



Is Virginia wine ready for the big time?



The wine world gathers in Richmond: growers, wine makers, writers, retailers, restaurateurs, sommeliers, educators, consumers, politicians and even an extension educator.

this and the governor and first lady would attach their names directly to it. On the surface this might appear to be just another promotion event but I think it may mark a change in stature of Virginia wines in the big, wide wine world. I always draw on my experience in Oregon to inform me about what it takes for a new wine region to ascend the mountain to wine respectability, recognition and success, and to calibrate our progress in the Eastern U.S. This event brought together a lot of forces at work in Virginia, probably first and foremost a legislative funding mechanism that created the [Virginia Wine Board](#) which paid for the event. To my knowledge, there is no wine marketing (or research) order or program that the wine industry uses to its benefit, and having matching funds to put on the table is always useful in the state capitol when money is being allocated. The second element here is support from the Governor, and maybe more importantly from Mrs. McDonnell, who appear to have a genuine affection for the Virginia wine industry and like drinking (and sharing) their wines. Also, I had a chance to meet [Todd Haymore](#), a young and dynamic secretary of agriculture, who isn't stuck on traditional commodity crops, such as dairy or timber, but willing to recognize the potential of wine as a new player in the agricultural landscape of the Commonwealth. Their support, while not absolutely critical, certainly helps make things easier in the funding field.

The wine summit invited [Steven Spurrier](#), of "Judgment in Paris" fame to visit, taste, and talk about Virginia wines. Is it really worthwhile to bring in a celebrity to help to validate an emerging wine region? Certainly Mr. Spurrier has an impeccable reputation in the wine trade, and, in fact, his comments about the wines we tasted were helpful. When I think back to Oregon, this step was skipped or omitted, I'm not sure intentionally or not, but I question a bit the utility and practicality of it. It might create a brief spike in interest in Virginia wines from people who read about his visit, but swooping in, tasting a few wines, writing something polite (or not) about the experience, does not have enduring impact or value to the wine industry. But what it does show is that Virginia is thinking about itself and how it will get itself recognized and onto the world wine map.

I have written and talked about what it takes to put an emerging wine region on the world wine map before but with all the cool stuff happening in Virginia I thought it might be worthwhile to revisit the topic and see how this leader in the Mid-Atlantic wine region is doing. This is a bit of free association rambling (nothing new for me) so I hope you can follow along. It is also just one person's opinion but a decidedly interested one as Virginia wines are concerned.

I attended the [Virginia Wine Summit](#) this week, which was sponsored by the Virginia Wine Board and hosted by Governor and Mrs. McDonnell. This in itself is significant for Virginia wine, that they have a wine board with the funds to stage an event like

Mr. Spurrier is perhaps best known for organizing the wine competition in Paris that pitted French wines against wines from California. The results are well known and since then these types of *mano o mano* wine events are commonplace. Recently, the “Judgment in Princeton” shined a light on New Jersey wines that were tasted against their French counterparts. Richard Bomrich, MW wrote a smart piece in the October issue (pages 18-19) of [Wine Business Monthly](#) about how inherently flawed, and in some respects silly these kinds of “competitions” are and he’s absolutely right. But it would be a bad case of sour grapes to dismiss these dramatic events because they make no logical or statistical sense. Wine consumers love them! How else could George Taber’s book [Judgment in Paris](#) become a bestseller and then be made into an awful movie called *Bottle Shock* (please read the book, do not watch the movie!) In Oregon, the 1975 Eyrie South Block Reserve Pinot Noir won a judgment tasting against some of Burgundy’s finest, helping to establish Oregon’s Pinot reputation, and perhaps attracting Robert Drouhin to the Willamette Valley. And I guess California is doing okay, at least the last time I checked.



