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



Jeffery White at Glen Manor. The property has been owned and farmed by four generations of his family for more than 100 years.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /Logan Mock-Bunting



Visitors enjoy a wine tasting at Glen Manor.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



Delaplane Cellars in Fauquier County.  
Ricky Carioti /Washington Post



Delaplane owner Jim Dolphin takes a sample of juice from a large container of grapes as vineyard manager Rumaldo Chavez sprays the juice around to encourage fermentation.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /Logan Mock-Bunting



A worker loads grapes into mechanical sorting equipment at Delaplane Cellars; smaller stems and greenery are sorted by hand on a platform below.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



Delaplane owner Betsy Dolphin measures the sugar level of the white wine fermenting in the barrel room.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



Delaplane, VA - October 20: Jim and Betsy Dolphin have owned and operated Delaplane Cellars for the last seven years.

Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



A woman samples a bit of rosette wine before a dinner at Delaplane Cellars.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



Patrons enjoy a white truffles and wine dinner with chef Roberto Donna at Delaplane.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post



A morning fog hangs over vines at Delaplane Cellar at sunrise.  
Logan Mock-Bunting /For The Washington Post

Thomas Jefferson was a failure.

Yes, the man did some good work, writing the Declaration of Independence and running the country as our third president. Monticello is fairly impressive, too. But there is no way around it: As a winemaker, Jefferson was a disaster.

He began planting grapes in Virginia in 1771. In 1773, he had an Italian, Filippo Mazzei, plant a variety of European vines on his land. Yet in the years that followed, Jefferson had not a single harvest of grapes and produced not a single bottle of wine. His precious European vines were killed by insects, fungus and harsh winters. Some were trampled by horses. As recounted in a recent history by Richard Leahy, “Beyond Jefferson’s Vines,” the great man eventually packed it in, claiming that he “would in a year or two more have established the practicability of that branch of culture in America.”

Sure he would have.

Instead of bringing viticulture to the New World, Jefferson may have helped set in motion the devastation of the wine industry in the Old World. The phylloxera vine louse, believed to have helped to kill off Jefferson's vines, was eventually exported to Europe, where it wiped out most of the continent's grapevines. It took the better part of a century for Europe to recover.

And for the next 200 years, wines in Virginia — based on native grapes not susceptible to the dreaded louse — were mostly undrinkable. When oenological pioneers revived winemaking in Virginia 40 years ago, the result was, as often as not, something that tasted like detergent. Gradually, the wines became tolerable, if usually unremarkable.

The past several years, however, have brought Jefferson vindication. A new generation of Virginia winemakers has begun to produce wines that can compete with the best of those from California and Europe. Here in the Mid-Atlantic, a petite Bordeaux is taking root. Technological advances in vineyard site selection, viticulture and winemaking have combined to create a critical mass for Virginia, establishing this area as what Decanter magazine in July called "the next big thing in American wine."

"The current renaissance of serious vintners in the Virginia wine community has made Virginia a major contender," says Jennifer Knowles, wine director at the Inn at Little Washington, which has 52 Virginia wines in its cellar and this year won a Wine Spectator Grand Award. She calls the wines "beautiful in their balance" and, ranging from \$30 to \$240 at the Rappahannock County restaurant, competitive with similarly priced wines from California and Europe.

This is not to say Virginia is the new Napa Valley. The Virginia Wine Board Marketing Office reports that the state has at least 230 wineries, and offers impressive statistics: an all-time high in wine sales in fiscal 2013, more than 511,000 cases sold, tied with Texas (yes, Texas) as the fifth-largest wine-grape-growing state. But independent experts I spoke to generally agree that many Virginia wineries are still making wine that ranges from unremarkable to unpleasant. That helps to explain why all but about 3 percent of Virginia wine is consumed in Virginia — much of that by tourists at wine festivals and winery tastings.

The making of high-quality wine is a rather different story. It is the work of about 20 producers. Some, such as Jim Law of Linden Vineyards and Gianni Zonin and Luca Paschina of Barboursville Vineyards, have been at it for many years. Others are Johnny-come-latelies with deep pockets. Donald Trump bet on Virginia wines two years ago, buying Kluge Estate winery and naming it — what else? — Trump Winery, under the direction of Donald's son, Eric. AOL founder Steve Case and wife Jean bought a producer and reopened it last year as Early Mountain Vineyards; they have said they'll donate any profits to furthering Virginia wine.

