

Wine Spectator

James suckling uncorked



James Suckling

Fun in Virginia

Discovering some unexpectedly excellent wines in Virginia wine country

Posted: May 7, 2010 12:00pm ET

I spent the weekend driving into the depths of Virginia and West Virginia with some friends after the Grand Tour in Washington, D.C., and we stopped off at two Virginia wineries, [Boxwood](#) and Chrysalis. I have to say that I didn't have great expectations for these places. I thought that the climate was too humid and too hot to produce quality grapes for wine production. But I was obviously wrong.

Both Chrysalis and Boxwood take their viticulture and winemaking seriously. Their vineyards are immaculately kept and their wineries well-designed and spotless. I don't want to bore you with all the details of the vineyard acreage, winery design, tanks, vats and barrels. I think the underlying reason why both are successful is their dedication to fine-tuned viticulture, which means staying on top of the vinegrowing from acute disease control to precise canopy management.

I like the whites better at Chrysalis, although the owner, Jennifer McCloud, is enamored with her local red variety, Norton. "It is a Virginia grape and it is versatile," she said. "We can make a sangria-like wine or a serious red. I love it."

Still, I prefer her whites, especially her Viogner and Albariño. The latter is the best Albariño I have had outside of the Iberian Peninsula. Both whites have a lovely perfumed and tropical fruit character, with fresh and rich palates. They are particularly crisp and fine compared to Viogners, for example, from California. These are small-production whites, about 700 cases of the Viogner and 250 of the Albariño. Both the 2009 and 2008 are available. I thought they were all very good to outstanding.

Jennifer also makes a fabulous sweet white from Petit Manseng. It was apparently the first legally PM in the United States. It's made through cryoextraction, whereby the grapes are frozen in a big freezer. The 2008 was very sweet and rich, with loads of dried pineapple, dried apricot, and mango character. There was so much going on in the glass. It was a dead ringer for a late-harvest wine from France's Jurançon. Outstanding.

Boxwood doesn't make white wines, but it produces a deliciously bright and fruity rosé. Go for the very good 2009 that just went in bottle. The reds are made from blends of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. I went around the small, perfectly built cellar and tasted each variety from the 2009 vintage. And I liked all of them except for the Merlot, which was sort of diluted. Granted, the vines are very young.

They make two reds: Topiary and Boxwood. The former is a blend of Cabernet Franc and Merlot; the latter is usually from Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Petit Verdot. I prefer the latter because of its racier, finer and classier tannin and fruit structure. It says very good Bordeaux to me. Look for the 2007 over the 2008, but the 2009 could be the best ever.

John Kent Cooke, a former owner and president of the NFL Washington Redskins, owns the chic, petit winery. His Bordeaux-trained stepdaughter Rachel Martin runs it with the help of Stéphane Derenoncourt, the famous Bordeaux-based consulting enologists.

Anyway, I am sure there is a lot more to discover in Virginia wine country as small as it can be. Last weekend was like discovering a new wine region in Italy or Europe. So fun.

Member comments 11 comment(s)

Andrew J Walter — Sacramento, CA — May 7, 2010 2:18pm ET

This is another reason (if we need another reason) to oppose HR5034. As of today, I am legally able to go on the web and buy some of these wines and have them shipped to California. Thats good for business which is good for everyone...esp for these small wineries. I've never had these wines although I have bought a few VA wines over the years to serve as ringers in blind tastings (mostly Viogners and Merlot based blends) with generally suprisingly good results. I will buy a few bottles of the whites on your reccomendations james. Thanks!

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Stewart Lancaster — beaver.pa — May 7, 2010 2:39pm ET

This past weekend I too visited three wineries in Virginia including Jefferson, Barbourville and King Family. They all make a large number of wines. I was impressed with the well made structure of the wines. The major problem is their prices. Whites were 15-25 dollars and the reds are \$25 and up. Difficult to compete with those prices. But, the overall quality was good.

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Sergio Gonzalez — Los Angeles, CA USA — May 7, 2010 2:45pm ET

Thanks for the heads-up on these wines. I enjoy Bordeaux styled wines and will be trying the Boxwood out. I'm searching the internet now. I'm glad you're out there in the field, always exploring.

Thanks.

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Ben Gilliberti — Washington, DC — May 7, 2010 4:55pm ET

I would also recommend visiting Chateau O'Brien, which is an easy drive from DC on rt 66. Taste the tannat - pretty serious stuff. Dr. Tony Wolf of Va. Tech consults.

<http://www.chateauobrien.com/visit/>

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Farhana Haque — Queens, NY — May 7, 2010 9:00pm ET

I remember having a Cab Franc from Barboursville a few years ago (I believe it was a 1990 vintage). I was completely thrown off-guard. What a great wine!

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Karl Mark — Geneva, IL. — May 7, 2010 9:49pm ET

I love hearing stories like this. Living in Chicago I'm in between the major growing regions of the country, but I still make an effort to try local wines from Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan. I'm hoping to visit the Traverse City area of Michigan and go wine tasting this spring. Very excited.

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Angela B Robertson — Naples, Florida USA — May 7, 2010 10:04pm ET

Check out Breaux in Northern Virginia near Harpers Ferry. Great whites, reds and dessert wine!!!

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Jenn Hinkle — Alexandria, VA — May 8, 2010 9:46pm ET

Thank you for your timely blog; I just moved to Virginia this month, and I am very excited to start tasting the wines the area. You have given me a great start. Kudos!

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Philip A Chauche — Germantown, MD — May 9, 2010 9:23am ET

Next time through, take a sidetrip through Maryland and visit the Black Ankle Vineyard near Mt. Airy. They have a nice selection of Bordeaux-style wines, and a very nice Syrah, as well.

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Richard Wilkerson — Alexandria, VA — May 9, 2010 7:33pm ET

We have yet to try Boxwood and Chrysalis though we have been very pleased with a few Virginia wines. In particular, any thing Chris Pearmund makes (or has a hand in) you should taste. Pearmund Cellars and The Winery at Lagrange are both near Haymarket, VA (30 minutes from DC) and Paradise Springs is in Clifton (20 minutes from DC). Several wines from each of these are very good. One of our favorites is the Madeira-styled Vin de Sol at Pearmund Cellars.

My biggest complaint with many Virginia wineries is they spend more time and money building a wedding destination than they do on their wines. Many also experiment too much with varieties when it is commonly known Cabernet Franc, Tanat, Norton and Viognier provide some of the best wines here. Some experimentation is good but many wineries bottle 14-20 different wines each vintage. It is common to visit a Virginia winery and have 7 or 8 wines in the regular tasting and another 6 in the Reserve tasting.

Unfortunately the price of most Virginia wines, due to production costs, are just too high for the quality. We enjoy tasting through as many as we can but ultimately there is much greater value in other, more developed regions. Hopefully as viticulture improves quality will go up and prices will be more competitive.

We are more interested than ever to try Boxwood, where Bordeaux great Stephane Derenecourt is a fly-in consultant. We may also have to swing by Chrysalis and try that Albarino and PM.

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William Mcilhenny — Washington, DC — May 9, 2010 10:05pm ET

It's interesting to see the comments about the price of Virginia wines. While a bad wine is no bargain at any price, Virginia boasts a lot of excellent wines that really are a bargain in the \$15-25 range. These are often tiny production, elegant, artisanal wines--the sort of wine that, from California, often commands a ludicrously high price.

From a consumer's point of view, I think Virginia wine has a whole lot to offer. It's great to see someone like James recognize this. And it is great to see savvy sommeliers at some of Washington's best restaurants picking up on this too.

