

AUGUST 28, 2009

# Weekend

## Wine Country

Whether you go for the view,  
the music or the wine, area vineyards  
are a worthy destination. PAGE 19



# Ask the Experts

Tell people you're visiting Virginia wineries, and you may get the following responses: Raised eyebrows. Turned-up noses. Skepticism. Virginia, after all, is hardly France or Napa.

We approached a few independent experts to answer the question on everyone's lips: Is the wine any good?

"You know the saying, you're never famous in your own town? I think the attitude is pretty common" toward Virginia wines, says Laurie Forster, a local wine educator and author of the book "The Sipping Point." "It's old baggage we have to overcome. There's great wine here and not great wine here. There's great wine in California and not-so-great wine in California."

Thomas Jefferson famously brought grapevines to Virginia and then they all famously died, setting not much of a precedent for wine in the region. Modern wine industries in Virginia and Maryland didn't spring up in earnest until the 1970s, and they struggled with the same issue: climate.

"Thomas Jefferson, even though everyone gives him credit for being the father of Virginia wines... he just didn't do it very well. Because he wasn't successful at it, we didn't have any wineries here until the 1970s," says Mary Watson-DeLauder, a wine educator and former longtime sommelier at Lansdowne Resort. "Once everyone caught on to the idea that

some grapes do better in this area, the wines got better. That's when the industry really took off."

The challenges to growing grapes in Virginia are that "we have a hot, muggy September day, and we have a hot, muggy September night," says Jason Whiteside, a former Pennsylvania winemaker who now teaches sommeliers from restaurants including Brasserie Beck and Oyamel at the Washington Wine Academy. "There's a lot of humidity, lots of rain pressure and lots of deer eat them."

But advances in research in the past few years have helped winemakers better predict which grapes will work here. (Hint: Pinot Noir is not among them.)

So which wines are having the most impact right now?

"There are two major grapes we are very successful at in Virginia — that is Viognier and Cabernet Franc," says Watson-DeLauder. "The Viognier, I haven't had a bad one. There are some that are shoulder-shruggers, but some are amazing — just amazing."

Forster has her own method for tasting: "I love drinking wines from the region," she says, "but I try wines that I know that they specialize in. In most tasting rooms, they're going to say, 'This is what we've won awards for.' But they'll also say, 'We just started making this.'"

Watson-DeLauder agrees. "You don't have to taste everything somebody makes. Pick one or two grapes that you like, and consistently taste those everywhere. If you taste everything someone is making, it makes for a short trip — you're not tasting, you're just getting drunk."

— *Lavanya Ramanathan*



DRAGON LIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY

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