In between are small, little-known estates with names such as Rappahannock Cellars, Pollak Vineyards and King Family Vineyards, scattered from Loudoun County to the Charlottesville area. Within a 90-minute drive from Washington, you can find three of the best:

- RdV Vineyards, in Delaplane, is the work of Rutger de Vink, a Dutch American who poured a family fortune into building a great vineyard and now sells out his \$100-a-bottle wines.
- Delaplane Cellars, just a few minutes from RdV, was built by Jim Dolphin, who was in real estate and used proceeds from the sale of his home to turn his winemaking hobby into a business.
- Glen Manor, in Front Royal, was the brainchild of Jeff White, a fifth-generation farmer along Skyline Drive who discovered that his land was perfect for wine grapes.

The three have little in common, except that they all learned the trade from Jim Law at Linden Vineyards. In just a few years, they have employed technological advances to make world-class wines, at times exceeding the quality of their mentor's.

Timelapse: A day at Delaplane Cellars

Virginia's wine renaissance starts at a simple place. Spend a day grape picking at Delaplane Cellars in this timelapse video, sped up to one minute.



As I write this, I am sipping 2010 Hodder Hill, a Bordeaux blend from Glen Manor, which sits on the west side of the Blue Ridge. The vines are grown on impossibly steep slopes at altitudes above 1,000 feet, using viticultural advances unknown just a few years ago and hand-pruned with the care of bonsai artists. It's mostly cabernet sauvignon — a finicky grape hard to ripen in Virginia — softened by merlot and given rich color by petit verdot, a favorite grape here because it resists fungus and rot. The result is a flawless, silky wine with flavors of black cherry and currants that won a gold medal in the 2013 Virginia Governor's Cup; the 2009 Hodder Hill won the 2012 Governor's Cup overall.

At \$48 a bottle, it's a steal — if you can find it. White produced only 350 cases of the stuff.

“There was a tendency in the past in Virginia to think, ‘I just have to get my fruit through the growing season clean, disease-free, so I can harvest it,’ ” White told me. “Now we're kind of pushing the envelope.”



Demaris Goffigan of Virginia Beach, left, dances with Marquita White of Norfolk at the AT&T Town Point Virginia Wine Festival held in Norfolk in October.  
(Logan Mock-Bunting/For The Washington Post)

At first glance, there is no reason anybody would try to make wine in Virginia.

Its clay soil has poor drainage. It gets far more rain than is good for grapevines, and in the form of torrential thunderstorms. The high humidity encourages fungus and rot. A short growing season means grapes don't have time to ripen. Then, just as harvest season arrives, there is the annual threat of bad weather related to tropical storms that can wipe out harvests.

“You look at our climate, and you don't jump up and down and say, ‘Oh, my God, this is a perfect place to grow grapes,’ ” said de Vink, the RdV proprietor.

Essentially, what's good for most crops — fertile soil and ample moisture — is precisely what you don't want if you're trying to make good wine. When a vine is in nutrient-rich soil and gets plenty of water, the plant puts its energy into leaves and shoots. But when a vine is stressed — not getting enough nutrition and water — it devotes its energy to perpetuating the species and protecting its seed by producing the most succulent fruit.

These new Virginia winemakers are mimicking the conditions of great wine regions such as Bordeaux and Burgundy. Consulting with soil scientists, they are finding rocky soils on steep, wind-swept hillsides that promote drainage and air circulation around the grape clusters. They graft European varieties onto phylloxera-resistant rootstock and use new techniques in “canopy management.”

There have been advances in the wineries, too, including micro-oxygenation, enzymes and concrete tanks, and more widespread use of stainless-steel equipment. But while such techniques can make an otherwise bad wine tolerable, the real difference has been outdoors. The fickle climate, says Knowles, of the Inn at Little Washington, “means an incredible amount of time spent physically tending the vines. This is where Virginia viticulture differs from most wine-growing regions in the world and why winemakers here have to have an almost fanatical attention to detail.”

The vagaries of nature, and the resulting need for labor-intensive farming, means the top Virginia wines have more in common with the understated wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy than the bold wines of California. California wines are all about ripe fruit and heavy oak, but Virginia wines are more delicate and require gentler extraction of juice from the grapes.

Virginia's Old World style has won some critical acclaim. Four years ago, The Washington Post's wine writer, Dave McIntyre, hosted a blind tasting in which Virginia wines only narrowly trailed competitors from France and California. Then, last year, Steven Spurrier, the British wine merchant who arranged the “Judgment of Paris” wine tasting in 1976 that put California wines on the map when they beat their French rivals, arranged a



blind tasting of Virginia wines alongside top candidates from France, Italy, Portugal and California. Spurrier preferred the Virginia contender in six of eight comparisons, and the other two were ties.

