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## Virginia's first lady, Maureen McDonnell, gets behind the local wine biz

Executive privilege

BY CATHY HARDING

You have to hand it to Virginia First Lady Maureen McDonnell: She can tell a joke. Leading a contingent of 30 restaurant and retail people from Richmond and Virginia Beach to [Jefferson Vineyards](#) last week, as part of her effort to promote Virginia wines, she listened cheerfully while winemaker Andy Reagan described his success with the 2009 Pinot Gris, freshly bottled in November. "Sounds like November 2009 was good for you just like for my husband," she said, knocking back the discreet pour in her glass.

The event, shepherded by the [Virginia Wine Marketing Board](#), which also included stops at [Veritas](#) and [White Hall Vineyards](#), was the first of a series of such statewide visits to come. "It's very smart," Short Pump restaurateur Christy Ottaviano said of the move to involve the First Lady—as well as Agriculture Secretary Todd Haymore—in Virginia wine promotion. [The Wine Loft](#), the establishment she runs with her husband Jeff, serves 70 wines by the glass and even more by the bottle. "We try to support the local industry," Jeff said, "but initially it can be a hard sell."

As reported last week, there has been more than casual concern that a bill recently introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives will make everything harder for the wine industry nationwide by preventing wineries from shipping directly to consumers. But when we stole a minute with Haymore at Jefferson, he was more sanguine about it. "I understand the bill has a lot of opponents and some in Washington have told me it's a nonstarter. The bill has a long way to go," he said, noting that it has not a single Virginia co-sponsor.



**Marketing muscle at work: Hosting restaurant and retail buyers, First Lady Maureen McDonnell (pictured) and Agriculture Secretary Todd Haymore plan to tour wineries across Virginia. Last week they started their Charlottesville tour at Jefferson Vineyards.**

Speaking of Virginia grapes, Washingtonian Magazine food critic [Todd Kliman](#) has just published *The Wild Vine*, which comes as close to being a potboiler as a book about a native American grape can possibly be. Virginia figures large in the story, what with TJ failing after 50 years of trying to produce wine on his estate and then, in the early 19th century, a heartbroken Richmond doctor by the name of Daniel Norton developing a grape that could survive in North American soil. He gave that grape his name and a century and a half later it found its champion in Virginia winemaker Jenni McCloud, whose Middleburg winery, [Chrysalis Vineyards](#), produces wine from a variety of unusual grapes.

We got Kliman on the horn the other week for a brief discussion of *The Wild Vine*.

**Working Pour:** What informed your choice to reveal Jenni McCloud's sex change operation in the midst of a story about an American grape?

**Todd Kliman:** I was not interested in writing a book that proclaims my love of wine or my love of a grape. I'm interested in [Norton](#) because of its history and its people. To me, Norton is the outsider grape. It's a story of outsiders, and people on the margins. Jenni's story is part and parcel of that.

Always interested in the moment when people become galvanized by something. Norton is this double blow. To me this story is reinvention. And Jenni is the ultimate story in reinvention. Those decisions to leave behind this life as a businessman and very hard charging life in the tech world and embrace this Jeffersonian idea of a gentlewoman farmer—this is the double helix of her life.

**WP:** As you note, many people object to Norton's foxiness in its taste. Even Jenni admits it needs a lot of age on it to be tamed.

**TK:** It's a wine of extremes. I happen to like Norton; it's very much a food wine. It's not the wine you're going to sip late at night by the fireplace. There are certainly going to be people who read the book, pick up a bottle of wine and say, "This is terrible." That's O.K. This is a highly personal book. This is not a brief on behalf of Norton.

**WP:** What did you drink last night?

**TK:** My mom and I have a book group. Last night we had a South African Shiraz and a Mas Carlot Rosé. It was a beautiful color, like crushed strawberries and cream.