



Virginia Terroir

A few Virginia vintners are hell-bent on making the South's first truly great wines—and the proof is in the bottle

by
JAMES CONAWAY

photographs by
PATRICIALYONS

GREEN ACRES
The RdV Vineyards at dusk.
Opposite: Marine-turned-vintner
Rutger de Vink.



MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, Thomas Jefferson planted grapevines at Monticello in hopes that he could inspire Virginians to grow them all over the state. He wanted to encourage agriculture and get those yeoman farmers to drink wine instead of whiskey. But he lacked the knowledge and tools available today, and he underestimated the effects of climate and soil. The Piedmont region of Virginia in the eastern shadow of the Blue Ridge receives more rainfall every year than Bordeaux, and it sits on a sheet of subterranean clay that's bad for drainage. So in this worthy effort, the author of the Declaration of Independence, consummate intellectual, and our most fascinating president failed.

Luckily that isn't the end of the story. Wine continued to be made in the state after Jefferson's time, and lately there's a lot of it. Some of the reds have inspired the phrase "Virginia twang," not a reference to bluegrass but to the vegetal, rubbery taste that results from too much rain and too-rigorous leaf growth. The twanging you detect in the hills around Charlottesville and Middleburg is often the result of mediocre winemaking by pop-up vintners who have decided to cash in on tourism rather than quality.

They're encouraged by avowedly "pro-business" local govern-

ments that allow them to host weddings and loud alcoholic convocations that pollute once-bucolic byways and are often dangerous; too often the real crop isn't grapes, but "eventing." This contributes to the detriment of farming and does serious damage to the reputation of Virginia wine, something that could be avoided with better regulation, better vineyard selection, and better winemaking.

There are exceptions, some of them extraordinary. Virginia reds good enough to go up against ranked Bordeaux and California cabernets aren't cheap, however, and they can be counted on one hand of a very clumsy sawmill operator. They include Octagon, from Barbourville Vineyards, made by Luca Paschina, who has the backing of deep-pocketed Italians. Another is the aptly named Hardscrabble, from Linden Vineyards in Fauquier County, owned by Jim Law, both certifiable links in the Jeffersonian narrative chain.

Law has promoted the notion of Virginia terroir for thirty years. He has insisted that fine wine is a boon to agriculture in a time of overdevelopment and diminishing countryside, and he has acted to bring about a steady rise in quality. A former student of international affairs, Law chucked all that to serve in the Congo for the Peace Corps and then set out to make quality reds and whites, not in sunny California but right in the cradle of the American democracy.

Over the years his face has gotten ruddier, his red beard grayer, and his wines better and better. "I'm just a farmer" has been Law's constant refrain, his pruning shears and dusty Carhartts proof of

a life among the vines. His winery is a tasteful split-level wooden building on a hillside, the small, dedicated staff welcoming of visitors by appointment, both knowledgeable ones and those who want to learn about Virginia wine, but not deck squatters looking primarily for entertainment, the louder the better.

The winery is surrounded by vineyards that are meticulously kept and steeply angled. "A vineyard's essentially a water evacuation system," says Law, always willing to talk terrain. "You have to find steep slopes so the rain and cold can run downhill, and soil that's permeable."

Learning every aspect of a difficult, complicated symphony of viticulture and marketing is the modern vintner's lot and requires dedication, which doesn't leave time, Law discovered early on, for hosting party animals disgorged by limos. "I don't want to be a Chuck E. Cheese for adults," he says, with characteristic bluntness. "Try to do that, and you end up running two businesses—entertainment and winemaking. Quality's bound to suffer."

Law's advocacy of good ground and careful craft has turned him into an accidental vinous master for a new generation of Virginia winemakers. The apprentice program at Linden Vineyards teaches aspiring vineyardists and vintners everything about the product, from soil to fermentation to tasting to selling, while paying them a modest salary; several of those apprentices have gone on to their own successes in the ever-difficult Piedmont, one of them with the

GENTLEMAN FARMING Left to right: Linden Vineyards in Jefferson's old stomping grounds, Fauquier County, Virginia; Jim Law in the field; the vat room at RdV Vineyards; the \$100-a-bottle RdV cabernet.

unlikely name of Rutger de Vink.

Here the story takes a fascinating, unlikely upturn. Imagine a tall former Marine with a deferential manner who was once stationed in Somalia and whose grandfather, an Amsterdam doctor, was sent to a concentration camp during World War II for harboring downed Allied pilots. (He escaped.) Now de Vink, who is forty, wears

his hair long and his Bermudas loose, and he stands on a steep, rocky hillside in gorgeous, undulating Middleburg hunt country, surrounded by cabernet vines raised with all the care lavished on a fledgling prince. De Vink says simply, "I want to make Virginia's iconic wine."

