

A Road Trip into the Heart of American Terroir

Advances in viticulture and winemaking make for unexpected bounty

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Sommelier Steven Grubbs takes a tour through Southern wine country.
Photo © Bobby Fisher

Propelled by a startlingly good Virginia Pinot Noir, a star sommelier zips through the hilly wine country between Atlanta and Washington, DC, discovering native American grape varietals along the way.

Late last summer, in midtown Atlanta, my restaurant hosted a tasting of grower Champagnes. Toward the end of the event, among the empty bottles and their cast-off, mushroomed corks, my friend Tamara pulled me aside.

“Do you want to taste my mom's wine?” she asked. This question is like the question, “Do you want to hear my band?” or “Do you want to read this poem I wrote?” It sparks dread.

I didn't know her mother had a winery. I asked her where it was. “Virginia,” she said. The dread reasserted itself.

“The wine's Pinot Noir,” she added. The new detail didn't help. The grape has many genetic gifts, but it is notoriously difficult to grow. Outside of California and Oregon, most places in North America have all but given up. I said of course I'd try the Pinot and gave myself over to the novelty.

I mostly resist any push for Southern wines, as I've generally found them pretty awkward in the glass. I have imagined this to be a matter of making wine where one probably should not. So I was taken aback when Tamara's mother's wine, the 2010 Ankida Ridge, was as good as any other Pinot Noir I commonly run into. Better, maybe. Tastes like Pinot Noir, I thought, adding a mental exclamation point.

I set the experience aside. But some piece of my skepticism had rattled loose. So, some months later, my friend Jordan Noel and I packed into my silver Miata and bent northwest from Athens into the piedmont hills that encircle the old gold-rush town of Dahlonega, Georgia. We were embarking on a three-day tour of Southern wineries, a journey that would take us north and east, following the curl of the Blue Ridge Mountains up through North Carolina and into Virginia. If Tamara's mother could make authentic Pinot Noir, then there were likely to be other discoveries in the hilly reaches between Atlanta and DC. I hoped to find new story lines developing there.

But first, we would need to confront Eastern wine's complicated past. When European colonists arrived here on the Atlantic coast, they were thrilled to find the forests rife with wild grapevines. But those native vines produced wines with a strange flavor. The colonists called it “foxiness,” a wild, musky note. (One culprit is a pheromone called o-Aminoacetophenone that repels honeybees.) The wines were also low in alcohol and high in acid.

Descendants of those colonists later decided to import vines from Europe—*vitis vinifera*, the species to which the most significant varieties of wine-grape vines belong. But almost all these vines withered and died, victims of disease or pests. Some plants did live long enough to produce spontaneous hybrid offspring with native vines, and some of these—like Catawba and, later, Norton—proved useful in viticulture. Prohibition soon stunted whatever progress had been made, however, and the East still struggles to bounce back.

Some vineyards in the East do use *vinifera* vines today, but they require great care. In Georgia, for instance, humidity and pests are especially hard on the grapes, so producers tend to use pesticides and fungicides. I remember once asking a Georgia proprietor how he deals with humidity. “Spray like hell,” he said, without irony. Native vines and hybrids are simpler to grow, but coaxing something out of them that tastes like wine takes craft. Some people don't think native grapes are suited for wine at all; others have suggested that appreciating native wines requires a change in our palates.

Our first stop was Three Sisters Vineyards, in Dahlonega. Cofounder and winemaker Doug Paul is ruddy and large. He works in denim overalls. His vineyards are rimmed with hardwoods and Eastern hemlocks; the winery name comes from the three-peaked mountain that forms a backdrop.

The morning we arrived, he poured us tastes of his wines, among them two Chardonnays, a Cabernet Franc blend and a Cynthiana. Cynthiana, also called Norton, grows wild in the woods nearby. A few of the wines did bear a foxy earmark—a prickly, sylvan tone that is like the woody musk of wild honey. His Vidal Blanc, a hybrid, has enough acid to push past its wild edges without losing focus. A harmony emerges in the finish.

He took us on a tour of the cellar and the vineyards. When we returned, we found the tasting room thronged.

We left Doug to his guests and set out for the mountain's other side to visit Karl Boegner at Wolf Mountain Vineyards. Wolf Mountain is as much a luxury getaway as it is a winery, with a cottage for overnight stays. That Sunday, its tasting bar was mobbed with Atlantans watching sports on a loud TV.

We met Karl in the gift shop. Karl is a smart businessman who used to manage private clubs and resorts, and Wolf Mountain seems to express all the industry wisdom he's accumulated over the years. I'd tasted some of his wines before; in fact, of the 400 or so wines divided between the two wine lists I manage, a Wolf Mountain sparkling wine is the only one from my home state. The first time I'd tried it, I'd written “Tastes like wine” in my notebook. As with Ankida Ridge's Pinot Noir, I added an exclamation point.

Karl told us he sells most of his production either at the winery or to wine-club members; he doesn't need sommeliers like me sniffing around. Nor is he trying to work out the historical demons of East Coast wine: He doesn't make wine out of hybrid or native grapes. I asked why not, and he said, “They don't provide perceived value to the consumer.” He then added, “I'm not foolish enough to think I can make Seyval, Vidal or Chambourcin a household name.”

His wines—mostly blends made with the *vinifera* grapes Cabernet Sauvignon, Mourvèdre and Syrah—are slicker than those at Three Sisters. The sparkling wines are precise and pleasing. I was disappointed, however, by the news that Karl sometimes supplements his own grapes with California fruit. It is a practice that Doug Paul of Three Sisters claims is common in the region, and one in which he refuses to take part.

