



A block of Cabernet runs up the granite hillside just above the RdV winery; the rock provides the kind of drainage found in great vineyards around the world.

UNCORKED

VIRGINIA IS FOR (WINE) LOVERS

Thomas Jefferson tried and failed to grow grapes here. But the wines from RdV, produced two centuries later, would make the Bordeaux-loving Founding Father proud.

In April 2009, Rutger de Vink, owner of RdV Vineyards, traveled to Bordeaux for *en primeur*, the period when wines from a new vintage are tasted before bottling. With him was RdV's winemaker, Josh Grainer, and stashed in their pockets were vials of their Bordeaux-style wine made just outside our nation's capital. As they tasted, they took clandestine sips of their own efforts to see how the second vintage of RdV stacked up against the icons of France. And then Jean-Philippe Roby, a renowned French viticulturist who consults for RdV, decided the Virginia boys were being too modest. Roby approached the technical director of a *grand cru* estate and offered him a blind taste of the Virginia wine. Based on the careful extraction, the rich fruit and the silky tannins, the technical director made an



educated guess: The wine was from another *grand cru* vineyard in the Pauillac appellation.

“We stood a little taller after that,” Grainer says.

Thomas Jefferson died a fairly accomplished man, but his dream of a robust Virginia wine industry is being realized only now. In 1990, there were about 18 wineries; today it's closer to 230, with seven recognized American Viticultural Areas. RdV sits at the foot of the Blue Ridge mountains, in the Middleburg appellation. Should you fall asleep at some point on the drive from Washington, D.C.'s Union Station, you'd be forgiven, upon arrival, for thinking you'd traveled five hours instead of one.

From the vineyard's highest point, above a block of Cabernet, Fauquier County farmland resembles a patchwork quilt, dotted with silos and black angus cattle.

De Vink bought the 90-acre property in 2004. An ex-Marine who saw action in Somalia, he had walked away from a job in telecom, where the live-for-the-weekend lifestyle made him miserable. His next gig was an apprenticeship under Jim Law at Virginia's Linden Vineyards, where de Vink decided within a week

that he had found his calling. Today it's hard to imagine him working nine to five.

It's a Saturday in May, and de Vink and Granier are standing in RdV's basement laboratory. They've opened four bottles: a 2009 Chateau Lynch-Bages (\$220), a 2009 Camyus Select (\$125) and the same vintage of Lost Mountain (\$90) and Rendezvous (\$75), two Bordeaux-style blends from RdV. A blind version of this tasting, all bottles obscured by brown bags, is offered to anyone visiting the winery, which is open by appointment only. The format was inspired by David

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Schildknecht of *Wine Advocate*, who visited and wrote: “Could you ever have some fun with brown-bagged RdV bottles!” Put another way, the only thing keeping RdV from reserve lists is its Southern heritage. Schildknecht is not the first seasoned drinker to arrive at that conclusion. When the chef José Andrés heard about a blind tasting in which RdV beat out the likes of Lynch Bages and Opus One, he set up a rematch at his D.C. office. Andrés preferred Lost Mountain to everything else, including top wines from his native Spain.

I had tasted RdV for the first time months earlier at home. And I immediately checked the label to make sure I hadn't grabbed something else by mistake. When

I taste it again at the winery, alongside its French and Californian competition, I picture a continuum stretching from the West Coast to the Old World, with the wines from RdV falling—stylistically and geographically—somewhere in the middle. You get more ripeness and roundness from Virginia than Bordeaux and more restraint and finesse than you find in California Cab. But while the RdV wines are closer cousins to the French, the Lost Mountain in particular has a register all its own—a delicate vein of tobacco, as if the state's famous crop had somehow made its way into the fruit. In 2008, de Vink sent samples from Virginia to Eric Boissenot, an oenologist who blends four out of the five first-growth Bordeaux wines. In response, he received a one-line e-mail: “*C'est un vin de terroir*. I do your blend.” *Un vin de terroir* is a wine that expresses the earth it came from. One of the world's leading oenologists agreed to oversee RdV's blending—for almost no money—because he tasted Virginia in those samples. “I want to make the iconic Virginia wine,” de Vink said back when he was starting out. After an hour, I give up tasting and spitting to polish off a glass of Lost Mountain. For my money, he's hit the mark.

Later, over flank steak tacos, de Vink talks about his former occupations. “The Marine Corps,” he says, “was a way of life. I never knew what day it was. I loved that feeling.” It's Saturday, but he's still thinking about grafting some vines, and what a great Virginia wine should taste like. —S.P.

RdV Vineyards is at 2550 Delaplane Grade Rd., Delaplane; rdvineyards.com.



LOCAL BUBBLES

RdV kicks off its tour with a taste of Thibaut-Janisson Blanc de Char-donnay. It's a crisp, palate-cleansing sparkler made in the style of Champagne and further proof that “Old Dominion” can do a passable imitation of the Old World. \$30; tjwinery.com.

MORE GREAT VIRGINIA JUICE

2009 Barboursville Octagon

Named for the octagonal dining room designed by Thomas Jefferson for Governor James Barbour, this balanced Bordeaux-style blend is ready to drink now. Think of it as a line of defense for Bordeaux wines that need more cellar time. \$50; barboursvillewine.com.

2010 Linden Hardscrabble Chardonnay

Forget provenance—this is just outstanding Chardonnay. The nose is full of melon, pear and honeysuckle; the finish is uncommonly long. Jim Law, the godfather of Virginia wine, knows the terroir better than anyone. \$30; lindenvineyards.com.

2010 King Family Petit Verdot

A revelation for those who know Petit Verdot only as a small part of a blend. Its solo showing is monumental and almost Malbec-esque, with smooth tannins, black fruit and rich spice. \$35; kingfamilyvineyards.com.