Steven Spurrier addresses the lunch audience

So if there is to be an outcome to the *Judgment in Richmond* (or Virginia), it will hopefully raise consumer awareness of the quality of Virginia wines. I tasted 16 Virginia wines and all were very good quality, on one very exceptional. We tasted two wines in each varietal category, including Viognier, Cabernet Franc, Bordeaux red blend, Cabernet Sauvignon, Nebbiolo (how did that get in there?), Petit Verdot and Touriga Nacional. For the most part, the Virginia wines had more forward fruit, lushness and good acidity. These are wines that deserve consumer and critical recognition and respect. They also show that the wine industry in the East has a lot more to learn and do before we can compare ourselves with the benchmarks in each of these categories. But that is no surprise and we are reminded of that fact every single day in the vineyards and cellars.

As I consider how other wine regions like Oregon, Washington, the Finger Lakes and Long Island created their brand and identities, there are some common denominators that an emerging wine region like Virginia can use to its own advantage.

First and foremost, the wine has to be good. I would guess that 10% of the wine producers have to be making very good to outstanding wines by international standards, let’s say 90-95 Parker or WS scores, and they must do it consistently. The great challenge in the Mid-Atlantic is vintage variation and how we cope with the wine quality peaks and valleys, but I think we can cope with this using our viticulture and wine making knowledge and technologies. I think there are over 200 wineries in Virginia right now so even if just 20 or so are really devoted to producing world class wines it’s enough for the press to pay attention.

We do not know for sure, but are getting closer to an understanding of what is needed to make a world-class bottle of Virginia wine. It’s mostly about site selection and, unfortunately, until the key wine districts are viticulturally mapped for soil and climate and *terroir* of this caliber analyzed and quantified, it will be hard for anyone to find a great wine site. I am mainly referring to well to extremely well-drained soils, proper slope and aspect, local elevation and topographical, macro-meso climate features, preferably taking advantage of any rain shadow effects. I am pretty convinced by now that the closer you are to the ocean, the harder it is to produce consistently fine wines, there is just too much pressure from rain after *veraison*, which dilutes fruit and causes fruit rots (see Pennsylvania 2003, 2004, 2009, 2011 for evidence)

Other necessary components of wine region success are capital, because it just isn’t cheap to install a high quality vineyard and winery, and, in fact, infrastructure and personnel make a huge difference in obtaining every ounce of potential quality from the *terroir*. Funding, at the global (wine industry) and personal (vineyard and winery business) levels has to be durable, sustainable and sensible, i.e. it has to be well directed. In Oregon, the check off funds could either go towards research/education or marketing/promotion, with a minimum of 33% allocated to either area. In the early years two-thirds was devoted to pushing grape and wine quality through

research and education. I admit to a bias towards research and education but I still believe to my core that wine quality is the foundation upon which a wine industry is built. Otherwise, it's a one bottle sale and end of story, relationship, etc. It's hard to measure the contribution that Tony and Bruce have made to the current success of the wine industry in Virginia. Personally, I think it's substantial, but it could be even more if they are given more resources. There are still big challenges to producing consistently high quality Virginia wines and it will take a lot of science and hard work to figure out solutions.

Are Virginia wine makers and growers having regular technical production meetings? In Oregon, the Pinot noir technical conference at Steamboat was a key to improving wine quality. Winemakers and growing, talking among themselves, is an incredible way to compound the amount of knowledge in a region. It's mostly for naught if it's stuck in one person's head. That's why I write so much. Also, an international dialogue needs to develop to get to the highest level. Regular critical tastings, discussions and tours of cellars and vineyards is critical to intellectual growth and quality improvements.



There is a lot of conversation about what the signature white and red varieties should be in Virginia, and if it's necessary for a wine region to have marquee varieties in order to take its place on the world wine map. It's a very difficult question. It appears that Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot are the red candidates, and Viognier has been crowned the Virginia white grape. We had a spirited conversation about the red wine in the afternoon where we tasted a Bordeaux blend, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Norton. Determining a signature variety is complicated and fraught with risk. That's what makes areas such as the Willamette Valley and Finger Lakes such a no brainer and easy to develop and promote because from Day 1 it was all about

Pinot and Riesling, respectively. Washington has been up and down with Merlot and Syrah. But each of these states is much more than any one variety can represent, and so is Virginia. I believe that the best wine makers will learn about the *terroir* and make the logical variety matches, and hopefully make great wines that will dance into the marketplace to a captivated audience. This is a declaration that should not be hurried.

