

# MEET VIRGINIA

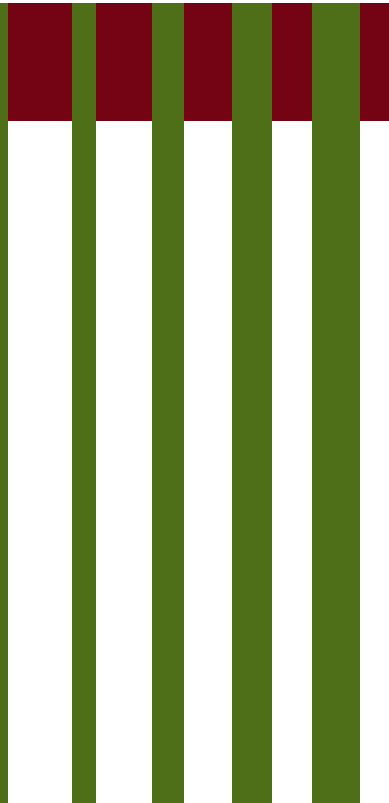


KELLY MAGYARICS

**I**n a forward-thinking area rich with historical importance, where ingenuity and innovation have coexisted with longstanding traditions and deep-seated beliefs, success eluded would-be vintners for centuries. Despite a requirement that every male settler plant and tend at least 10 vines, Jamestown colo-

nists couldn't establish a wine industry. George Washington tried and failed to start a vineyard at Mount Vernon. Most famously (and perhaps most discouraging), Francophile and enophile Thomas Jefferson cultivated European varietals at Monticello for more than 30 years without producing a single bottle of wine.

Photos by Kelly Magyarics (left), Kenneth Garrett (right)



*Kelly Magyarics is a wine-and-spirits writer and wine educator based in northern Virginia. She can be reached through her website, [www.kellymagyarics.com](http://www.kellymagyarics.com), or at [www.twitter.com/kmagyarics](https://www.twitter.com/kmagyarics).*

Flash forward 400 years. Today, the state of Virginia boasts 160 wineries, compared to only 46 in 1995. Wine sales for the year ending June 30 were up nearly 13% over the previous year. Viognier and Cabernet Franc are emerging as the state's varietal stars; Bordeaux blends, sparkling wines, and a quirky indigenous grape also attract their share of attention. If you haven't already made her acquaintance, meet Virginia—and her wines.

## Political distinctions

Considering the entire state as one wine-making region would be as inaccurate as making broad generalizations about California wine. "Virginia as a whole is a huge area to be assumed as one viticultural region," explains Jordan Harris, winemaker and general manager for Tarara Winery in Leesburg. Indeed, six of the 187 American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) are found in the state:

Eastern Shore, Monticello, Northern Neck George Washington Birthplace, North Fork of Roanoke, Rocky Knob, and Shenandoah Valley (which extends into West Virginia). Harris points out that as wineries are built closer to one another, establishing wine trails and marketing initiatives, they



*Barboursville Vineyards tasting room (left); Boxwood Winery estate in The Plains (top).*



Jordan Harris (left), winemaker for Tarara Winery in Leesburg (right).

are boosting interest in Virginia wine by attracting both repeat visitors and new enthusiasts.

The state government also plays a vital role in promoting the Virginia wine industry. The Department of Agriculture funds both a state viticulturist and the enology department at Virginia Tech University. “Our governor [Bob McDonnell] and secretary of agriculture [Todd Haymore] are huge supporters of the wine industry and provide all the assistance we require,” says Jim Corcoran, proprietor of Corcoran Vineyards in Waterford. The state wine-marketing office provides free services to vintners, and the Virginia Wine Distribution Company, of which Corcoran is a board member, gives producers in Virginia the ability to self-distribute—a huge plus for operations that are too small to attract distributors.

As in any winegrowing area, climate dramatically influences the final product. Five distinct regions—Tidewater, Piedmont, northern Virginia, western mountain, and southwestern mountain—provide the moderate climates needed for international and indigenous grape varieties to thrive. The mountainous southwest

and the Shenandoah Valley have only a 160-day growing season; in northern Virginia, east of the Blue Ridge Mountains, it’s closer to 200 days. According to Harris, who operates in the northern area, “Our wines tend to be leaner, with great balance, moderate alcohol level, and great complexity when compared to some other New World regions.”

