

Local Vintners Grow Respect

By Dave McIntyre

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Farmers markets continue to sprout throughout the region, grocery stores tout produce "from around here," and community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs bring food directly from farm to table.

We feel virtuous supporting local farmers and reducing the "carbon footprint" of our food because it travels shorter distances. Yet even if we toast this eco-consciousness with an American wine, it's probably a California chardonnay that was fermented and aged in oak barrels imported from France, packaged in heavy glass bottles and then trucked across the country. Carbon footprint, indeed.

If we eat local, why not drink local?

Local wines -- broadly defined as any wines not from the dominating regions of the West Coast -- are getting better. That is especially true in Virginia, but increasingly as well in Maryland, Pennsylvania and unheralded spots such as North Carolina's Yadkin Valley and the mountains of northern Georgia. The Ohio River Valley produces pinot blanc of surprising finesse, and Michigan's Old Mission and Leelanau peninsulas are increasingly known for their sprightly Riesling and perfumed Gewuerztraminer.

The U.S. wine industry has exploded in growth this decade. In 2000, there were 2,188 U.S. wineries, according to Wine America, a national trade association based in Washington. By 2007, that number had risen to 4,712, with California's share dropping from more than half to just under a third, meaning the growth was elsewhere. With wine now produced in all 50 states, local gems everywhere are waiting to be discovered by consumers receptive to the wonderful diversity that is American wine.

If only we can find them.

Unfortunately, Virginia wineries, which now number more than 130, enjoy only a paltry representation on store shelves, even in Northern Virginia. Similarly, a friend of mine recently visited relatives in Illinois and scoured stores in vain for an Illini wine to try. The national distribution system and various state laws are stacked against small producers from out-of-the-way wine regions, so most of their wines are sold at the winery or at festivals. We tend to think of the wines as novelties, something to be enjoyed on an annual excursion but ignored the rest of the year.

So how did a Lynfred Winery Seyval Blanc from Illinois and a Dos Cabezas "DC Red" blend from Arizona end up on a D.C. restaurant wine list? Well, as novelties, to be honest, part of sommelier Andrew Stover's effort to tie his list at Oya, in Penn Quarter, to the presidential campaign by featuring wines from candidates' home states. Regional wines are not a gimmick at Oya, though. Stover has peppered his list with unusual wines from across the country, using a provision of D.C. law that allows him to "direct import" wines that are unavailable through the standard distribution network.

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But Stover doesn't just bury these unusual wines on the restaurant's list: He offers them by the glass and promotes them aggressively. That way, diners can try something new without investing in an entire bottle.

"The Lynfred reminds me of a New Zealand sauvignon blanc, but with residual sugar," he said. "Loads of grapefruit and gooseberry but semisweet." The Arizona wine, on the other hand, "tastes like a ripe Chianti: loads of sweet raspberry and cherry with truffles and spice."

Others have tried to raise consumer awareness of local or regional wines. The Atlantic Seaboard Wine Association (which changed its name last month from the Vinifera Wine Growers Association) sponsors a four-year-old annual competition for wines produced along the East Coast, and I have been one of the judges. This year's best of show was a semi-dry Riesling from Newport Vineyards in Rhode Island. Winners the first three years of the contest were a merlot from Long Island, and a cabernet franc and a Bordeaux-style blend from Virginia.

Do those wines mimic German Riesling or Napa cab or first-growth Bordeaux? No. But they don't have to. The point is that winemaking is improving so that the best wines in these regions approach the quality of wines from more traditional regions, but with their own expression. No longer is poor quality synonymous with local terroir.

This week, wine writers across the country and in Canada are focusing on wines produced near where they live. The effort, which I organized with Jeff Siegel, a Dallas-based writer who styles himself "the Wine Curmudgeon," includes newspaper columnists, Internet publishers and bloggers from Virginia, Maryland, Texas, New York, North Carolina, Kentucky, Georgia, Wisconsin, Missouri and Canada. Each writer is featuring wines he or she regards as among the best, or soon-to-be best, from that region. Their recommendations are available at <http://www.drinklocalwine.com>.

Don't get me wrong. I love California wines, and nothing will persuade me to stop exploring wines from around the world. And it's true that local wines have a long way to go. Think of them as a pyramid, with the best wines at the narrow point, rising from a wider base of inferior wine. California would be an inverted pyramid, with more high-quality wines and only a narrow contingent of those that are less than satisfactory.

But as local wine industries mature, winemaking techniques improve, vineyards grow older and consumers become more accepting, the tip of the local pyramid will continue to grow. That is increasingly true in Virginia.

Price is an issue many consumers cite to explain a reluctance to try local wines beyond the souvenir purchase on a weekend excursion to a wine festival. Price will matter less as quality improves, however, and top local wines already are competitive against similarly priced wines from California and elsewhere.

