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A Grape Virginia Vintners Can Love

By Dave McIntyre
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Competitive wine tastings rarely make news, except when an upstart wins. The 1976 "Judgment of Paris," in which wines from California triumphed over some of France's best, helped establish Napa Valley's reputation as a fine wine region. A much-less-heralded taste-off 15 years ago had a similar effect on Virginia's fledgling wine industry, when **Horton Vineyards** won a Viognier contest against wines produced by some of California's most celebrated winemakers.

"We really cleaned their clocks!" Dennis Horton, co-owner and namesake of the winery in Orange County, north of Charlottesville, recalled in a recent interview.

Horton's triumph electrified the Virginia wine industry, which began planting Viognier grapes with abandon. In 1993, the year Horton produced his prize-winner, the grape was so insignificant that the state did not track how much of it was planted. Tony K. Wolf, the state viticulturist and a professor of viticulture at Virginia Tech, recently estimated that there were fewer than 20 acres at that time. By



2007, the last year for which official statistics are available, Viognier plantings had grown to 180 acres. According to the Virginia Wine Board, a state marketing office, production grew by two-thirds from 2004 to 2007. That probably is an understatement, as severe frosts in April 2007 and then a long, dry summer kept yields low.

Viognier is popular among Virginia vintners because it has thick skin and grows in loose clusters, making it resistant to rot in the humid climate. Heavy rains at harvest time (tropical storm season) can wreak havoc with other grape varieties, diluting sugar and

acid primarily. But Viognier remains steady, slowing its growth for a day or two and then picking up where it left off, Horton said.

"It is extremely suited to this climate, and it can remain balanced because it tolerates the heat and humidity," he said.

Viognier wine would not be a success, of course, if consumers didn't like it. A well-made Viognier smells of jasmine, honeysuckle and peach blossom. Two styles are emerging in Virginia. The first is lush and opulent with exuberant fruit, sometimes slightly sweet. The second is more austere and subtle in the classic fashion of the wines of Condrieu, Viognier's homeland in France's Rhone Valley. The latter style demands your attention to appreciate the wine's nuances, an investment some drinkers might be unwilling to make. That would be a shame, for not only are these wines delicious now, but they have sufficient acidity and structure to improve in the bottle for four or five years.

Some winemakers age at least a portion of their Viognier in new oak barrels to give it some heft, though used barrels are generally favored to soften the wine's texture without adding overt woody flavors. Others avoid oak altogether in favor of freshness. An underripe Viognier tastes green and bitter, as if it had been made with the stems and someone forgot to add grapes. An overripe one can be flabby, lacking acidity.

To see if Virginia really is for Viognier, I recently joined four other judges for a taste-off organized by **Tarara Vineyards** of Loudoun County as part of the winery's 20th anniversary celebration. Todd Gray, chef and co-proprietor of **Equinox** restaurant; Andrew Stover, sommelier at Oya and Sei; Nycci Nellis of TheListAreYouOnIt.com; wine educator Laurie Forster and I sniffed and slurped our way through 15 entrants to choose four that will join Tarara's at that winery's Fine Vine Festival on May 30.

The group's winners -- from **Veritas**, **Cooper**, **Keswick** and **Casanel**, a Loudoun County newcomer -- were all excellent. Overall, however, quality varied alarmingly. So I broadened my search, tasting several more Virginia Viogniers over the next few weeks. (Because I have my favorites and know several winemakers in the state, I tasted most of the wines "blind," with the labels concealed, as we had done at the Tarara tasting.) Again, one wine could be fantastic and the next so wildly disappointing it was difficult to believe they had been made from the same grape variety. That is perhaps as good a reason as any to visit Virginia wineries and search out the good ones.

In the end, it was difficult to trim my list of favorites to eight recommendations. Virginia's best Viogniers are superb.

Recommendations

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Without making a judgment on either style, because I love them both, here are some of Virginia's best Viogniers in types I identify as either "effusive" or "classic." Think of the effusive style as a big, wet kiss on the lips, while the classic style is a relationship requiring your attention (or maybe lack of attention while the wine spends 30 to 60 minutes in a decanter).

Effusive

Cooper Vineyards Viognier 2008

Virginia, \$21

I've tasted this wine three times recently, first the 2007 and the new vintage twice, and each time I've come away excited. The wine features exotic tropical aromas and flavors with bright acidity and a round, full mouth feel. Co-owner Geoffrey Cooper, a Richmond ophthalmologist, released his first wines only nine years ago from Louisa, near Lake Anna. He ages 10 percent of the wine in used barrels.

