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The state of 'locapour' around Washington



Virginia first lady Maureen McDonnell and state Agriculture Secretary Todd P. Haymore raise a glass to Breaux Vineyards during a visit there on the wine tour. (Richard A. Lipski for The Washington Post)

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Maureen McDonnell was on a mission. Chagrined that Virginia wines are hard to find on retail shelves and restaurant wine lists, the commonwealth's first lady spent time in late August introducing Washington area retailers and sommeliers to wineries in Loudoun and Fauquier counties.

Her message: Forget what you remember about Virginia wines and taste them anew.

"When I dine at restaurants and see that they don't have Virginia wines on the list, I introduce myself to the manager and ask, 'Why not?' " McDonnell said in an interview after two days of tours, attended by representatives of 28 restaurants and eight retailers. "They usually have impressions of the wines from long ago and didn't take the chance to reexamine them as they improved."

As the "eat local" movement has taken root in restaurant kitchens across the country, a "drink local" movement has blossomed as well. It started, ironically enough, in California, where the San Francisco Chronicle reported last year that area vintners were complaining about locavore restaurants that glorified local farmers but stocked their lists with imported wines. Washingtonian magazine food critic Todd Kliman took the argument national this summer with an essay published on TheDailyBeast.com entitled "The Locavore Wine Hypocrisy."

"Why is it that the lust for local stops short when it comes to local or regional wines?" Kliman asked.

Why, indeed? Vineyards are farms. Many local wineries are small-output, boutique producers with an artisanal approach. So why aren't there more local wines on local wine lists?

McDonnell had at least one very receptive guest on her tours. German Broggi arrived in Washington in June as the new beverage director at the Park Hyatt Hotel and its fervently locavore restaurant, Blue Duck Tavern. A native of Argentina and a 15-year veteran of the Park Hyatt's global empire, Broggi immediately set out to visit local wineries with the idea of building Blue Duck Tavern's "locapour" credentials.

Broggi called the tour an "eye-opening" introduction to Virginia wine country and its family-owned wineries. This month, he unveiled a new wine list for Blue Duck with an entire page dedicated to Virginia wines. He's working on a similar page for Maryland wines and intends to add local beers and spirits.

Broggi's enthusiasm is still the exception, however. A discussion with chefs, sommeliers and growers yields these explanations: Quality is poor, and diners don't want to drink local wines, anyway; and the wines are not well distributed, making them difficult for restaurants to buy.

Winery folks chafe at what they perceive to be a Washington area bias against local bottles.

"I've had calls from trendy restaurants in California, Oregon and Washington state asking for our wines," says Jennifer Breaux Blosser, who hosted McDonnell's group for a locally sourced lunch at Breaux Vineyards in Purcellville. She attributed that interest to out-of-town visitors who take a bottle to their favorite restaurants back home to share with the sommeliers.

"It's amazing that we are embraced more by restaurants in places where I can't sell our wine than we are in the D.C. market," she says. "We're right here. We'll do your wine dinner. You can have the winemaker or a member of the family."

One of the restaurants Kliman singled out in his critique was Alexandria's Restaurant Eve. Noting that owners Cathal and Meshelle Armstrong are strong supporters of local farmers, Kliman tut-tutted that on their wine list, "only two locally produced bottles make the cut."

That ignited a vitriolic discussion among the vinoscenti on DonRockwell.com, where Meshelle Armstrong had posted a lengthy response. Her defense boiled down to: Local wines generally aren't good enough to be served at Restaurant Eve, and when they are offered, customers reject them. That leaves the restaurant eating the cost.

"I don't buy Virginia asparagus because it's local, I buy it because it's the best," Cathal Armstrong said in an interview after the locapour brouhaha. "And we don't buy wine because it's from France, California or Virginia, but because we like it." (When I visited Eve, there were three Virginia wines from two wineries on the extensive and frequently updated list, including Thibaut-Janisson Blanc de Chardonnay, a sparkling wine the restaurant has served by the glass since it was introduced three years ago.)

Eve's sommelier, Todd Thrasher, said he regularly put Virginia wines in the pairings menu for the restaurant's prix-fixe meals but encountered resistance from customers.

"If you put the wine in front of them and say it's from Virginia, they get 'the look,' and you can tell they assume it's not good," Thrasher said. And in the more than six years since Eve opened its doors, he says, customers have requested Virginia wines "maybe three or four times."

Consumer expectations might play a role here. A dinner at Restaurant Eve isn't cheap, and diners might not consider local wine special enough for a special occasion. The Armstrongs regularly list eight to 10 local wines at the Majestic, their less formal restaurant in Alexandria, and they say sales there are better, if not robust.

At CityZen, in the District's Mandarin Oriental hotel, executive chef Eric Ziebold supports local farmers and has struggled to do the same with area vintners. He lists Kluge Estate sparkling wine at CityZen and at its sister restaurant, Sou'Wester, and is negotiating with the winery to create a private-label bubbly. He has had some success matching the Horton Vineyards petit manseng with the first course of his tasting menu, "when you can throw the customer a curveball because he knows the lobster and white Burgundy are coming." But Ziebold says he has had trouble forging a mutually beneficial relationship with local winegrowers.

Many local wineries sell most if not all of their production at the winery tasting room or through festivals, so there is little incentive for winemakers to visit high-profile Washington area restaurants. Some, however, make the effort.

"We've been welcomed by the Maryland restaurant community," says Ed Boyce, co-owner of Black Ankle Vineyards in Mount Airy, which has led Maryland's recent quality revolution. "That's our market, because restaurants are where people try things." Boyce praised Woodberry Kitchen and Fleming's Prime Steakhouse, both in Baltimore, and Ricciuti's in Olney for their support of the state's wine industry.

Distribution is a problem.

"Mrs. McDonnell is putting a great effort into promoting Virginia wine, but the state should be putting more money and energy into getting distributors to sell the wine," says Michael Sternberg, co-proprietor of the three Harry's Tap Room restaurants in Northern Virginia. He also cited the problem of "legacy wineries" that haven't kept pace with the improvement in local wines and continue to feed the market perception of poor quality.

And yet, Sternberg regularly carries a dozen Virginia bottles on his lists, from wineries such as Barbourville, Cardinal Point, Pollak and CrossKeys. They are wines he has sought out and discovered during his travels across the state. And he has invested extra effort in educating his staff about the wines, which he likes to offer by the glass.

Despite the market obstacles, other local restaurants have been willing to invest the time and effort and take a chance on local wines. Silver Diner's new "fresh and local" menu can be washed

down with wines from Barboursville, Horton and Chateau Morrisette. Oya and Sei in Penn Quarter feature quirky wines from around the country, not just this region.

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