

A mixed case

September 28, 2009 6:05 AM

by Jim Raper

Even connoisseurs may not know what to expect from a Virginia wine with a proprietary name such as Hardscrabble. After all, wine buyers in the United States, and most of the rest of the world, have shown a clear preference for varietals — wines labeled by grape variety.



Wine Spectator put Linden Vineyards owner Jim Law at the head of the class among Virginia winemakers.

But as comforted as consumers may be to find a familiar variety such as Chardonnay prominently on the label, many Virginia winemakers are gambling on upscale blends. Since they are not entitled to varietal names and, therefore, require hard-to-decipher labels that can be a drag on sales, why the gamble, especially in these difficult economic times?

Quite simply because Virginia's most consistently delicious and complex wines, particularly reds, are likely to be non-varietal blends. At least that's the opinion of many industry experts. And publicity seems to be bearing out their judgment.

Octagon, a red wine made by Barbourville Vineyards in Orange County, won a ringing endorsement from the famed British wine critic Michael Broadbent in the August issue of Decanter magazine. This was just the latest of several major media blessings bestowed on this achievement of winemaker Luca Paschina.

Hardscrabble, another red, is the most expensive wine from Linden Vineyards in Warren County and has a cult-like following. Wine Spectator magazine earlier this year put Linden owner Jim Law at the head of the class among Virginia winemakers.

Reserve d'Oriane, a white blend of Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier and Petit Manseng, from DelFosse Vineyards and Winery south of Charlottesville, may not have the star-power of Octagon or Hardscrabble, but this wine has been buoyed in recent months by a CNN television report from the Virginia wine booth at the London International Wine Fair and a thumbs-up review in the Washington Post.

Champions of varietals can point to the Virginia Governor's Cup competition for state wines. The event has anointed a best-in-show bottle annually since 1982. Every cup winner has been a varietal, with Chardonnays and Cabernet Sauvignons leading the way.

Included among the winners, however, are at least one Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc, Gewürztraminer, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Syrah, which supports the case of those who favor blends. (For a list of some of Virginia's best blends, see page 20). Virginia's quirky grape-growing conditions make it difficult for vintners to find one or two varieties that they can build an industry around. Besides, even the varietals made in the state — say the Cabernet Sauvignons — are usually augmented, with dollops of Merlot or Cabernet Franc. The grape name is allowed on a label if that variety is the source of at least 75 percent of the wine in the bottle.



Shepherd Rouse of Rockbridge Vineyard likens a blended wine to an investment portfolio. 'You must be diversified.'

So Virginia grape growers are not likely to pin all of their hopes on one variety. "It's like an investment portfolio. You must be diversified," says Shepherd Rouse, owner and winemaker of Rockbridge Vineyard south of Staunton. "Merlot, which ripens early, can be harvested and then the weather will go to hell afterwards, playing havoc with Cabernet Sauvignon. And in some years it's just the opposite. The rationale behind blending various percentages of the varieties is that every year at least one should produce grapes in good condition, ripe. The other varieties that might not be in as good condition can still add complexity."

Law at Linden says that the best red wines in the state are blends of traditional Bordeaux grapes — Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Malbec and Carmenere. "This is why I devote so much time to studying Bordeaux wines and vineyards," he explains.

"Using Hardscrabble as an example, Cabernet Sauvignon is the foundation of the wine with its wonderful mouth-coating tannins and bright acidity. Cabernet Sauvignon, however, lacks mid-palate weight and needs Merlot to give the wine fat and fill in the middle," explains Law. "Once we work out the basic framing of the blend, then we start to add spice aromatics by playing with the Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Carmenere."

Of the traditional Bordeaux varieties, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Merlot have shown more of an affinity for the Virginia terroir, while Cabernet Sauvignon has proven to be more difficult to get ripe. Law believes another "blending partner," as he called it, could be Tannat, a red variety also imported from southwest France.

There are producers, such as Dennis Horton, owner and winemaker at Horton Vineyards in Orange County, who are into more exotic blends. They use lesser known noble varieties from Europe — Touriga Nacional, Syrah, Mourvedre and Grenache among them — to blend up wines of true distinction. Horton's Stonecastle Red is sometimes a blend of nine varieties, but he may not stop there in the future. "Hey, the great Chateaufeuf du Pape wines of France can be made of up to 13 varieties," he noted. "Gives us something to shoot for."