Also on that blind panel was Jay Youmans, educational director of the Capital Wine School, who runs the annual Virginia Governor's Cup competition. In the past two years, his well-credentialed judges have given 88 of 100 points to more than 40 wines from a handful of Virginia producers. The influential British wine writer Jancis Robinson, too, has called the Virginia wines she tasted "thrillingly good," and McIntyre has been a key figure in spreading the word about Virginia's advances.

In theory, the same sort of technical advances that have helped Virginia wineries should make it possible to produce decent wine almost anywhere. But Virginia has had a jump because of favorable tax and distribution laws. Maryland, for example, is 15 to 20 years behind its neighbor, Youmans estimates, though wineries such as Black Ankle, Boordy, Sugarloaf and Old Westminster "are making great inroads."

Still, Virginia's critical acclaim is of limited use for now, because the wines are produced in such small quantities they are rarely available beyond the tasting rooms. But even if Virginia wine never becomes The Next Big Thing, there is a triumph in making Jefferson's 18th-century prediction come true.



A worker clips a bunch of grapes during the harvest at Glen Manor Vineyards. A worker clips a bunch of grapes during the harvest at Glen Manor Vineyards. (Logan Mock-Bunting/For The Washington Post)

A century ago, Jeff White's great-grandfather was looking for a spot for the family farm. Out in Shenandoah, the best parcels were always down in the valley, where the soil is rich and the water abundant. But the good farming land was taken, so White's ancestor decided to try his luck on the western slope of the Blue Ridge. The land was scenic — it sits just below modern-day Skyline Drive in Front Royal — but not much of a spot for agriculture. The best White's ancestors could do was to grow fruit trees. "It was not one of the sought-after farms," White says with some understatement.

But it turns out White's ancestor was quite accidentally prescient. The mountains were steep and rocky — rain simply runs off.



Jeffery White of Glen Manor Vineyards.

White planted his first vineyard in 1995 at 1,100 feet, on a patch of granite and greenstone, with a slope of 15 degrees. He sold his grapes to Law at Linden, where White worked as a winemaker, and it turned out the fruit was good. So White planted his second vineyard at 1,300 feet, with a 35-degree slope, on soil so rocky White's

ancestors let the forest keep it. White's farmhands probably wish he had continued the practice, because everything in the new vineyard takes them twice as long as it took in the old.

Viewed from his Glen Manor winery, White's newer vineyard looks almost as if it is growing on a cliff face. And because of the west-facing orientation, the vineyard is in the scorching sun until 8:30 on summer nights.

If he leaves too many leaves on his vines, the grapes will become moldy and diseased. If he leaves too few, they'll sunburn. And so he trims each vine by hand, leaving extra shading over the grape clusters on the west and south side, but pulling leaves from the east and north side to let sun and air in. "I make multiple passes through the vines, plucking leaves as the summer goes by," he explains.

He tried growing chardonnay grapes but had to pull out the vines; they were getting a bacterial illness called grapevine yellows, transmitted by a leafhopper. He has encountered a fungus — ripe rot — that can grow even in direct sunlight.

But White is keeping one step ahead of Mother Nature. Through pruning, he tricks his vines into growing a large number of smaller grape clusters. This increases the "crop load," further stressing the vines and dissuading them from more vegetative growth. He then cuts half of the grape clusters in midseason and discards them. To protect his remaining grapes, he covers them in bird netting. An eight-foot electrified fence and aluminum pie pans keep out deer and bears.

White grows only 14 acres of vines, and his newer vineyard uses slow-growing rootstock. He switched to a newer variety of cabernet sauvignon that ripens earlier — clone No. 337 — and plants his vines more densely so they compete over the limited water supply. The result: "It's night and day," White says. He planted 450 vines per acre in his first vineyard, but now plants 1,400.

He also lowered the fruiting wire — where the grape clusters sit — to two feet above the ground, to get more radiation heating to ripen the grapes.

As he gains confidence, White grows bolder: He has been experimenting with sauvignon blanc grapes, which, according to conventional wisdom, should not be grown in Virginia: They are thin-skinned and in tight clusters, so the heat and humidity cause the grapes to burst and rot. But this year, White let the vines' leaves grow at the top late in the season to take moisture away from the grapes and prevent them from bursting.

These heroic efforts mean White is producing some wines that are world-class. Yet the world may never know it: He sells as much as 70 percent of his wine straight out of the winery. That's too bad, because White's wine could change impressions about the region's winemakers. "There's still a stigma that a Virginia wine could be a risky proposition," White admits.



