

# Virginia: America's Old World

It doesn't get the media coverage that California does, but Virginia is tipped to be the next big thing in American wine. Jason Tesauo picks out the varieties and producers that are bringing the area to wider attention, at home and abroad

A DASHING DUTCHMAN EMERGES from his slick travel trailer to pour three wines, including his own. The 2008 Château Léoville-Barton (£65) will mellow, but in its adolescence, the second growth is standoffish. Flanking it, a voluptuous 2008 Colgin IX Estate Napa Valley Red Wine (£330). Standing between these classic examples of Bordeaux austerity and California opulence, an elegant yet juicy wine from a rising star and rocky hilltop one hour west of Washington, DC. Rutger de Vink's RdV Vineyards Lost Mountain 2009 (£50) wins the day. Not surprisingly – I later learn – Jancis Robinson scored it 18/20.

Virginia wines are coming of age at the moment when American palates are doing the same. Despite California's global rise in the 1970s, the US of yore still treated wine as a cocktail and fast food as a treat. Enter the era of slow-food consciousness and go-local fetishism. After years of high-octane wines – and one heck of a hangover – open-minded drinkers who have tired of the density, oak and alcohol often found on the west coast are now showing interest in Virginia's delicacy, stainless steel and food-friendliness.

Ironically, since New World obsession never caught on in England, UK critics touted Virginia even before America's own mainstream wine press. Michael Broadbent, for instance, reported on his first 'seriously good wine' from Virginia (the 1998 Barboursville Vineyards Octagon 3rd Edition) in 2001. Thus, 400 years after the Jamestown Experiment, the Brits have a new Virginia outpost. 'The English want to like American wine, and Virginia consistently delivers finesse and elegance,' says Broadbent's son, US-based wine importer Bartholomew Broadbent.

'They are a perfect bridge between the west coast and Europe,' says Jennifer Knowles, sommelier at the famed The Inn At Little Washington. It is fate: the heart of Virginia wine country lies practically at

the midpoint between Bordeaux and Napa Valley. 'Very simply,' said Steven Spurrier during a 2012 visit, 'Virginia makes the kinds of wines I like to drink.'

Then...

