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Virginia wine, a perfect match with Chesapeake oysters

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Jon Wehner stood at the end of the small pier and pointed to his right, across Church Creek. “Those are our oyster beds over there,” he said, indicating a series of white poles sticking out of the water near the north shore. “And over here to the left, closer to the bay, you can see Shooting Point’s bed.”

As he spoke, a small boat churned slowly toward us from the northwest, the sound of its motor cutting through the chilly November air. Tom and Ann Gullivan of the Shooting Point Oyster Co., based one creek up in Franktown, Va., were shuttling a small group of shivering food journalists and bloggers who had come to learn about Eastern Shore oysters and what to drink with them.

“Welcome to Chatham Vineyards,” Wehner greeted them, and launched into his spiel once more.

Wine-savvy travelers know to search out the local vino when on vacation, matching a country’s or region’s cuisine to its wines. We don’t think that way about Virginia, however, probably because we have only recently begun to recognize the Old Dominion as a major producer of high-quality wine. Wehner and other winemakers, with support from the state tourism agency, are promoting the idea that wines from their vineyards near the Chesapeake Bay make an ideal match for the region’s most famous food: the oyster. It’s a celebration not only of Virginia wine but also the recent resurgence of the Chesapeake’s oyster population through the growth of aquaculture.

“Oysters and wine taste more of the place they come from than any other foods,” said Mills Wehner, Jon’s wife and co-owner of Chatham Vineyards, in Machipongo. The couple tend 32,000 vines on 20 acres, planted in 1999. The property oozes history. The land was first deeded in 1640, and the Federal-era house overlooking Church Creek was built in 1818 and named for William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham.

Jon Wehner is a second-generation winegrower, having grown up on a vineyard his parents owned in Fairfax County from 1970 to 2000. At Chatham Vineyards he has crafted an unoaked chardonnay, called Church Creek Steel, that has gained a near-reverent following among Virginia wine fans. I would be tempted to compare it to Chablis, but that would undercut his contention that it is a true expression of the Eastern Shore.

“It’s a very site-expressive wine that reflects our maritime climate here on the Eastern Shore, with the steady breeze off the bay, and the sandy soils that contain a lot of calcium from decomposed shells,” Wehner explained.

At Chatham Vineyards that day, about 200 patrons sampled raw oysters from six purveyors around the Eastern Shore, from Chincoteague Bay to Church Creek, along with wild-caught oysters roasted over a wood fire. My favorites were Tom Gullivan’s delicate Nassawadox Salts, from the bay side of the peninsula, and Pete Terry’s bold and salty Sewansecott oysters, from Hog Island on the sea side. Atlantic-side oysters tend to be saltier because of the higher salinity of ocean waters; the Hog Island area is not affected by inland rivers, Terry said.

All of them were delicious with the Church Creek Steel Chardonnay.

A week before Chatham’s oyster festival, nearly 2,600 people gathered at the Dog and Oyster Vineyard in Irvington, at the tip of the Northern Neck, where the Rappahannock River feeds into the Chesapeake. This inaugural Virginia Wine and Oyster Classic featured wines from around the state,

not just the Chesapeake and Northern Neck, but the emphasis was the same: local wines with local foods.

That message is built into the name of the Dog and Oyster. Rescue dogs manage varmint control in the vineyard, where winegrower Mark Hollingsworth makes two bracing white wines that seem to cry out for bivalves. Pearl is made from vidal blanc, while Oyster White is chardonnay: two French-American hybrid grape varieties that are not mentioned on the label. That's a wise choice, given that most wine drinkers are not familiar with those grapes.

"People like the wines for their quality," Hollingsworth said. "They don't really know the grapes, or care."

The Dog and Oyster lies within the Northern Neck George Washington Birthplace American Viticultural Area, but Hollingsworth feels a kinship with wineries on the other side of the Chesapeake.

"Ingleside is 70 miles upriver," he said, referring to the Northern Neck's most prominent winery. "We're closer to wineries on the Eastern Shore."

And with all those delicious oysters in between.