Bunches of grapes at Delaplane Cellars. (Logan Mock-Bunting/For The Washington Post)

Jim Dolphin is a no-frills winemaker. He was the chief financial officer of a real-estate investment company, fermenting grapes at home as a hobby. But he left his job, sold his home, bought hilly land in Delaplane, and planted grapevines in 2008.

Dolphin's is a shoestring operation. Other wineries have vibrating tables to sort grapes from stems, but not Dolphin. "The one I want costs \$19,000," he says. "Maybe next year." Neither can he afford the drip-irrigation systems others use. His irrigation technique? "You do a rain dance." He doesn't drape his vines in bird netting, opting for an inexpensive device that mimics birds' distress calls and, theoretically, keeps the birds from eating his grapes.



Jim and Betsy Dolphin of Delaplane Cellars.

Dolphin sprays 15 or 20 times each season for the extraordinary range of hazards: powdery mildew, downy mildew, black rot, phomopsis, Japanese beetles, Asian fruit flies, bunch stem necrosis and many more. “You see a leaf that has some symptoms,” he says, walking between rows of vines. “It’s like, ‘Okay, what the hell is this?’ ”

He plants grapes that suit the hot, moist climate. He favors tannat, a red grape with thick skins, and petit manseng, a white grape with thick skins and loose clusters, allowing for more air circulation. Both are from southwest France. Dolphin also likes the petit verdot, a deep red grape that comes from small berries in loose clusters.

Dolphin plants only eight acres and buys half his grapes from other farmers. Like other high-quality producers, he understands that most of the quality is in the grapes — “What ends up in your bottle, 80 to 90 percent of what happens is in the vineyard,” he says — but he has been particularly proficient at adapting the winemaking process to Virginia’s vagaries.

“Here, we adjust our winemaking practices to the vintage,” he explains. He cites the example of 2011, “probably the worst year ever in Virginia for growing grapes.” There was Hurricane Irene and a tropical storm. There were 30-odd rainy days before the harvest, causing rot and under-ripe grapes. “We processed very, very gently,” he says. “We didn’t try to extract much at all from the grapes.” He fermented the grapes at a cooler temperature. And, as it turned out, the 2011 wines from Delaplane are, if not memorable, at least clean and without flaws.

Even in bountiful vintages, Dolphin believes in minimal extraction — not overstating the natural flavors of the grapes. “I’m a surgeon, not a butcher,” he says. His yields are very low: He harvests only two or three tons per acre, though he could produce six tons, and he uses no mechanized harvesting or weeding.

But who will know of Dolphin’s extraordinary winemaking efforts? Sadly, few. He reports that 98 percent of his wine is sold in his tasting room, where jazz music, nibbles and views are the selling points rather than the wine. A moment later, he notices that a tourist has begun to sample grapes from the vine. He excuses himself, then confronts the miscreant, who is picking the fruit while talking on his cellphone.



Jean-Philippe Roby, one of the artisans at RdV Vineyards. (Logan Mock-Bunting/For The Washington Post)

When Rutger de Vink was looking for land for a vineyard, he hired a soil scientist and said, “Find me the poorest, driest soils.”

Eventually, he found a wooded hillside on the southern tip of a granite knoll in what's called the "Lost Mountain Range" between the Blue Ridge and Bull Run. The area was labeled "not suitable for agriculture" on Fauquier County soil maps. Says de Vink: "That was the first indication that it was good for grapes." Core soil samples, now displayed in glass cylinders in his cellar, show 26 feet of rock. On top of the solid granite is weathered granite, and on top of that is a thin, 18-inch layer of sandy loam.



Rutger de Vink, of RdV Vineyards.

Starting in 2006, De Vink poured a good chunk of his wealth (his family has money from pharmaceuticals) into making a rocky 16 acres into a top vineyard. He admits to spending \$10 million, not including the land. He spent \$100,000 per acre just to develop the land for planting. He installed drip irrigation and recruited some of Bordeaux's leading wine authorities to serve as his consultants.

Viticulturalist Jean-Philippe Roby of the University of Bordeaux recalls meeting an inquisitive de Vink in 2002: He "was the first person I've met who asked so many questions concerning terroir" — how the soil influences the wine. As they spent a day in a Bordeaux vineyard, de Vink fired off questions in halting French, Roby recalled: " 'What is this pruning system, and why do you prune like this, and why do you plant with, so, this density here, another density [there], and why do you edge like this?'"