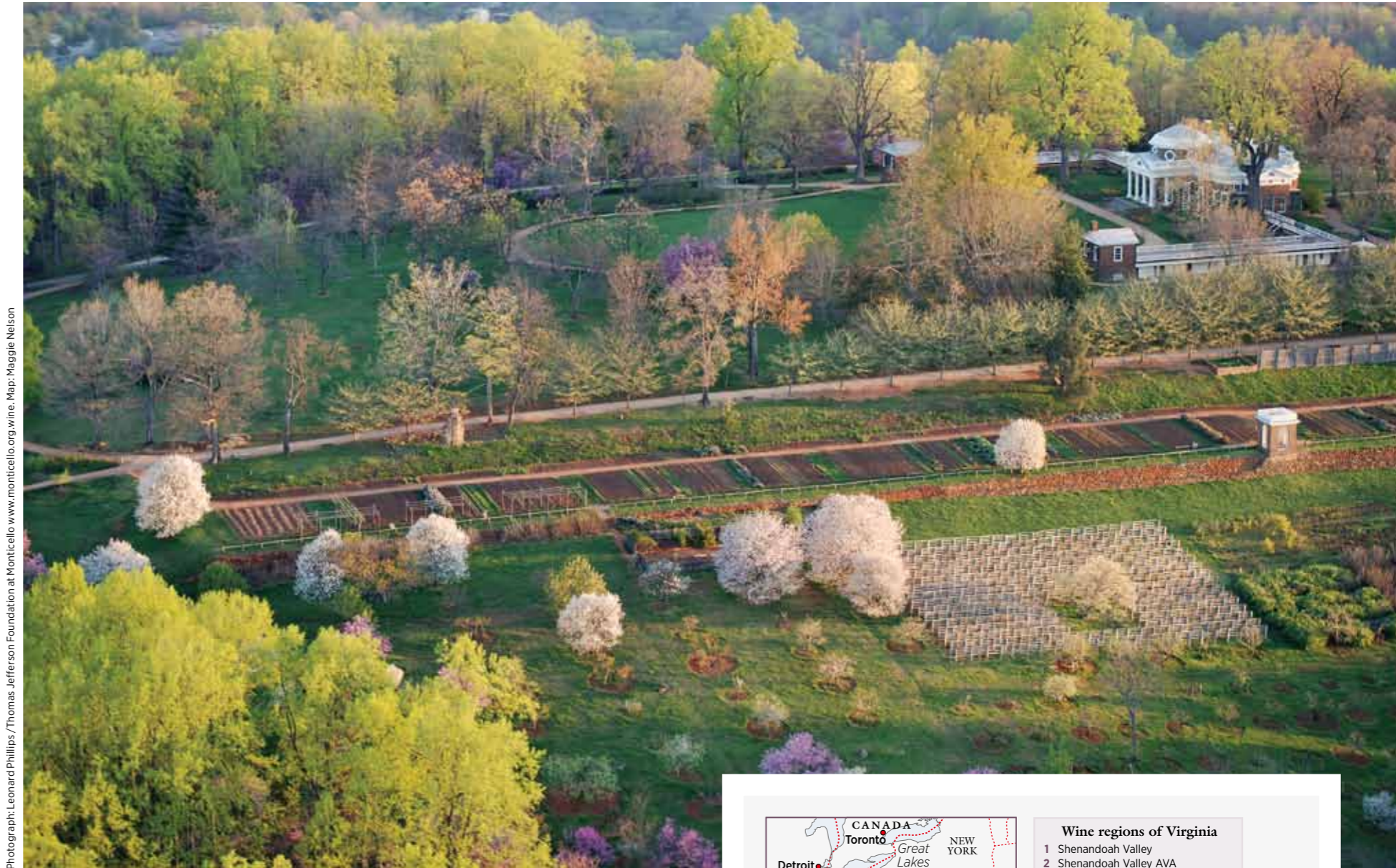
Virginia's wine timeline begins in 1774, when Italian viticulturist Filippo Mazzei planted clippings from France, Italy and Spain at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. The 19th-century phylloxera blight and Prohibition (1919) wiped out the wine culture until Italy's Zonin family founded Barboursville (1976) and ushered in the modern renaissance.

In the 1980s, plantings shifted from French hybrids to vinifera, and the 1990s saw Riesling and Pinot Noir bulldozed in favour of Viognier, Cabernet Franc and Bordeaux varieties. Winegrowers fine-tuned their terroir thanks to a strong oenological and viticultural research programme at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, plus support from the tourism industry, Department of Agriculture and, most importantly, a kind of open-door collaboration unheard of in Europe. 'We try to work collectively, not protect trade secrets,' says Matthieu Finot, winemaker at King Family.

By the late 2000s, Virginia had emerged as the fifth-largest wine-producing state in the US, thriving outside of California's shadow alongside Washington, New York and Oregon.

...and now

As a predominately warm region, Virginia's long growing season combines with varied exposure, altitudes and soil types to ripen most varieties. It's far from love at first sight, however. Striking out on his own after an apprenticeship under famed Virginia winegrower Jim Law, Rutger de Vink devoted three years and 100 test holes to identifying RdV's stone-ridden sweet spot of poor soils where high-vigour vines perform best. A soil scientist first identified it as 'nothing but a pile of rocks'. Only



Photograph: Leonard Phillips / Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello www.monticello.org/wine. Map: Maggie Nelson



Above: Rutger de Vink, who spent three years investigating RdV's terroir

Top: Monticello, where Virginia's wine story began

*'The English want to like American wine, and Virginia consistently delivers finesse and elegance'*

**Bartholomew Broadbent, US-based wine importer**

three harvests later, RdV is regularly named among the state's best producers.