What we really need is greater recognition for the wines that are setting new standards for quality in these unfamiliar wine regions, and for consumers to go into their favorite wine stores and ask for them. Only increased demand will persuade retailers to stock them.

And only then can they be more than a novelty.

Recommended Wines

Virginia

The state has rightfully become known for its floral-scented Viognier and its peppery cabernet franc. But it is also beginning to find its own expression in chardonnay: something in between the oaky, buttery style of California and the taut, mineral voice of Burgundy. There is also an increasingly vocal contingent arguing that petit verdot, typically relegated to a minor role in a Bordeaux blend, may be the Old Dominion's best bet in red wine. And while Virginia might not give Champagne a run for its money, it is producing some enticing sparkling wines.

Linden Vineyards Hardscrabble Chardonnay 2005

** 1/2

\$24

The chardonnay vines at Jim Law's original Hardscrabble vineyard, just outside the winery near Front Royal in Fauquier County, range in age from 12 to 21 years. That maturity helps them produce wines with effusive peach and apricot flavors. Barrel fermentation and aging for 10 months in a mixture of new and "seasoned" barrels add heft and spice. The 2006, to be released later this fall, is more austere -- from a more typical, rainier vintage -- and should reward extended aging. Perfect with richer fish such as salmon, tuna or mackerel.

Simon N Cellars; available at Arrowine and the Virginia Shop in Virginia and Cowgirl Creamery in the District; and on the list at Bistro Francais and BLT Steak in the District, and at L'Auberge Provencale and the Inn at Little Washington in Virginia.

Michael Shaps Petit Verdot 2005

** 1/2

\$35

Michael Shaps is Virginia's leading consulting winemaker, influential in the initial success of many wineries in the Charlottesville area, including Jefferson, King Family, Keswick and newcomers Delfosse and Pollak. Last year he opened Virginia Wineworks, the state's first "custom crush" facility, in Monticello to help start-up wineries that do not yet have their own facilities. His petit verdot (only 75 cases produced) is rich and elegant, with spicy blackberry fruit. Old World in style and weight, enticing on the nose, it makes a strong argument for petit verdot as Virginia's premier red grape. Pair with lighter meat dishes, such as pork, veal or roast chicken.

Country Vintner, available at Curious Grape, Church Street Cellars, Domasoteca and Red, White & Bleu in Virginia; on the list at Proof in the District.

Kluge Estate SP Rosé 2004

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\$32

Kluge Estate is leading a small number of Virginia wineries that are turning out top-quality sparkling wines using the traditional champagne method. Made primarily with chardonnay, this

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sparkler gets its rosé hue from about 10 percent pinot noir and offers an enticing floral aroma with the food-friendly refreshing acidity and tight bead of bubbles that champagne lovers crave.

Bacchus; available at Connecticut Avenue Wine & Liquor and Sherry's Fine Wine & Spirits in the District; on the list at Charlie Palmer Steak and the Morrison-Clark Restaurant in the District and at Lansdowne Resort in Virginia.

Maryland

Maryland has lagged behind Virginia in the size and reputation of its wine industry, but its top wines are starting to make impressive strides in quality. Maryland's industry has tripled in size this decade, to 36 wineries. Here are three wines -- one from an upstart newcomer and two from familiar names -- that show the state's range. Maryland wines are not widely distributed and are most easily purchased at the winery.

Black Ankle Vineyards "Crumbling Rock" 2006

** 1/2

\$40

This fledgling winery hadn't even opened its doors before this initial release started winning acclaim, with a gold medal at the Atlantic Seaboard Wine Competition and best of show at the Maryland Governor's Cup. This Bordeaux-style red blend of cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, merlot and petit verdot makes an ambitious statement, in flavor and in price. Rich, extracted and deep, with silky tannins. Red meat. This is not your father's Maryland wine.

Elk Run Vineyards Gewuerztraminer 2007

* 1/2

\$21

From the winery's Cold Friday Vineyard, visible off State Route 26 north of Mount Airy, this wine features classic aromas of litchi and jasmine without going all soapy, as Gewuerz can do. Is it Alsatian, as any grower of this grape aspires to? No. But it's darn nice. The hint of sweetness suggests spicy Asian cuisine or soft, slightly stinky cheeses.

Boordy Vineyards Vidal 2007

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\$12

Boordy is historically important as the pioneer promoter of French-American hybrid grapes during the 1940s and '50s, which gave modern viticulture its start on the East Coast. This vidal, part of the winery's "Icons of Maryland" series, is zesty with lime and peach flavors and a hint of sweetness that calls for a crab cake, or at least a sunset.

KEY:

*** Exceptional

** Excellent

* Very good