

'Virginia Makes Wines?' Yes, and London Likes Them

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LONDON -- Lisa Abbott, a cork master at her English wine club (it's called the Wasters), took a sip of a Viognier from Virginia and declared with obvious surprise, "It's an absolute classic!"

"I didn't know Virginia produced wine," she said, echoing a comment heard over and over at the recent London International Wine Fair.

True, Virginia wines barely existed in the 1980s, but today the state has more than 150 wineries. A dozen of those winemakers came to the London extravaganza, which drew 15,000 people from all over the world, as part of Virginia's efforts to step out on the world wine stage.

"That is really impressive," said Cristina Proietti, who works in sales for British wine seller Majestic, as she swirled a red, the Cuvee des Champs of White Hall Vineyards, in her glass. After several rounds of sipping, spitting and considering the wine from the Blue Ridge, she declared it "more approachable than a Bordeaux." (The French winemakers were a safe distance away.)

"It's well structured and not overtly New World," she said, in that Old World way. "I didn't have an image of a Virginia wine. It's quite new, but it's slightly traditional."

The United Kingdom is the world's biggest importer of wine. Well aware of the importance of cracking the multibillion-dollar market, Christopher Parker, a Reston resident who is marketing what he calls the "Virginia wine lifestyle," is setting his sights on his native country.

Originally from London, Parker says that many tourists, particularly the British, will go to Virginia to taste the local grape and see the state's historic sites and lovely landscape. For Europeans, he said, "it's a lot easier to fly to the East Coast than Napa Valley."

The British also have intrinsic interest in the former colonies, said Parker, whose company, New Horizon Wines, plans trips for wine-tasting tourists that also feature luxury local organic food, hiking and other outdoor activities, and stops in places such as Jamestown, Williamsburg and Charlottesville. "International recognition will bring national recognition," he said.



British wine expert Steven Spurrier, left, with winemaker Luca Paschina of Virginia's Barboursville Vineyards at the London International Wine Fair. (By Christopher Parker -- New Horizon Wines)

The annual London fair, held this year in the cavernous Excel center, is a way for thousands of winemakers to show off their best to buyers, tasters and wine industry writers. France, Spain and Italy commanded a huge presence, with large, fancy stands and thousands of offerings; Virginia had a relatively small space next to Uruguay. Bosnia, Romania and Bulgaria had booths, too.

"Nowadays, everyone is producing wines; I have heard even Texas!" said Juan Chavarri, a most agreeable man representing Spain's Rioja region. As he stood in front of a grand booth featuring hundreds of bottles of Rioja, Chavarri said countries like his, where winemaking has been going on for centuries, are well aware of the newcomers.

Fifty years ago, he said, New Zealand and Australia were busy with "sheep and meat," and now they are exporting good wines. "So if you tell me Virginia is producing wine, I believe you," he said.

But few had tasted it. Many didn't know where Virginia is. "Virginia is not on my radar," said J.C. Bekker, South African winemaker for the DGB group, which includes the much-visited Boschendal winery near Cape Town.

"Virginia makes wines?" asked English wine enthusiast John Boughton, who had a puzzled look on his face as he neared the booth for a taste.

Abbott, the cork master from the Wasters wine club, said she didn't have a firm image of Virginia: "What I think of is 'The Waltons,'" she said, recalling the 1970s TV show about John Boy and the rest that still airs in Britain. "I think of the Blue Ridge Mountains, fantastic countryside, religious American families."

As she tasted Barboursville Vineyards' much-praised Cabernet Franc Reserve, its winemaker, Luca Paschina, showed her a map of Virginia wineries and how near they are to Washington.

"We are plenty surprised about Virginia wines," said Abbott. She said she would urge a group of 20 English friends who like to play golf and drink wine to go to Virginia for vacation next year.

Tony Champ, whose White Hall Vineyards is on the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains, said he first planted grapes in 1992 and in the past five years has doubled production. His winery is open for tastings as well as for weddings and other events, as are many of the other wineries, which have begun a push to draw more visitors.

Typically \$16 to \$20 a bottle, Virginia wines tend to be pricier than those from regions that produce wine on a bigger scale. Several, including those from Rappahannock Cellars, Barboursville, Pearmund Cellars, Veritas Vineyard & Winery, Veramar Vineyard and the Williamsburg Winery, won awards and commendations from the Decanter World Wine Awards, announced in London. Much of the buzz around the state's wines focused on its Viogniers.

Chris Pearmund, whose winery is in eastern Fauquier County, noted that Virginia settlers in the 17th century planted grapes and made wine. But for much of the 20th century, winemaking was prohibited in Virginia under Prohibition-era laws that lingered in the commonwealth longer than

elsewhere. "We started making wine in the state 400 years ago, but now we are starting to get it right," he said.