## Grape varieties

Although a wide range of North American and *vinifera* grapes are planted, an aromatic white and two Bordeaux reds are emerging as the Old Dominion’s key varieties. Beguiling and sensual Viognier, with its aromas of honeysuckle, peach, and orange blossom, is a major success story. After a trip to the Rhône Valley in the early 1980s, Dennis Horton of Horton Vineyards decided to plant the grape, whose thick skin and loose clusters are well suited to the humidity of Virginia summers. Today, Horton produces award-winning and immensely popular Monticello Viogniers in both still and sparkling styles.



Corcoran Vineyards tasting room (left) and winery (right) in Waterford.



Photos by Becki Culley (top), Kelly Magyarics (bottom left), Melanie Corcoran (bottom right)

## MEET VIRGINIA



Jake Busching, general manager and winemaker for Pollak Vineyards (far left); Pollak Petit Manseng vines (left); Kluge Estate retail shop (middle top), harvest (middle bottom), and vineyard in Charlottesville (bottom right); Kluge CEO and co-owner William Moses (bottom left).

The emerging style for Virginia Viognier is dry or off-dry, without the use of new oak or malolactic conversion. Winemaker Matthieu Finot of Monticello's King Family Vineyards, who worked for a time in Nuits-Saint-Georges, contrasts the minerality of Condrieu with the fruit-forwardness found in bottlings here. Crisp and inviting, Virginia Viognier is a perfect match for crab cakes, simply grilled fish, or spicy Asian cuisine.

Jake Busching of Pollak Vineyards near Charlottesville, a 5,000-case-per-year operation on 28 acres that planted its first vines in 2003, calls Viognier the "red-wine drinker's white wine" because of its body and verve. Although other producers in the state use neutral oak to round it out, he prefers stainless steel to retain its freshness, fruit, and acidity. At nearby Veritas Winery, also in the Monticello AVA, winemaker Emily Pelton strives to take the grape directly from the vine to the glass, aiming for the purest expression of fruit. Relatively high alcohol (14.5%) is seamlessly integrated.

Chardonnay is still one of the most widely planted grapes in the state, ranging in style from unoaked, with crisp apple and pear flavors, to full-bodied, oaky, buttery, and viscous. Finot is quick to point out that Virginia's weather is quite different from California's, so that even a Virginia Chardonnay with 100% oak aging and malolactic conversion retains an inviting level of fresh acidity.

Not surprisingly, the success of Chardonnay has led to the production of sparkling wines. "We grow great Chardonnay because our multi-seasonal climate generates great natural fruit," explains William Moses, CEO and co-owner of Kluge Estate in Charlottesville, which produces 10,000 cases a year of *méthode traditionnelle* blancs des blancs and sparkling rosés. Kluge's sparklers are currently aged in stainless steel, but



Photos by Kelly Magyarics (top), Keith Lanpher (middle), bottom right)



the winery is transitioning to some barrel aging. Its new, state-of-the-art sparkling-wine facility will open in early 2011.

Claude Thibaut, calling on more than 25 years of experience in his native France as well as in Australia and California, has consulted with Kluge Estate on its sparkling winemaking. In 2005, Thibaut partnered with Manuel Janisson to form Thibaut-Janisson winery, which bottles a Blanc de Chardonnay made from the Monticello AVA. Its latest offering, called Virginia Fizz, is a crisp, peachy Crémant-style wine, also marketed to bartenders as a versatile mixer.

In the red-wine category, thin-skinned, early-ripening Cabernet Franc has shown great promise. In general, Cabernet Franc is fruitier, more herbal, and lower in acidity than its genetic sister Cabernet Sauvignon, which vintners admit does not fare well in the Monticello area. Keswick Vineyards winemaker Stephen Barnard notes that the green-pepper aromas often encountered in Virginia Cabernet Francs are caused by under-ripe grapes, not by any fault of the variety. Adds Doug Fabbiosi of Fabbiosi Cellars in Leesburg, “When I compare ours to the Loire Valley, I feel we are starting to create a new benchmark.” His winemaking philosophy involves maintaining the acid structure needed to help his wines partner well with food.

Merlot has done better than Cabernet Sauvignon in the state. According to Busching, Merlot



*Claude Thibaut of Thibaut-Janisson (top); Stephen Barnard (below left), winemaker for Keswick Vineyards in Keswick (below right).*

thrives in the red-clay soils that are prevalent here, although Finot notes that it takes on more of an Old World profile than a New World one. Rachel Martin, executive vice president of Middleburg’s Boxwood Winery in northern Virginia, says her goal is “to produce a premium red wine in the Bordeaux tradition reflecting the Virginia terroir.” To that end, she makes a duo of blends from estate-grown fruit—the Left Bank-style Boxwood and the Right Bank-style Topiary—with Bordeaux’s famed Stéphane Derenoncourt acting as consultant. Three satellite tasting rooms (with another opening in 2011) supplement sales of the 5,000-case-per-year winery.