'Soil is first and climate comes second,' says Luca Paschina, winemaker and general manager at Barboursville, Virginia's benchmark winery. 'My number-one advice for each grower is to gain a better understanding of their soil. Some are still planting what grows in the market, instead of what grows well on their site.' De Vink says: 'We set out to continue what Luca had done, what Jim had done at Linden Vineyards, the pioneers of Virginia.' >





Michael Shaps, winemaking consultant for more than 30 Virginia wineries, tells clients: 'I can't just wave the magic wand. Put your money into vineyards, not me.' Old World regions cannot expand, but the New World can, if only as fast as its vines. Gesturing to a denuded hilltop where he has cleared 16 hectares, George Hodson, general manager at the family-run Veritas Vineyard & Winery, says: 'Until we get significant investment in vineyards, we'll be a novelty.'

Virginia's tasting rooms are filled with accents, and not just from international visitors. Nearly 40% of the state's winemakers are French, Italian, South African or Spanish expats, imported for their passion, patience and minimalist approach. Matthieu Finot, winemaker at King Family since 2007, studied in Côte de Nuits, Bandol, Jura and elsewhere. He says: 'We're used to bad weather and can adapt to what's happening. A California winemaker will not know so well how to handle rain and vintage variability.'

Hodson's sister, Emily Pelton agrees. As winemaker at Veritas, her skills weren't forged at UC Davis like many American oenologists, but via a Masters

degree in infectious diseases – and the frosts, droughts and rains that came with the job entrusted to her by her British parents.

Veramar Vineyard winemaker Justin Bogaty says: 'We become better from challenging years.' Veramar's 2011 Cabernet Franc (12.7% alcohol) shows classic varietal tartness and smokiness, though it's a tad thinner than in drier years. 'Not bad for 36 days of sunshine,' Bogaty quips. He's a UC Davis graduate making everyday wines – with whole-cluster fermentation and gentle tannins – in part because there's no empty space in his cellar for ageing: 'I haven't got a corner to tuck it into.'

### Calling cards

'Virginia is innovative enough to grow Petit Manseng, but traditional enough not to reinvent the wheel,' explains Pelton. Paschina adds: 'We have to make wines that are excellent, not just very good. That means we should know our varietal limits.'

Investment in lesser-known varieties and Bordeaux blends is paying off with world-class recognition. Virginia's white calling card is

**Below: King Family's Matthieu Finot says Europeans can handle bad weather better than Californian winemakers**



### Recent vintages

**2012** Very good. Record early bud break led to early ripening. Producers who pruned performed very well.

**2011** Uneven. Whites fared well, reds from northern regions ripened better than central producers who endured much September rain.

**2010** Excellent. One of the driest vintages. Warmer-than-average summer led to early harvest. Balance/finesse for those who didn't pick late.

**2009** Outstanding. Wet spring, followed by a dry summer and beautiful September; hurricanes dodged in October. An even and ideal season destined to become a classic.

**2008** Very good. Long growing season. Diligent canopy management and late harvest led to elegant, ageable wines.

Viognier, which can show tremendous structure and depth here. 'We're trying not to get it too ripe,' explains Finot. His 2011 is generously aromatic, handled in 70% stainless steel with the remainder in neutral oak, French acacia barrels and concrete eggs. Around the state, vinification varies, but top examples undergo *sur lie* ageing in steel or neutral wood to preserve the nose, freshness and minerality. Those with ample acidity even hold up to cellaring. Barboursville's rare eight and ten-year-old Viogniers show honeyed hues, silky textures and plenty of life.

There's nearly twice as much Chardonnay planted, though it shares Viognier's leaner tendencies, with most wines either eschewing wood or evincing Burgundian restraint. Elsewhere, Thibaut-Janisson Winery introduced major méthode Champenoise fizz to VA, while Sauvignon Blanc, Vermentino and sophisticated stickies made from Petit Manseng and Moscato demonstrate aptitude and even mastery, but the number of plots is still tiny. Foggy Ridge Cider is also moving the needle with outstanding estate ciders from resurrected heirloom varieties that would please VA forefathers and the mother country alike.

