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VINES & WINES: Homegrown and proud of it

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Expanded Virginia Wine Expo will showcase state's finest Bigger? For sure. Better? Most certainly. Worth the price of admission? Undoubtedly.

If you're a wine fancier, experienced or otherwise, the Greater Richmond Convention Center will be the place to be this weekend.

That's where 57 state wine ries will be pouring more than 325 wines as the showcase for the annual Virginia Wine Expo.

These state wineries will be trying to win over critics of Virginia wines as well as introducing themselves to those who have never tried Virginia wines.

"I am very impressed by Virginia wines," said Bartholomew Broadbent, an international wine expert who will be participating in the Expo. "I prefer Virginia wines to most of the California wines, because I believe California wines have gone off the charts of acceptability in terms of alcohol content, sweetness, ripeness . . . "

One of the few complaints about last year's Expo was about cramped quarters. Expo Executive Director Alex Papajohn has remedied the problem by going from 40,000 square feet to almost 140,000 square feet and widening the aisles from 10 to 40 feet.

"We have more wineries, 57 versus 41 last year," said Papajohn who conceived the Expo. "We have restaurant and caterer samplings. We did not have that last year. We have our version of the Iron Chef competition."

Friday night, at the SunTrust Governor's Cup Grand Tasting, wineries will be pouring wines, including a reserve bottle they normally don't pour at festivals. The reserve will not be available Saturday and Sunday. This and a sit-down reserve tasting with Broadbent require separate tickets.

The Expo will have higher admission prices -- \$35 single day Saturday or Sunday in advance compared with \$25 a year ago, although you can get a two-day pass in advance for \$60. Papajohn doesn't expect the change to hurt attendance.

"Last year, we had a far-below market price; we did that almost like an introductory offer," he said. "We're delivering amazing value for the money, and you get a crystal wine glass."

Many of the wines will be a taster's surprise.

"I think the quality of Virginia's mainstays has been steadily improving and holding their own against other U.S. regions," Matt Lake, owner of Wine and Beer Westpark said. "What's great about Virginia is the emerging wineries I've tried are starting at those established quality levels."

Ben Harris of Once Upon a Vine South has a general suggestion on what to sample during the Expo.

"Much like the Willamette Valley [in Oregon] is known for producing high-quality Pinot Noirs or the Napa Valley for its Cabernet Sauvignon, so does Virginia have certain varietals which suit her best," he said. "Perhaps most notable are Virginia's Cabernet Francs and Viogniers. The state also seems to do well with Rieslings and some of the Italian varietals (such as Barbera), but Cabernet Franc and Viognier show the most consistent degrees of quality."

Frank Call of Belle Kuisine has another idea: "I believe that Virginia wines continue to grow and improve yearly, both in quality and taste, and shine in certain grape varieties. Virginia is stylistically between California and Europe. Virginia is known to produce a good wine for any palate. Varieties worthy of note include Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, and Virginia's own native Norton grape."

There's more.

"For the general public, it is a convenient crash-course in Virginia wine, both in terms of learning about the old guard and the new, up and coming wineries," Julia Battaglini, owner of River City Cellars, said. "Add in the chefs' demonstrations, Bartholomew Broadbent's tasting and the Governor's Cup, and you've got a slew of reasons to go."