“Virginia has the soil and climate to grow outstanding Bordeaux varietals,” claims Moses. Kluge Estate’s 2,500 annual cases of New World Red, which is 40% Merlot, are sourced from the highest-quality blocks on the estate after 30-50% of the fruit has been dropped. Using 100% French oak from a variety of coopers adds concentration. In addition, the winery turns out some 7,500 cases a year of Albemarle Simply Red, making it Kluge’s highest-volume product. This wine contains a higher percentage of Cabernet Franc and comes in at a lower price point for several reasons, including a shorter aging time.

In Busching’s view, Virginia lacks what he calls a “cult wine scene,” with impossible-to-get bottlings that generate buzz. He concedes that the potential exists, perhaps nowhere more than at Charlottesville’s Barbourville Vineyards in the Monticello AVA. The Barbourville Octagon, named after Jefferson’s eight-sided architectural design for the estate’s original mansion, is always at least 75% Merlot, blended with Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Petit Verdot. Aged 12-14 months in French oak, it is laid down for another six months before release.

Photo by David Rehor (top)

In the words of Barbooursville winemaker Luca Paschina, “Octagon represents the best level of quality and craftsmanship that we have matured over the past 32 years. It is the wine that is defining Virginia as a true wine region.”

Speaking of a cult following, the rustic, powerful Norton grape continues to earn loyal fans. First cultivated in the early 1800s by Dr. Daniel Norborne Norton of Richmond, this oldest indigenous North American variety gained notoriety at the 1873 Vienna World’s Fair, where it was named “best red wine of all nations.” Today, a smattering of Virginia wineries work with Norton, which tends to make deeply colored, earthy wines with spicy-fruit, bitter-coffee, and chocolate notes. Chrysalis Vineyards, with 69 acres in northern Virginia, owns the largest single Norton planting in the world. Proprietor Jennifer McCloud is a tireless champion of the grape, including it in both her flagship Locksley Reserve and her semi-sweet patio sipper, Sarah’s Patio Red. Although it may not become a signature variety for Virginia, Norton has carved out a definite niche.

## Cost effectiveness

The bottom line is always a pressing consideration for restaurants seeking wines that are difficult to procure due to volume or availability. Considering the cost of making wine in Virginia, Harris maintains that Virginia’s quality-to-price ratio is high. If a top Viognier from Condrieu costs \$60, for example, and those from California and Australia about \$50, an outstanding Virginia Viognier can be had for less than \$30—often less than \$20. Likewise, Virginia red blends patterned after respected red Bordeaux are available for less than \$50.

Although he encourages tasting and experimentation, Harris considers it the job of Virginia winemakers to promote their own products, without waiting for a wine director or sommelier to happen upon them. The majority of Virginia wine continues to be sold in tasting rooms, to wine-club members, and in retail stores and restaurants across the region, including Washington, D.C. One exception is Kluge, which distributes 35% of its 25,000 annual cases of wine to 18 states outside Virginia. Expansion plans include



*Luca Paschina, winemaker for Barbooursville Vineyards (top left); Doug Fabblioli of Fabblioli Cellars in Leesburg (top right); Jennifer McCloud (below), proprietor of Chrysalis Vineyards in Middleburg (bottom right).*

the addition of more state distributorships, retail and on-premise accounts, and international customers, especially in Asia. Twenty-five percent of Boxwood’s production is sold outside Virginia or on the Internet, and a portion of Barbooursville’s 35,000 annual cases is distributed in 10 other states. Other wines, including those from Horton and Williamsburg, travel beyond the state’s borders as well.

Fabblioli concedes that a few bad choices can turn off an out-of-state buyer. But he also touts the rising stars



## OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

**Kluge Estate Blanc de Blanc** 2007 \$28

Rich and creamy, with bright acidity, this wine balances minerality with a floral nose of lemon custard and pear. It finishes with crisp citrus notes and subtle hints of pastries and almonds.

**Thibaut-Janisson Blanc de Chardonnay Virginia Sparkling Wine** N.V. \$26

Lemon-colored, with a refined nose. This elegant, understated sparkler is racy and mineral-driven, displaying flavors of melon and well-integrated oak.

**Horton Viognier** 2009 \$20

Exotic honey and tropical-fruit aromas lead to a full-bodied, viscous mouthfeel. Subtle oak nuances from barrel fermentation appear on the midpalate.