The defining red grape of Virginia is Cabernet Franc. Francs here are medium-bodied and earthy with black fruits and high acidity. Andrew Hodson, Veritas' patriarch, highlights delicate tannins reminiscent of Chinon and Burgundy: 'It should almost be called Pinot Franc instead of Cabernet Franc.' Bartholomew Broadbent declares that 'Virginia makes the best Cabernet Franc in the world'. It has become the litmus test for site selection and winemaking talent: if someone's Franc is plonk, don't blame Virginia.

Around the world, Petit Verdot is consigned to a minor role in blends to boost acidity, tannin and colour. 'It eats oak alive,' says Pelton, and its backbone and inky hues enliven VA clarets, but its dill, violet and raspberry are producing complex monovarietal wines too. Spurrier is wowed: 'I'm surprised Virginia can create that elegance in such a short time with Petit Verdot.'

### Virginia at a glance

The state has 230 wineries across nine regions and seven American Viticultural Areas (AVAs – see below). Central and northern regions represent nearly 80% of production. Piedmont is characterised by well-draining red clay; the north features low-vigour silt loam over crumbling granite; Shenandoah Valley is known for its limestone skeins; in the east and along the coast, sandy loam is common.

According to the Virginia Wine Board, Chardonnay is the most popular variety, followed by Cabernet Franc.

#### Central Virginia Region

■ Monticello AVA (38 wineries): The 'classico' of Virginia. Foothills along eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

#### Northern Virginia Region

■ Middleburg Virginia AVA (24 wineries): 50 miles west of Washington, DC, with Potomac River to the north and mountains on the other three sides.

#### Shenandoah Valley Region

■ Shenandoah Valley AVA (22 wineries): the state's largest AVA. Bounded by Blue Ridge to the east and Appalachian mountains to the west.

#### Chesapeake Bay Region

■ Northern Neck George Washington Birthplace AVA (11 wineries): Peninsula between Potomac and Rappahannock rivers on the Chesapeake Bay.

#### Eastern Virginia Region

■ Virginia's Eastern Shore AVA (three wineries): Atlantic to the east, Chesapeake Bay to the west. Sea breezes and sandy soil.

#### Blue Ridge Highlands Region

■ North Fork of Roanoke AVA (two wineries): Summer heat tempered by cool, foggy mornings.  
 ■ Rocky Knob AVA (two wineries): Well-drained loam and gravel.

**Southern Virginia, Hampton Roads, Heart of Appalachia** Three regions dotted with a dozen wineries; no AVAs.

### Best of both worlds

To be taken seriously, the real meter sticks for Virginia are its Bordeaux blends. Whether to express terroir or compensate for variation, 'blends are a huge tool for us,' says Finot, and the driver is Merlot: elegant, St-Émilion-like and more consistent than Cabernet Sauvignon.

And besides being half the price of a St-Émilion premier grand cru classé B, you also get to drink them sooner. Boxwood Winery's 2010 Boxwood is >

**Below: Barboursville Vineyards, the state's benchmark winery, was founded by Italy's Zonin family in 1976**







a Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Petit Verdot pinnacle of earthiness, perfume, leather and freshness that could use five years, but doesn't require 20. Boxwood also layers those grapes atop early-picked Malbec into perhaps Virginia's best dry rosé. Executive VP Rachel Martin, who studied oenology in Bordeaux, says: 'You can't help but feel connected to the wine when you have snuck into

**Above: George, Patricia and Andrew Hodson, and Emily Pelton, at family-run Veritas Vineyard & Winery**

the cellar straight from bed to give it a punch-down or pump-over.'

While Boxwood is decidedly hands-on, famous Johnny-come-latelies like Donald Trump and Steve Case (of AOL Time Warner) are planting their flags and their wallets, delivering not sweat equity but capital investment and industry buzz. Trump Winery's SP Brut Rosé is already garnering more ink than the boss's pink ties.

Virginia's emergence is promising for Old World-leaning oenophiles sometimes caught between waiting for classified crus to mature and the vain act of pairing young fruit bombs with a meal. In that context, Virginia's quality-to-value proposition is more in line with Old World wines. 'There's pushback,' says de Vink of his £50 wine, yet every RdV sells faster than you can say 'first of original 13 colonies', so some might even argue for raising the price.