We left Wolf Mountain and backtracked around the mountain, then crossed into North Carolina. In Asheville, we had a drink at The Double Crown, a juke joint with an old church organ as a back bar. We had dinner at The Admiral, a very good restaurant that's been installed into an old mountain beer bar. We sat at the bar and ate braised short ribs and sweetbreads. In the dining room's corner, a glowing Budweiser sign had been modified so it said dive in white neon.

We'd booked a log cabin for the night a short drive away, in the hills of Fleetwood, North Carolina, outside of Boone. I woke up early the next morning and had to yell up the stairs to Jordan, who was still asleep in the lofted bedroom. Outside, a drapery of fog hung in the trees, but the air on the front porch

was clear and clean. I went out to pack up the car for our drive across the North Carolina border into Virginia.

We tore away from the lot and pushed hard on mountain back roads, shooting through northwestern North Carolina's Yadkin Valley. Along the way, we checked out a fledgling producer called Carolina Heritage Vineyard and Winery; owners Clyde and Pat Colwell grow all of their fruit organically and work only with hybrid and native grapes. Across the border in Virginia, in the high country close to Dugspur, we stopped by a well-known cider works called Foggy Ridge. Owner Diane Flynt studied cidermaking in England and has visited Normandy's top cider producers, but her style is her own. She works with an assortment of apple varieties, a mix of old American heirlooms as well as French and English types, and makes ciders with backbone and all the marks of her restrained, intelligent hand.

A late lunch was awaiting us at Virginia's Veritas Vineyard & Winery, near Afton, a few hours away. We sat at a rectangular table draped in white linen and furnished with ornate flatware, and the winery chef, Jonathan Boroughs, presented six courses, each paired with a Veritas bottling. The flowery Viogniers and hearty reds made from Petit Verdot and Tannat—grapes from vines originally brought in from southwest France—were very good. They were not the loud cowboy wines of California or the earthy, eco-intelligent wines of Oregon's Willamette Valley. They were easy to understand, but also well-bred and composed; attractive, yet temperate.

Across the table was Lucie Morton, a roving vineyard consultant and viticulturalist who works with Veritas and other wineries both locally and overseas. Virginia winemaking has developed significantly in the last decade, and Lucie has been one of the catalysts. She described the advances as a matter of sorting out “first the right place, then the right grape, and then the proper viticultural practices.” This sequence of solutions appears obvious, but in Europe it took thousands of years to accomplish that work.

Leaving Veritas, we headed upstate and made our way to Early Mountain Vineyards, a Virginia producer that also serves as a rallying point for the local scene, selling bottles from a selection of the area's winemakers alongside its own wines. The tasting we had that day was humbling. We tried wine after wine, every one of them legit.

Our last stop was Ankida Ridge, outside Amherst, Virginia, at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. We met up with Tamara's mother, Christine Vrooman, and learned that it was Lucie Morton who'd suggested growing Pinot Noir on the steep, mountainous site. The site, which had never been farmed, is rich in ancient decomposing granite. Sheep and chickens roam the vineyard, eliminating weeds and pests.

It was getting late, so Christine showed us to the guest room over the new tasting facility at Ankida Ridge. When I woke up the next morning, I could still smell the drywall and spackling from the just-finished building. Jordan had slept on a grand leather sofa and was on the porch, looking out onto the valley. Christine was driving down from her ridge-line house to bring us up for breakfast.

Christine poached eggs pulled from her chicken house, and we ate sausage from the neighbor's hogs with honeycomb from the mountain. She opened a bottle of Chateau Z's Vixen Blanc, a white wine made by a local geologist from wild Virginia grapes. We imagined what kind of food would go with its raw, distinctly American forest flavors. We settled on some kind of wild river fish.

Soon we were driving back down the Blue Ridge slope, catching the interstate south. Jordan spent part of the trip home trying to locate the best chopped pork in western North Carolina. I spent the time attempting to make sense of what I'd tasted over the last few days. I'd expected Ankida Ridge Pinot to be an Eastern anomaly. But it turned out that Virginia was full of wines that were equally good, and even my own home state was performing better than I had thought. The East is still a work in progress, but hope certainly abounds for those who produce its wines—and I, too, have become surprisingly optimistic.

Southern Wine Tour

Georgia

Three Sisters Vineyards

Grows Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc and Vidal Blanc (a hybrid) and makes wine from Cynthiana grapes.
threesistersvineyards.com

Wolf Mountain Vineyards & Winery

A boutique producer making Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Mourvèdre blends.
wolfmountainvineyards.com

North Carolina

The Double Crown

An Asheville bar with ambitious cocktail specials. thedoublecrown.com

The Admiral

A meat-centric Asheville restaurant serving sweetbreads and short ribs. theadmiralnc.com

Carolina Heritage Vineyard and Winery

A 35-acre winery in the Blue Ridge Mountains. carolinaheritagevineyards.com

Virginia

Foggy Ridge Cider

Exceptional ciders from heirloom apple varieties. foggyridgecider.com

Veritas Vineyard & Winery

Works with French varietals like Viognier, Petit Verdot and Tannat. veritaswines.com

Early Mountain

Built on land once owned by a Revolutionary War lieutenant, this winery makes Viognier and Muscat Dolce. earlymountain.com

Ankida Ridge Vineyards

A small Amherst winery creating impressive Pinot Noir. ankidaridge.com