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The U.K.-Virginia wine link gets stronger with a visit from British writers

Crossing the Atlantic

BY CATHY HARDING

Thank the Icelandic ash cloud. Kathleen Burk does. Burk is one of about 10 wine writers from Britain and abroad who visited Virginia earlier this month to learn more about the Commonwealth's wines. Members of the [Circle of Wine Writers](#), as their group is known (membership nears 300 and includes wine writers of renown such as Jancis Robinson, Steven Spurrier and Oz Clarke), visited [Keswick Hall](#) on September 8 for a tasting of Central Virginia-area wines and dinner with Virginia [First Lady Maureen McDonnell](#) and Agriculture Secretary Todd Haymore.

Pausing at a table where Michael Shaps' Chardonnay was being poured, Burk explained that while visiting Ohio in the spring to give an address unrelated to wine, she was held over on the way home at Newark International Airport (that's where the Eyjafjallajökull volcano comes in). Settling in at a surprisingly good airport wine bar, she says, she tried an "East Coast" flight. "And the Virginia wine knocked me over," she said. So when the opportunity arose to visit Virginia with the circle and learn more, she jumped at it. And what was she drinking at the airport? Albemarle Red from Kluge Estate Winery and Vineyard.

The visit from the British writers marks another chapter in the efforts of [Chris Parker and his New Horizon Wines](#) to get the story of Virginia wines—along with the best of our state's product—into the U.K. market. And, timing being everything in life, his 6-year-old project is gaining momentum just as a new Richmond administration has made state wine promotion a prominent part of its economic development agenda. Hence, the July trade mission to England to promote Virginia's enological bounty.

The industry might have to look hard for a more sincere government proponent than First Lady Maureen McDonnell. Peeling herself away from the 2009 Legacy from [San Soucy Vineyards](#) (a blend of Chambourcin, Tempranillo and Cabernet Franc), she explained before dinner how she slid into her new role. In Falls Church, her grandmother made her own berry wine. She was a gardener, too, and the grow-your-own ethos left an imprint on young Maureen. When she was a bit older and married, she and the future governor were stationed in Germany where they toured vineyards "and really appreciated the history of winemaking." California wines were coming into vogue and though she wished for better from her native state, McDonnell just couldn't find a Virginia wine she enjoyed. "In the last 10 years, as we've traveled on campaigns, Bob and I developed a love for the Virginia landscape and said, 'Something is changing here.'" And it was at about that time that wine quality here started to seriously improve.

"I'd love to see more Virginians drinking Virginia wines. I would love to see Virginia wine sweep the country. Beyond that," the First Lady added, "I'd like to see our wines showcased across the world."



"I would love to see Virginia sweep the country," Virginia's First Lady Maureen McDonnell (center) said recently at Keswick Hall. "I'd like to see our wines showcased across the world." Here Virginia's First Lady is being served a sample by Tim Gorman of Cardinal Point Vineyard & Winery, Nelson County, VA.

Moving upstairs to the luscious terrace for a five-course dinner, paired with all local wines, the First Lady could perhaps detect glimmers of her global hope coming true. While all the wines were outstanding, one Wine Circle writer at our table went especially rhapsodic over Stephen Barnard's 2009 Verdejo for [Keswick Vineyards](#). "Ah, Verdejo! In Virginia!" he said, evidently pleased with the results. "Who would have known?"