Then again, didn't a quibble over the price of tea once land us in hot water? At least we've finally returned... with wine. **D**

*Award-winning drinks writer Jason Tesauro is author of The Modern Gentleman, and contributor to The New York Times and Sommelier Journal*

## Decanter's top Virginian wines available in the UK



**Veritas, Viognier, Monticello 2011** 16.75/20pts (89/100pts) £19.50 **Bedales, Prohibition Wines** Attractive and somewhat restrained aromas of passion fruit and lime, with a hint of smokiness and nuttiness. The palate is fresh, with a good structure. Crisp finish. **Drink 2013 Alcohol 13%**

**King Family Vineyards, Viognier, Monticello 2010** 16.5 (88) £17.50 **Oxford Wine Co, Selfridges, Soho Wine Supply**

Hints of peach and sweet pear. Nice oily texture with a slight salinity and lots of weight, while keeping its cool freshness. A crisp, intense finish. **Drink 2013 Alc 13.5%**



**Williamsburg Winery, Acte 12 of Sixteen Chardonnay, Williamsburg 2010** 15.5 (85) £19.99 **Wholefoods** The nose is buttery and smoky with hints of toast and pineapple. The palate has a streak of acidity with rich fruit and is somewhat yeasty. **Drink 2013 Alc 13%**

**Barboursville Vineyards, Viognier Reserve, Barboursville 2010** 15 (83) £17-£17.50 **Christopher Piper, Handford Wines, The Wine Society, Wholefoods** Honey hints and fruit blossom on the nose,

but somewhat closed. The palate follows through with lemon and apples and a great acidity. Good intensity. **Drink 2013 Alc 13%**



**Barboursville Vineyards, Cabernet Franc Reserve, Barboursville 2010** 17 (90) £19-£20 **Alfred the Grape, Bedales, Chris Piper, Handford, Hercules, Oxford Wine, Soho Wine, The Wine Society, Troubadour, Wholefoods** Beautiful aromas of sweet, black cherries, coffee and cocoa and a hint of spice. The palate has a beautiful structure and a great depth. Amazing length. **Drink 2013-2015 Alc 14.5%**



**RdV Vineyards, Lost Mountain 2009** 17 (90) £50 **New Horizon Wines** Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Petit Verdot. Fresh and vibrant with notes of truffle and liquorice. Cherry and toffee flavours with a good weight and hints of coffee. Fresh. **Drink 2013-2017 Alc 14.5%**

**Boxwood Estate, Boxwood, Middleburg 2010** 16.75 (89) £26 **Hercules Wine, Oxford Wine Co, Prohibition Wines, Troubadour Wines, Selfridges, Wholefoods** Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. Restrained with blackcurrant and

plummy aromas. Velvety feel with coulis flavours and a hint of spice. Firm tannins, good length. **Drink 2013-2017 Alc 13.5%**



**Veritas, Cabernet Franc, Monticello 2009** 16.25 (87) £18.50 **Bedales, Oxford Wine Co, The Good Wine Shop, Wholefoods** Vibrant on the nose with sweet and plummy notes and hints of floral. Ripe-berry flavours and cherry and cassis on the palate. Good intensity and elegant fruit. **Drink 2013-2015 Alc 13%**

**Veritas, Paul Shaffer 4th Edition Petit Verdot, Monticello 2010** 16.25 (87) £22.50 **Bedales, Oxford Wine Co, The Good Wine Shop, Wholefoods**

Rich fruit, earthy tones and lots of spice. The palate is lovely and chewy with liquorice notes and bramble fruit. Firm tannins and a good length. **Drink 2013-2015 Alc 14%**

**White Hall Vineyards, Petit Verdot, Monticello 2010** 15.75 (85+) £19.75 **Christopher Piper, Prohibition Wines, Selfridges**

Red- and dark-berry aromas with a hint of leafiness. Slightly creamy, but nice acidity to follow through. **Drink 2013-2015 Alc 13%**

*For full details of UK stockists, see p103  
All wines are imported by New Horizon Wines*