That's not say that wine marketing isn't vital to this whole exercise. At the Atlantic Canada Wine Symposium in Halifax this summer I stumbled upon a talk by Morgen McLaughlin, the president of [Finger Lakes Wine Country](#), a private promotion organization whose mission is to popularize the Finger Lakes area (not just the wine industry, but Corning and other attractions). In her dynamic and take-no-prisoners way, Morgen explained how they, in a very cool and calculating fashion, decided to get the Wine Spectator to pay attention to FL wines. They executed their plan and now WS regularly reviews FL wines which often score in the high 80s and low 90s. The next step is to get wine quality to mid 90s. This opened New York City restaurant wine lists to FL wines. Welcome in the world!

Part of Morgen's success depended on her ability to show the BEST of FL wines to WS. Given the politics of the industry, it's easier said than done. But the good thing about FLWC is that it is a private organization that doesn't need to make everyone happy. At some point, or at least for targeted occasions, an industry has to decide that it's going to put its best stuff in the glass, and when it does, it will, in fact, benefit everyone. You can NOT pour bad wines when you are trying to get people to like your wines!

The wines have to be available outside of the home marketplace, and in places where fine wines are appreciated and noted. Oregon Pinot, driven by the costs of low yield viticulture, demanded higher bottle prices, which Oregonians (including myself) could not afford to pay so it committed itself very early to the wholesale, out of state market to large wine centers.

While the wine press is probably not as important as the restaurant trade, Virginia wine is very lucky to have [Dave McIntyre](#), the wine writer for the Washington Post, as one of its boosters. That can't hurt. Dave can encourage people to taste local wines but I believe it was wines by the glass being poured in many of Portland's better restaurants that launched Oregon Pinot into space. Not many consumers, including myself, will take a chance on a (name your price) bottle of wine from an unknown area, at least not without a direct and personal recommendation. So the challenge is to get a wine consumer to taste the wine first, without having to plunk down a big wad of dough. It's all about confidence and education. Get that first sip across the lips and all of a sudden everything falls into place – buy fresh, buy local, matching local foods and wines, reduce the carbon footprint, support local agriculture, spend a day (or two) visiting local wineries, it's an epiphany for the wine consumer that, in a short 50 years, has made Napa Valley the #1 tourist destination in California. By comparison, it took nature eons to create Yosemite, so we have her beat hands down, and it's not even the top attraction! Nevertheless, engage Dave and his colleagues at every possible opportunity.

What's next for Virginia? Well, if it is confident of its wine quality, it is welcoming the world to its wines. As I said earlier, that means sharing them openly, getting them “out there.” In Oregon, there were two main sharing devices, the [International Pinot Noir Celebration](#) and [Oregon Pinot Camp](#). IPNC invites Pinot lovers (consumers, trade, writers, etc) to McMinnville each summer for an unbeatable festival of Pinot noir. Pinot camp focuses on the wine trade (retailers, sommeliers, wholesalers, etc), and for 3-days carts them around to the best wineries and then send them back to their stores and restaurants as new disciples of Oregon Pinot. Before you do any of this, check the wine quality.

All of this takes three things: vision, leadership and cooperation. This is one thing that Oregon and Washington have both had from the beginning. People like David Adelsheim, and Dick Erath in Oregon, and Chateau Ste Michelle in Washington. Who are the leaders here and what kind of vision do they have for Virginia wines? Can there be enough consensus building to get the job done? I'll never forget what [Jim Anderson](#), the charismatic leader of the Missouri wine industry, who convinced St Louis that it needed to drink hybrid wines, told me that you simply have to ignore the negative naysayers, the “nattering naybobs of negativism” to quote a former politician, and in the end make and execute a plan. Act. Even if it's a mistake, do something, and always look forward.