Commonwealth Wines: available in Virginia at Olde Dominion Wine Shoppe in Occoquan, Opera House Gourmet in Manassas, various Total Wine & More and Wegmans locations.

Veritas Vineyard and Winery Viognier 2007

Monticello, Virginia, \$20

"Finally, Viognier!" I scribbled when I smelled this wine after six disappointing rivals. Its pale, slightly golden color yields to fresh, herbaceous and flowery aromas and mouth-filling, peachy flavors that won't quit. Tasted twice, with similar enthusiasm.

Kysela: available in the District at Calvert Woodley; available in Virginia at Arrowine in Arlington, various Total Wine & More locations.

Horton Vineyards Viognier 2007

** 1/2

Orange County, Virginia, \$20

The wine that started the Viognier craze is still one of Virginia's best. It's not particularly complex, but its peach blossom, apricot and jasmine flavors bring pure pleasure. Horton also makes an excellent sparkling Viognier, as delicious as it is novel.

DOPS in the District and Maryland: available in the District at Cairo Wine & Liquor, Circle Wine & Liquor, Harris Teeter stores, Morris Miller Wine & Liquor; on the list at Founding Farmers. Available in Maryland at Bay Ridge Wine & Spirits in Annapolis, Beltway Fine Wine & Spirits in Towson, Corridor Wine & Spirits in Laurel; on the list at Sam's on

the Waterfront in Annapolis. Service Distributing in Virginia: widely available, including at various Safeway, Total Wine & More, Wegmans, Whole Foods Market and World Market locations; Leesburg Vintner in Leesburg, Olde Dominion Wine Shoppe in Occoquan.

Jefferson Vineyards Viognier 2008

Monticello, Virginia, \$25

Elegantly packaged, this wine carries Jefferson's signature and hails from land near his estate at Monticello. This enticing wine is flowery with peach and jasmine flavors, and a hint of residual sweetness on the finish. Sold primarily to restaurants.

Country Vintner: on the list in the District at Kinkead's, various Clyde's restaurants, the Fairmont Hotel, the Hay-Adams Hotel.

King Family Vineyards Viognier 2007

Monticello, Virginia, \$24

With 20 percent of the juice fermented and aged in barrel, this wine has an appealing fat texture and creamy tropical-fruit flavors.

Commonwealth Wines: available in Virginia at Olde Virginia Gourmet in Stafford, Opera House Gourmet in Manassas, Wegmans in Potomac Mills, Whole Foods Market in Arlington and Springfield.

Michael Shaps Viognier 2007

Monticello, Virginia, \$35

Only 200 cases of this exceptional wine were produced, though winemaker-consultant Michael Shaps has had his hand in the production of many top-notch wines from the Charlottesville area over the past decade. This classically styled, textbook Viognier has depth and a subtlety that makes you take notice, once you're done flirting with the others.

Country Vintner: available in the District at Chevy Chase Wine & Spirits; on the list at Hook, Occidental Restaurant, the Hay-Adams Hotel. Available in Virginia at Evo Bistro; on the list at Legal Seafoods in McLean.

Barboursville Vineyards Viognier Reserve 2007

**** 1/2**

Virginia, \$22

This wine is reticent at first but opens nicely after an hour or so, with jasmine, peach and an impressive, lively acidity. Complex, intriguing and sophisticated, it probably will be better in a year or two.

Country Vintner: available in the District at Pearson's, Wine Specialist; on the list at Occidental Restaurant; on the list in Virginia at Clyde's Patowmack Farm.

Breaux Vineyards Viognier 2007

Virginia, \$23

Every time I taste a Breaux Viognier, I think, "Nice, but a tad underripe." Then the aromas begin to emerge -- flowers, citrus and spice -- and I find myself enticed by springtime in a glass.

Service Distributing: available in Virginia at various Wegmans and Harris Teeter locations, Classic Wines in Great Falls, Leesburg Vintner in Leesburg, Whole Foods Market in Fairfax; on the list at Magnolias at the Mill in Purcellville, Okra's Louisiana Bistro in Manassas, Tuscarora Mill in Leesburg.

KEY

***** Exceptional**

**** Excellent**

*** Very good**