He means it. Below him, what look like two blindingly white connected barns are really a stealth winery, its faux silo symbolic, he says, of the importance of agriculture to the county, and the country. At night this hollow, artfully trussed silo lights up like a beacon. The winery's minimalism, its custom-made stainless steel tanks and overall understated elegance, produce a fitting Bordeaux blend called, simply, RdV. It costs \$88, which means, tax included, that Virginia has now produced a \$100 bottle of wine, a first and a subject of much discussion in Virginia and abroad.

Now for a little provenance. The cost of producing a ranking wine

in today's insanely competitive world of high-end cabernet—aka “rocket juice”—is akin to that of getting oneself launched into outer space. But a great wine can't be made, no matter how much is spent, unless the variables are right, the most important being place. If it's not in the ground, it's not in the bottle, period. Many a middling fortune has ended up in the spit bucket because someone didn't pay attention to this maxim.

As de Vink says, “Sometimes there's an arrogance among the wealthy that they can have what they want anywhere.”

But if someone does manage to produce a remarkable wine in unproven terrain, at whatever cost, others will follow. Expensive blends can be astonishingly profitable, whether they're from Bordeaux or northern California, as well as celebrity-inducing, but the time required to recoup outlay can exceed a wine's—and a vintner's—life span.

De Vink is blessed in having wealthy family backers, and in being uncommonly idealistic. He and Jim Law became good friends while de Vink was at Linden, tasting and endlessly discussing the metrics of quality vineyards and aspirational winemaking. Meanwhile he was searching for the right land for himself, as far away as Sonoma and the Sierra foothills, but he finally ended up back here, in Fauquier County, near the hamlet of Delaplane and just a few miles from Linden.

De Vink's seriousness and persuasiveness brought soil scientists from California to help locate the “right” place for a vineyard; de Vink told them, “Just find the droughtiest, crappiest soil you can.” He wanted to radically limit growth and forestall any possibility of Virginia twang, and eventually found what he considered the perfect site—a coverlet of dirt over a deep substrate of broken granite.

De Vink's travels in Bordeaux put him in touch with viticultural worthies, and his manner convinced Jean-Philippe Roby, noted professor at the University of Bordeaux, to advise him on planting, and a winemaker at Château Le Bon Pasteur to make the first vintages of RdV. Then another star, Eric Boissenot, enologist and consultant to Château Latour and three other First Growth Bordeaux estates, agreed to supervise the blending of RdV—from France.

Initially, samples of RdV were overnighed from Dulles International Airport to Paris, and from there to Bordeaux, so Boissenot could taste and analyze them and electronically transmit recommendations back to RdV, another example of the modern, wired, oh so *cher* global vineyard. Now Boissenot—and other professional Bordelais—come regularly to Delaplane to perform the arcane, crucial rituals of the ultimate, apotheosized cellar rat.

RdV's classic Bordeaux blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and petit verdot goes into new French oak barrels. RdV Vineyards really makes two wines: a blend of mostly merlot called Rendezvous that sells for a mere \$55; and two thousand cases of the main event, RdV, which is 85 percent cabernet (the 2008 vintage, at least; the precise blend changes annually). And the inevitable question has arisen: Can a Virginia wine be worth a hundred bucks?

Wine pricing—which means paying—is highly subjective but also a measure of what the market will bear. The Barbourville Octagon and Linden's Hardscrabble both cost about \$40. Some professional wine tasters in Washington, D.C., recently compared RdV with two famous cabernets, Château Montrose from Bordeaux's St. Estèphe region, and Dominus from the Napa Valley, part of the domain of Château Petrus in Pomerol. They judged RdV to be more or less in



LOCATION.
LOCATION
Above: The RdV compound, complete with sleek faux grain silo, vat room, and wine cellar. Opposite: The granite RdV wine cellar, carved out of a hillside.

equal company and the most likely to age well, and the 2008 Montrose costs \$116 a bottle and the Dominus \$176.

In RdV Vineyards' airy inner sanctum are glass tables—no tacky bar here—where the vetted visitor may swirl, smell, and sip. The balance of the flagship wine, RdV, is striking, as are the classic Bordeaux associations of black cherry, currants, and a hint

of tobacco. But what most impresses is its intensity: a long, firm shaft of flavor that runs through the whole tasting experience, and out the other side.

De Vink's invocation of icons brings to mind Stag's Leap Wine Cellars of the Napa Valley, whose cabernet won the now-legendary Paris tasting in 1976 and put California wines on the map. Stag's Leap cost \$7 then and today sells for \$200, not bad appreciation even after thirty-odd years. If RdV one day pulls off a similar coup, it's cheap.

De Vink and Law continue to bounce ideas, and wine, off each other. “We talk, and taste, all the time,” says Law, clearly proud of what's happened in the Old Dominion vineyard. He has helped impart a rare understanding of place and problems, while what was once an aspirant has introduced the mentor to Bordeaux wines, ideas, and personalities he might not otherwise have encountered. Such symbiotic relationships move the quality needle steadily northward. ©

