

Virginia Real

Two Wildly Contrasting Grapes Shine in the Old Dominion

by Kelly A. Magyarics

What's hot in Virginia wine? An exotic foreigner and a native son. At the Virginia Wine Showcase in Chantilly, VA, on February 8 and 9—the first indoor state wine festival—Viognier and Norton proved that they are making some of the state's most notable wines. THE TASTING PANEL was there.

Viognier in Virginia evokes comparison with a new exchange student at your high school: foreign and fascinating, yet approachable once you can pronounce her name. Virginians are embracing this grape as an intriguing, aromatic alternative to Chardonnay, and planting is on the rise.

The state's climate appears handpicked for its viticulture, as Viognier's tough bark withstands spring frosts, while its airy clusters fend off troublesome late summer rot and mildew. Most local versions fall between the complex elegance and apricot and honey-suckle aromatics of those from the northern Rhône's Condrieu region, and the tropical fruit notes of the more lush and opulent California style.

Virginia Viognier also tends to have a nice line of vibrant acidity, keeping it refreshingly crisp. Horton remains one of the largest producers, and Viognier is also on the tasting menu at Kluge Estate, Tarara, Breaux and Chrysalis, among others. DelFosse has a standout version, made in 100% stainless steel with clean, intense peach and pear flavors. This foreigner is here to stay.

On the flip side, Norton is the local boy who made good. It was first cultivated in the

early 1800's in Richmond by Dr. Daniel Norborne Norton, and today Virginia's Chrysalis Vineyards has the largest single Norton planting in the world—69 acres. The grape



Jennifer McCloud of Chrysalis Vineyards inspects her Norton vines.

is resistant to fungal diseases, so it's perfect for humid Virginia summers.

Norton makes deeply colored, full-bodied, earthy red wines with spicy red fruit, bitter chocolate and coffee flavors and an enticing rustic quality. Chrysalis, tireless champion of Virginia Norton, has several superior offerings, including their flagship wine, Locksley Reserve, as well as a semi-sweet patio red with flavors of raisins and cherries that's best served chilled. Bluemont and Cooper Vineyards also make quality bottles, and Horton blends Norton with Touriga Nacional and Tinta Cão to produce Virginia's only "Port."

Norton's local cult-like following among those who trumpet it as "American's True Grape" assures it a highly regarded place in Virginia's wine country. ■■



Breaux Vineyards' Viognier.