

Wine treats from Virginia, beyond

Advances in viticulture and winemaking make for unexpected bounty

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(Steven Morris Photography, Getty Images)

Back in October, I conducted two wine tastings using a set of wine glasses dyed with cobalt so that the blown crystal is completely opaque. The glasses forestall any prejudice or supposition that the tasters might have about the wine at hand. They cannot tell even if it is red or white.

At the gathering, we were trying to determine how much cabernet sauvignon or merlot dominated a blend of a wine by merely using our senses of sight, smell, taste and touch. We did not know in advance the provenance of the wine, who made it, its age or color or, certainly, the percentage of the various grapes that made its mix.

We tasted two dozen of the usual suspects, high-end reds from Bordeaux and Napa Valley, a Super Tuscan and "Bordeaux blend" reds from other countries such as Argentina.

Before "the reveal," the favorite of many tasters, if not most, based on the principles of pure pleasure alone, was a not-inexpensive red blend of about a third each cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc/petit verdot from — ta-da — Virginia. Yes, Santa Claus, there is a Virginia.

As one woman who attended said, "If I knew ahead of time that this RdV (Vineyards "Rendezvous" 2009) was from Virginia, I would never have picked it as my favorite."

Subsequent to that tasting, I held another tasting of solely Virginia wines and found quite a number of delicious wines (and also some duds).

The element of surprise is one of the more delicious aspects of wine appreciation. During this past year, here are the three regions of the globe from which I (and many others who taste with me) have found our most surprisingly good wines. I'll begin with Virginia.

Virginia

Is it because it is the child of its famous father, Thomas Jefferson, that Virginia wins with wines made of European grapes? While Jefferson tried and failed with these same grapes,

contemporary Virginians succeed wildly with cabernet sauvignon, merlot and other reds, as well as with chardonnay and viognier and other whites.

Virginia's winemakers have learned to work around or with the brutally hot summers, frosty springs, wet falls and unappealing soil structures of their land. Unlike Jefferson, they are the heirs of 20th-century advances in viticulture and winemaking that ensure more steady success in the winery. (These same advances grace the other regions of the globe that this column features.)

2009 RdV Vineyards Red Blend "Rendezvous," Virginia: Polished, multilayered, juicy-ripe, deeply pigmented; black-red fruits (cassis, blackberry) scented with Graves-like minerals; terrific. \$80

2009 Barboursville Vineyards Red Blend "Octagon," Virginia: A stand-in for a Right Bank Bordeaux, all plush, dark fruit with grace notes of vanilla and chocolate; as elegant a red as could be found. \$50

Portugal

Portugal's reds, whites, pinks, fortifieds and even its sparkling wines all continue to impress, especially with what you get for so little payout. A friend returning from a vacation in Lisbon remarked, "It's like all the prices on the restaurant wine lists were missing a digit."

Portugal's strengths as a winemaker are what the world outside of it see as its weaknesses: 250 unpronounceable indigenous grape varieties; its relative isolation, Pac-Man'ed as it is by winemaking colossus Spain; and, as master sommelier Evan Goldstein puts it, "no famed flying winemakers who go around the world sprinkling fairy dust" over the world's better-known vineyards.

2010 A. Semedo Tinto, Bairrada, Portugal: A 50/50 mix of baga and touriga nacional grapes for lifted, "sweet," ripe dark berry and cherry fruit, pretty hints of minerals and wood, all tied together with full-on acidity. \$16

2010 Symington Family Red Blend "Altano," Douro, Portugal: Buckets of smooth, juicy dark red fruit, a blend of several indigenous red grapes, inviting and refreshing and for no money. \$10

Crete

This portion of Greece excels in modern winemaking in the same way that Portugal does, by using its indigenous grape varieties, both white and red, to make appealing, very interesting and remarkably food-friendly wines. Crete has been at winemaking longer than Portugal, however, or most any winemaking region (its oldest wine press dates to 3,500 B.C.) and, except for the historical hiccups of the phylloxera infestation or Ottoman rule, it has pattered along making wine. Lately, again as the beneficiary of modern advances in viticulture and winemaking, its wines stand on the world stage alongside other older, re-emerging regions such as Slovenia, southern England, New York state and Hungary (look for more about these latter in columns from me in the new year).

2009 Boutari Red Blend "Skalani," Crete: From the native kotsifali grape, mixed with syrah, for something like a southern Rhone red, juicy black fruit scented with spice and pepper; always trust Boutari. \$40

2012 Lyrarakis Dafni, Crete: An indigenous white grape with an inviting aroma of bay leaf; hence, sauvignon blanc-y, if you will, but with smoother acidity; great with hard cheese. \$19

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.