

Loudoun County Cultivates a Fast-Growing Wine Industry

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Driving along Tarara Lane, just off U.S. Route 15 north of Leesburg on a recent Saturday, I was distracted from the pastoral view by several signs. One signaled a wedding party to the left, while another heralded a family reunion to the right; a third pointed to a rafting excursion on the Potomac.

"There's supposed to be a winery in here somewhere," I muttered, feeling rather bucolicky.

Two crowded parking lots later, I found [Tarara's](#) tasting room just off a large deck packed with 20- and 30-somethings sipping wine, nibbling cheese and enjoying the cool September air. Jordan Harris, Tarara's young winemaker, bounded from the working winery to greet me. Reeking of sweat and grape must, he wiped his palm on his T-shirt before offering a sticky handshake, his face flushed with the excitement and frenzy of harvest.

"We're pressing viognier today," he said.

Harris came to Tarara just before the 2007 harvest from Ontario's Niagara wine region and immediately made changes that are bearing fruit in terms of higher quality. But he's just part of a larger story of Loudoun County's wine industry, which in the past six years has more than doubled in size. Loudoun County now boasts 23 wineries, according to the Virginia Wine Board, nearly as many as the Monticello district that encompasses four counties surrounding Charlottesville. All these wineries interspersed with the suburban sprawl of the national capital region have led Loudoun to dub itself "D.C.'s Wine Country."

The wineries are more than mere wedding factories or pleasant weekend diversions. There's much to like in Loudoun County wine.

"The diversity of varietals is what sets Loudoun County wine apart," said Lori Corcoran, co-owner with her husband, Jim, of [Corcoran Vineyards](#) and president of the [Loudoun Wineries Association](#). Corcoran herself is bullish on malbec. Harris at Tarara is betting on syrah. At [Chrysalis](#), near Middleburg, Jennifer McCloud champions Norton as Virginia's native grape, but her albariño has proved so successful that at least two other Loudoun wineries, [Sunset Hills](#) and [Willowcroft](#), are now growing it. David Collins at [Breux Vineyards](#) produces nebbiolo that brings a taste of Piemonte to the Piedmont.

As the "eat local" movement gains strength, so will the "drink local" trend, especially as the quality of winemaking improves. Todd Thrasher, sommelier and general manager of Restaurant Eve in Old Town Alexandria, joined me in a tasting of 28 Loudoun County wines and proclaimed himself a convert, adding wines from Boxwood Winery and Chrysalis to his lists at Restaurant Eve and the Majestic. He also decided to pour only Virginia and Maryland wines at the annual Farmland Feast dinner Nov. 4, benefiting area farm markets, for which he coordinates the wines.

"We tend to think of Virginia wines as being 'not French,' " Thrasher said, echoing a common negative comparison for local wines. "But we need to think of them as Virginia wines, because many of them are quite good."

Tarara, opened in 1985, is one of Loudoun County's oldest wineries, but Harris has steered it in a new direction. He insisted that all Tarara wines be bottled under screw caps and ended the use of French-American hybrid grape varieties in favor of classic European wine grapes. Most important, he decreed that Tarara would no longer use grapes grown outside Virginia, a regrettably common (and legal) practice among many wineries. Faced with a cool, rainy growing season this year, he ordered vineyard workers to drop half of the grape crop on the ground so the rest would have a better chance to ripen fully, a difficult decision for any farmer to make.

As he used a wine thief -- a long, thin glass pipette -- to draw me a barrel sample of his 2008 merlot, Harris confided that he was contemplating blending and labeling the final wines according to their vineyard rather than their grape variety. There is too much emphasis on cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon or whatever grape and not enough on the vineyard itself, he said.

If Harris acts on that thought, he'll be following the lead of [Boxwood](#), one of Loudoun's newest wineries. On a historic horse farm near Middleburg, John Kent Cooke presides over 16 acres of vines. The communications mogul and former Washington Redskins owner has a vineyard that differs from most in Virginia: It has 2,010 vines per acre, in the Bordeaux fashion. (An average acre in the rest of the state has about 800.) Advocates of dense planting argue that the expensive technique helps to control the vine's vigor and to concentrate flavor in the grapes, which can lead to more complex wines.

Boxwood does not label its wines by grape variety but produces two Bordeaux-style blends using only grapes grown on the estate. The first, called simply Boxwood, is modeled after wines from Bordeaux's Left Bank and features equal parts cabernet sauvignon and merlot, with some petit verdot. The second, Topiary, is a cabernet franc-merlot blend in the style of St. Emilion. (The winery also makes a rosé from juice bled off the cabernet franc during pressing.)