**Tarara Chardonnay** 2008 \$30

Lush, juicy fruit is balanced with smoky oak in this medium-bodied Chardonnay. A soft mouthfeel with rich citrus flavors is followed by a long, clean finish.

**Veritas Saddleback Chardonnay** 2009 \$18

Modeled after Chablis, this wine displays clean aromas of ripe apple, honeydew melon, and quince. The medium-bodied palate is layered with tree fruits, soft toast, and spice from oak aging. Minerality and balanced acidity distinguish the finish.

**Barboursville Vineyards Octagon** 2006 \$45

Dark, rich garnet color, with an intense aroma of plum, cassis, coffee, and berries. The full, silky palate is set off by graceful tannins.

**Boxwood Topiary** 2009 \$25

A blend of 42% Cabernet Sauvignon, 42% Merlot, and 16% Petit Verdot, this wine is intense purple in color, with an abundant nose of dark fruits, sweet tobacco, and graphite. Blackberry flavors emerge on the long, concentrated palate, well structured with ripe tannins.

**Chrysalis Norton Locksley Reserve** 2005 \$35

Chrysalis Vineyards' flagship wine is deeply colored, robust, and full-bodied. Rustic and spicy, it can easily stand up to meats and full-flavored dishes.

**Fabbioli Cellars Cabernet Franc** 2008 \$19

A young and constantly changing wine full of bright, intense fruit, dominated by raspberry jam. The barrel-influenced palate features a mild pepper taste with an acidic tang.

**Kluge Estate New World Red** 2005 \$25

A blend of 53% Merlot, 28% Cabernet Franc, 18% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 1% Malbec, this wine is round and silky, showing mature and well-balanced fruit. Full-bodied, with a spicy, toasted-oak character, it has notes of currant and black cherry, reminiscent of a Bordeaux *cru classé* or Pomerol.

**Pollak Merlot** 2008 \$20

Dark-cherry and oak aromas lead to a fruit-forward palate with rich chocolate flavor and a hint of oaky sweetness. Great structure, sweet tannins, and an enticing, velvety finish.

Prices are current estimated retail.



Boxwood Winery cellar.

### KEY PRODUCERS

**Barboursville Vineyards**

17655 Winery Road  
Barboursville, VA 22923  
(540) 832-3824  
barboursvillewine.net

**Boxwood Winery**

2042 Burrland Lane  
The Plains, VA 20198  
(540) 687-8778  
www.boxwoodwinery.com

**Chrysalis Vineyards**

23876 Champe Ford Road  
Middleburg, VA 20117  
(540) 687-8222  
www.chrysaliswine.com

**Corcoran Vineyards**

14635 Corkys Farm Lane  
Waterford, VA 20197  
(540) 882-9073  
www.corcoranvineyards.com

**Fabbioli Cellars**

15669 Limestone  
School Road  
Leesburg, VA 20176

(703) 771-1197  
fabbioliwines.com

**Horton Vineyards**

6399 Spotswood Trail  
Gordonsville, VA 22942  
(800) 829-4633  
hortonwine.com

**Keswick Vineyards**

1575 Keswick Winery Drive  
Keswick, VA 22947  
(888) 244-3341  
www.keswickvineyards.com

**King Family Vineyards**

6550 Roseland Farm  
Crozet, VA 22932  
(434) 823-7800  
www.kingfamilyvineyards.com

**Kluge Estate**

100 Grand Cru Drive  
Charlottesville, VA 22902  
(434) 977-3895  
www.klugeestate.com

**Pollak Vineyards**

330 Newton Road  
Greenwood, VA 22943  
(540) 456-8844  
www.pollakvineyards.com

**Tarara Winery**

13648 Tarara Lane  
Leesburg, VA 20176  
(703) 771-7100  
www.tarara.com

**Thibaut-Janisson**

1413 Dairy Road  
Charlottesville, VA 22903  
(434) 996-3307  
www.tjwinery.com

**Veritas Winery**

151 Veritas Lane  
Afton, VA 22920  
(540) 456-8000  
www.veritaswines.com

**Williamsburg Winery**

5800 Wessex Hundred  
Williamsburg, VA 23185  
(757) 258-0899  
www.williamsburgwinery.com

in the state's young industry: "Finding them is half the fun. Virginia is the up-and-coming region producing winning wines that deserve a place on the table. What a difference the past 10 years has made!"

Students of history, take note. In Virginia, careful attention to the challenges of the past is allowing a deliciously spirited wine future to take shape. ☞