"I said, 'Well, I don't want to consult in America,' " but de Vink eventually persuaded him, Roby explains on one of his harvest-season visits to RdV. "As it was a new vineyard, it was really interesting, because I usually work in Europe in established vineyards," where "you see something, and you correct. Here it was like a new baby."

Another Frenchman, oenologist Eric Boissenot, is overnights juice samples as the season progresses and consults with wine director Josh Grainer on fermentation and blending.

De Vink's fingers are purple in fall from squeezing grapes to test ripeness. He patrols the vineyard in a golf cart, in which a shotgun (to fire at varmints) dangles precariously from the roof.

De Vink went to Colgate University to study business but enlisted in the Marine Corps before graduation and spent time in Somalia during his four years. He later did a stint at Columbia Capital — the venture capital firm founded by Virginia Sen. Mark Warner (D) — before turning to winemaking. In 2001, he joined Linden Vineyards as an apprentice, working with Law.

De Vink looked at possible vineyard sites on the Sonoma Coast, but settled on Virginia. When prospective consultants boasted about the great vineyards they had tended in California, he'd tell them: "Good for you. Do it in Virginia — then you can have something credited to your name."

He wanted to make wine in Virginia that would sell for \$100 a bottle and more. The site fixes many of Virginia's problems: Elevation (850 feet at its highest) increases the air flow, and the average slope is 20 to 25 degrees. But location alone won't get him to \$100.

De Vink built a barn-size cooling room, kept at 40 degrees, so grapes can be picked and stored if a storm is looming; the cooling of the grapes also allows for gentler extraction of the juice, therefore subtler wine. To protect against disease and pests, de Vink had to spray his vines 14 times this year, 40 percent more than is typical in Bordeaux. Even then he loses to powdery mildew, black rot and grapevine yellows. He has all the

latest fermenting equipment, and, in a nod to another fact of life in Virginia, he has a grape-sorting table that separates out the stink bugs.

De Vink, who lives in an Airstream trailer on his property, plants “cover crops” between the vines to compete for water. He removes all clippings to keep nitrogen from the soil, because the nutrient causes vines to grow too vigorously. He adds Epsom salts to the soil to reduce the potassium the plants take up, because too much potassium throws off the pH balance of the wine.

“This is where modern science and techniques help,” he says. He strips leaves from grape clusters in wet periods to admit more air and sunlight. He, like White, grows his grape clusters about a foot lower than in Bordeaux because he thinks they benefit from the warmth of the ground and because doing so produces an overall leaf canopy better for airflow. Even so, he plants only half as many vines per acre as they typically do in Bordeaux, because, even with all his efforts to restrain growth, the vines will still grow bigger and faster in Virginia.

Like other quality producers, he uses cane pruning, a labor-intensive method of training vines. This creates perfectly vertical, pencil-shaped shoots, six or eight per plant, evenly spaced. It reduces the amount of old wood on the vines, reducing the risk of disease. The result is row after tidy row of almost flat sheets of leaves — “solar panels,” de Vink calls them — facing the sun.

Under the guidance of Roby, de Vink sometimes swaps grape varieties — say, attempting to grow cabernet sauvignon where merlot had been before. The slopes of RdV display “a lot of difference of soil,” says Roby, who consults for about a dozen vineyards worldwide. “You have green leaves at the bottom [of the hill], very dry yellow leaves in the middle, middle green and on the top it’s yellow. ... the terroir effect is very strong on the behavior of the plant, and the objective for Rutger and I was to understand the difference of behavior of the plant.”

And for all that, there are things about Virginia no amount of ingenuity and money can fix: In 2011, de Vink lost 70 percent of his harvest to storms. Even if everything goes well, his capacity is only 2,000 cases a year — barely a drop in the barrel. It will take de Vink a long time to earn back his investment, but he aims to be cash-flow positive within a couple of years.

But his wines, though they cost around three figures per bottle, quickly sell out as sommeliers and connoisseurs scoop them up.

De Vink’s pampered grapes — merlot, cabernet sauvignon, petit verdot and cabernet franc — are blended into two Bordeaux-style wines: Rendezvous, a round, merlot-based blend; and Lost Mountain, a Medoc-style blend with more cabernet sauvignon that is more tannic and meant to be aged.

“We want to make a wine that transcends Virginia,” he says as we taste the wines in his cellar. There’s a bowl for spitting after each wine is tasted, but these fluids are too precious to be expelled. “It’s a big ambition: We want to be a great American wine. For me it’s nails on a chalkboard when somebody tastes this wine and says, ‘Not bad for Virginia.’ You know what? This is not bad for an American wine.”