

Virginia Dares!

21-24 February 2004

This was my first trip to Virginia, although I had tasted a number of Virginia wines sporadically over the previous 17 years. On 22 February I visited six vineyards (Central District only) and on 23 February I tasted 128 wines at a centralised tasting at Barboursville Vineyards. In total, I tasted over 150 Virginia wines.

Generally, I found the reds to have more potential than the whites, although Viognier is an exciting exception to the latter.

I have not observed the veraison or harvest in Virginia, but having tasted a large number of wines in a relatively short period of time, I get the impression that there is a “rush” to ripeness. This can result in an imbalance of phenolics to fruit, which seems to be the case in some of the red wines I tasted, although certainly not in all, indicating that winemakers are learning how to handle the fruit. I noted *délistage* being practised, which is good, but another technique that might prove useful would be to employ a well-timed hot prefermentation soak to extract the maximum anthocyanins and the minimum of harsher tannins. Ultimately, however, the goal should be to achieve a better natural balance in the vineyard by maximising the hang time to achieve riper pips. Some years are going to be a bigger gamble than others, but risks must be taken if winemakers want to achieve international acclaim. Anyone who is not willing to take risks should not be growing grapes.

[Editor’s notes: The problem with phenolic maturity is mainly due to uneven ripening. Post-fermentation, pre-dejuicing, thermal treatment may be a more desirable means of increasing tannin polymerization (see *Enology Notes* on both subjects).]

The reds generally fared best, although Viognier proved to be an exciting exception. In both red and white wines there is a tendency to over-oak. Despite reds faring better than whites, there was a disturbing number of wines spoiled by Brett, and that comes from a Brit palate that traditionally is more tolerant of Brett, especially at low levels, where we have become conditioned to it forming part of the overall complexity of some very famous French wines. There were also some volatile phenol faults, but no more than might be expected elsewhere. Floral (violet) aromas in some inappropriate reds suggested the use of enzymes certain cases.

The most successful red varieties were Merlot and Petit Verdot, which surprised me. By most successful, I not only mean the most number of high-scoring wines, but also the greatest spread amongst different producers (principally Veritas 2001, Jefferson 2001 and Chateau Morrisette 2001 for Merlot and Veritas 2002, White Hall 2002, Oakencroft 2002 and Chrysalis 2002 for Petit Verdot). I was astonished by the power and finesse of Michael Shaps’ King Family Vineyard 2002 Merlot. It’s a wine of remarkable balance, but it is still in barrels, and it remains to be seen what effect bottling will have. If, however, it performs as well in bottle as barrel, and I am right in assuming that the 85 red wines I tasted from every vintage from 2002 back to 1997 did in fact include the best of Virginia so far, then I have no hesitation in saying that it will soon become regarded as Virginia’s greatest wine. What I enjoyed most about the other successful Merlot wines was their sapid varietal purity, something I would expect in a cooler climate, with a longer veraison.

I also think there is also potential for Tannat, Nebbiolo and Norton, but the top-scoring wines for each of these varieties were all from single, rather than multiple, producers. These were Horton Tannat 2001 and to a lesser extent 1999, Barboursville Vineyards Nebbiolo Reserve 1999 and to a lesser extent 2000, and Chrysalis Norton 2002 and 2001 (not Locksley). The Tannat is a particularly interesting choice for Virginia. I would not say that Uruguay has built its reputation on Tannat, but rather that what reputation Uruguay has is dependent on it. However, it is worth mentioning that some of Uruguay's best wines to date have been Tannat-Merlot or Merlot-Tannat blends, rather than straight Tannat. It should be borne in mind that Norton will, at best, be a curiosity outside the USA, but it deserves to be a speciality in Virginia for [a] heritage reasons, and because [b] it is the only native American variety that has the potential to make an internationally acceptable quality.

Cabernet Sauvignon was surprisingly good, although it is difficult to tell whether this is producer specific because although four out of seven excelled, three were from Barboursville Vineyards (2001, 1999 and 1998), with only Chateau Morrisette 2001 and Oakencroft 2001 achieving a similar standard. There is no doubting the quality of the most successful Meritage (or otherwise) type blends: Keswick Vineyards 2002, Veritas 2001, Kluge Estate 2001, Barboursville Vineyards Octagon IV, Valhalla Gotterdammerung 1998, and Linden Vineyards Reserve Red 1997. However, many of the others were all over the place in structure, balance and style, which makes me think that Virginia needs to understand better the potential of its individual varieties before attempting to concoct the most appropriate blends.

The most disappointing red wine grape was Cabernet Franc, which was just as surprising in its way as the success of Merlot. Perhaps it was because this was the only variety I was expecting to be good or maybe it was just the wines I tasted on the day I tasted them, but generally the tannins were too harsh, and there was a greater proportion of faults or clumsy funkiness. Furthermore, the older vintages showed far better (especially Horton 1999, Barboursville Vineyards 1999 and Villa Appalaccia 1998 & 1997) than the younger ones, whereas in emerging wine regions, the younger the wine, the more noticeable the improvements.

As for whites, the Chardonnay wines left me cold. There were a large number of these wines. They had no special quality or character, clearly demonstrating there is no reason why Virginia should be growing this grape. However, I understand the demand for Chardonnay in the USA, and recognise the economic rationale of producing it. Just don't try to build Virginia's reputation on it!

On the other hand, the Viognier seems to suit Virginia's climate extraordinarily well. Furthermore, its winemakers have sensibly chosen to emphasise fruit and acidity rather than going for the over-floral, over-oaked, residual sweetness route, the cloying character of which has blighted this variety in many famous New World wine regions. In general, I found more enjoyment and better balance in these wines than I do in most Condrieu. The best were Michael Shaps 2002 and 2001, and Barboursville Vineyards 2002 (and, to a lesser extent, 1999).

One-off successes included Kluge 2001 SP, which was impeccably finished by Claude Thibaut, one of the world's most talented sparkling wine consultants. It will be interesting to see what he can achieve making the wine from scratch, and I do wonder if he should look elsewhere to source some of the grapes. On paper, the higher altitude vineyards in the

Shenandoah Valley would seem the logical place to start searching. Certainly the vineyards would be better suited to sparkling than still wine production. Another one-off, also from Kluge, is its 2001 Cru, which is a *vin de liqueur*, although it has such finesse that I could have sworn it was a *vin doux naturel*.

I look forward to returning in four years time, when I will be able to schedule a much longer, more intensive visit into one of my RTW itineraries, and the 2004 snapshot should help me to gauge the extent and direction of any improvements.

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