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Virginia vino gets the documentary treatment

Grapes on film

BY J. TOBIAS BEARD

Virginia's burgeoning wine industry is going to be immortalized on film, yes, but no one's exactly sure when. Footage, lots of it, has been shot for a new feature-length documentary by Charlottesville-based [Silverthorn Films](#), called, for lack of an official title, Virginia Wine. Although there's no release date yet, Bill Reifenberger and his partners have taken footage at 13 wineries, filmed numerous interviews and even gone flying. They took noted local viticulturist [Chris Hill](#) up in an airplane to let him look at the vineyards he's been tending for the last 28 years in a way he never had before. And seeing our wine industry in a new way is what the filmmakers want to do for the rest of us as well.

"We've got over a year of our lives invested in [this film]," Bill Reifenberger says, sitting in the company's offices in the Glass Building south of the downtown mall. Silverthorn Films was founded in 2000 by Reifenberger, Ben Clore, and Lori Shinseki, and along with a few other regulars, they've made documentary films for PBS, the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, and UVA. They've covered topics as diverse as the Tuskegee Airmen and the transformative power of gardens, with a special emphasis on stories about Virginia, including profiles of Robert E. Lee and Doug Wilder. It was in casting around for the next Virginia story that Reifenberger hit on wine. "It is a cultural component of our area," he says, one that encompasses many other stories, like development, local food, family, and perhaps most of all, farming. "I think the number one thing people will take away from the film," he says, "is that Virginia wine is the story of agriculture."



Bill Reifenberger, left, and Ben Clore of Silverthorn Films see a world of concerns in the story of Virginia wine, from development and farming to family and drinking local.

We look at some rough footage of Gabriele Rausse pruning vines. It's winter, the ground snow-draped and blank, save for row after row of bare vines. Rausse is the only thing that moves, clipping branches, a small figure in a big, big world. And he's also a big figure in the small world of Virginia wine, the man who, in many ways, made it all happen when, in 1976, he planted the first vines at Barboursville. The camera captures both those stories. The footage wasn't planned, it's just what Rausse was doing that day, and Reifenberger and Clore happened to film it.

Silverthorn is making a documentary, not *Sideways 2: Monticello*. The filmmakers want to show us Virginia wine—capture it, not just talk about it. And what we'll see is the 2008 vintage in all its glory, from bud break to harvest. Which, Reifenberger admits, is not always super exciting. "No one gets eaten," he jokes. But clearly it's been thrilling for Reifenberger, who, although he wasn't much of a wine drinker before, seems to have been sucked in. There is a long row of empty Virginia wine bottles on the windowsill in the office. Good stuff too: Barboursville Octagon, Veritas Sauvignon Blanc Reserve, Jefferson Viognier. Working on the film has made him more appreciative of what wine does for the area—"what it's doing to preserve the rural landscape. A lot of those people don't have to do this," he says. He looks at the row of bottles.

"Research," Reifenberger says, smiling.