Oh, and you've heard me say this before, and I was glad to have Mr. Spurrier offer the same admonition . . . get out of your bunker (I mean cellar) and taste wines! Especially benchmark wines that can inform you of the type, style and price point of the wines you are or want to make. Justin Willet at [Tyler Winery](#) in the Santa Rita Hills told us that the benchmark for his Chardonnay is Domaine Roulot Meursault *Les Tessons*. You can taste it, visit there, talk to Jean-Pierre and work backwards from their through the cellar to the vineyard to try, not to recreate his wines, but to emulate them in the best viticultural and wine making way.

I think a lot about this stuff. Each and every day I think hard enough that my brain hurts about how we can make consistently better wines in the Eastern US. I hope this is fodder for conversation. It's impossible to know, of course, what's going to happen in Virginia but the indicators are looking promising. I get the buzz in Virginia. To me, that's when things start really moving. I'm not exactly sure what the buzz is, or when it happens, or exactly why, but there was a time in the early 90's when Oregon buzzed and the rest, as they say, is Pinot history. The wine industry is growing so fast that I have lost track of who the players are, and for the most part that is a good thing but the wine future of Virginia should be directed, and not completely left to fate. I'm pretty sure that wine quality, at this point in time, is really good but there's lots of room for improvement. Decisions that leaders make now will decide where this industry ends up in the context of great wines of the world, or the U.S., or the Mid-Atlantic. The indicators, such as the wine summit, funding, research and education, a strategic plan, vineyard sustainability and other road markers that other wine regions have passed on their way to success are in the view of Virginia wine. It will take a lot of vision, cooperation and effort to overcome the environmental and consumer perception challenges, not to mention those that we create for ourselves to get to wherever that mythical place we hope to be on the world wine map.

I would be terribly remiss if I did not recognize, thank, and praise Annette Boyd, the director of the Virginia Wine Board Marketing Office and her amazing staff and crew who organized and delivered the wine summit. I have been to a lot of wine meetings but never have I seen a room full of glasses turned around so quickly and efficiently. It was beyond impressive. Her hospitality and grace are completely Virginian.

Here's a list of the wines I tasted at the summit:

Viognier:

2010 E. Guigal Condrieu
2010 Ducard Signature Viognier

Cabernet Franc:

2010 Domaine Bernard Baudry Les Grezeaux
Chinon (Loire)
2010 Barboursville Reserve

Bordeaux Red Blend:

2008 Chateau du Tertre (Margaux fifth growth)
2009 Potomac Point Richland Reserve Heritage

Cabernet Sauvignon:

2009 Keswick Vineyards Monticello Reserve
2009 Chateau Montelena

Nebbiolo:

2008 Barboursville Reserve
2008 Vietti Castiglione Barolo

Petit Verdot:

2008 Delfosse Vineyards
2009 Casale del Giglio (Italy)

Touriga Nacional:

2007 Barren Ridge Vineyard
Quinta do Crasto (Portugal)

Viognier tasting:

Breaux Vineyards
King Family Vineyard
Keswick Vineyards

Virginia Reds:

Barboursville Vineyards Cabernet Franc
2009 RdV Vineyards Lost Mountain
Veritas Vineyards Petit Verdot
2011 Chrysalis Barrel Select Norton



A sea of wine glasses, and to my knowledge, not a single broken glass or spilled wine, well, except for mine (sorry Bill!)

I cannot resist mentioning perhaps my favorite wine of this visit to Virginia, a very interesting and unique 2010 [Hudson-Chatham Winery](#) Mason Place Vineyard Pultney Farms Old Vines Baco Noir from 60+ year old vines near the Hudson River. Dave McIntyre brought it to a dinner at Peter Chang's and it was the best red wine (along with Finger Lakes Riesling and Gewurztraminer) with spicy Chinese food.

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