



A History of Virginia's Wine Industry

by

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Photos courtesy of Pearmund Vineyards

When one thinks of the American tradition of wine-making, one's mind immediately turns to the sweeping, sunlit valleys carpeted wall-to-wall with lush green rows of vines heavy with the season's bounty. It's true, these idyllic valleys are found in places called Sonoma and Napa, but one might not expect to find such a vista about 2,300 miles east, in valleys named Shenandoah and New River. Wine culture is rich in these valleys and has been for hundreds of years. Perhaps better known as the Mother of Presidents, it can be argued that Virginia is also the birthplace of the American wine industry. In fact,



viticulture has been a vital part of American History, particularly in our temperate Commonwealth, for over four centuries.

During the 17th century, the British's move to colonize the new world was fueled by the desire to gain agricultural independence from the continent of Europe. In particular, Britain was interested in introducing new and less expensive agricultural products than they could get from their strained relationship with the French. In addition to tobacco, one of the highly anticipated yields from the colonies was the production of "domestic" wine, which could be shipped directly from the British colonies at a more economical rate than it could be procured from the continent of Europe. Britain was so determined to ensure the production of wine that in 1619 the House of Burgesses passed Acte 12, which stated that every landholder must plant ten grape vines for every acre of land in their possession. Virginia was considered to be the ideal spot to cultivate grapes for the production of wine, and the colonists gave it an honest shot. Unfortunately, the native varieties of grapes made less-than-palatable wine when put to the test. Scuppernong grapes of the Muscadine family seemed to be the



hardest and highest producing grapes in the colony, but the wine produced from its juice was eventually eclipsed in popularity by alcoholic beverages made from other fruits. Almost two hundred years after the colonists began to toil in this noble pursuit, Thomas Jefferson invested in a quantity of Italian vinifera vines, and hired two Italian vintners to supervise the entire winemaking process. According to historical accounts, Jefferson was very proud of the beverage produced from his vines, but the two Italians refused to partake of it.

The coming decades brought nearly constant political turmoil to the country, and Virginians were provided with many instances to prove their stubbornness in the face of adversity. Virginian farmers had primarily replanted with more successful cash crops such as tobacco, but some individuals still dabbled in the development of grape varieties suitable to the production of wine with moderate success. In fact, Virginia wine production peaked just before the outbreak of the Civil War. As expected, the more successful vineyards and wineries were likely targets during this terrible time, and most vineyards did not survive to see the end of the war. As the nation slowly recovered, so did the production of wine, though not to

its pre-war standards. Conflicting stories surround the development and introduction of the Norton variety of wine grapes – the first successful red wine grapes in Virginia. Before, during, and after Prohibition, the root hardy Norton grape placed firm roots as Virginia’s wine grape. Well past the nation’s end to Prohibition, Virginia continued to be somewhat of a temperance state. It was not until the 1970’s that Virginia growers were allowed to produce wine from their successful attempts at growing European style hybrids in Virginian soil. The strength of Norton and other American native hybrids was the key to successful cultivation of European varieties of wine grapes. Virginians began grafting the less disease resistant European vines on hardier rootstock of native vines. In addition, growers began deep tilling the soil in order for the roots to better establish themselves, resulting in crops that still continue to improve in quality.

With 300 vineyards and just under 100 wineries, Virginia is one of the leading producers of high-quality vinifera grape vines and many award winning wines. The Commonwealth is making a name for itself in the viticultural world by placing concentration on certain varieties

of grapes that thrive in the region. For instance, Viognier wines from Virginia are becoming prized throughout the nation and the world for their playful spark and citrus exuberance which often lost in other more watery whites. This wine is a perfect pairing for stylish “fusion” cuisine with its equatorial preparations and piquant spice.

The increased recognition of these viticultural products and Virginia’s rich history has influenced the decision makers at the State Capital to incorporate several initiatives to increase exposure of this booming industry into Virginia’s already thriving historical tourism trade (www.virginia.org) (www.virginiawines.org). Jefferson and Williamsburg wineries receive a great deal of their patronage from those exploring the nearby historical landmarks, and in keeping with that trend Virginia has established “wineways” in geographical regions of historical and cultural interest throughout the state. The Blue Ridge Wine Way (www.blueridgewineway.com) twists through the sweeping countryside in the foothills of the Blue Ridge of Northern Virginia—an area rich in Revolutionary, Civil War and cultural history. Just south of the site of the Battle of Bull Run near Middleburg, Pearmund Cellars (www.pearmundcellars.com) offers a broad flight of expertly hand-crafted wines including Viognier, on a plantation site that has been farmed since the 1740s. Shortly after the ratification of the Virginia Farm Winery Act in 1976, the then named Meriwether Vineyard, was established with fifteen acres of Chardonnay grape vines on American root stock. In the early nineties, Chris Pearmund, an up-and-comer in the wine industry purchased the vineyard in the hopes of starting his own vineyard and winery operation in this fertile region. Located in Broad Run, the winery provides the perfect atmosphere for an afternoon picnic with easy access from Routes 66 and 29.

The new Virginia wine and history tourism trend continues to grow and thrive in a region peppered with historical markers highlighting important events of American history. The Virginia wine region is home to many acclaimed restaurants, inns and B&Bs, and will assure an educational, comfortable, and well-fed journey. The Blue Ridge Wine Way also encourages the reciprocal relationship of wineries with area businesses. For instance, local wines are often featured at establishments such as the Inn at Little Washington, a world-renowned restaurant in the heart of Virginia wine country.

The future of Virginia wines is ever brightening as growers continue to strive for the best varieties to represent the ecologically unique region or terroir. Individual winery stylistic identities have forged forward also, from quaint renovated dairy barns to elegant Tuscan-styled estates embracing the latest technologies. These efforts have already achieved improved national recognition. Virginia wines have received increased exposure and positive reviews in numerous national publications and satellite channels such as Fine Living and the Food Network. As Virginia vintners partner with legislators and community organizations, the business climate continues to improve for the regional wine industry, insuring its future for generations to come.

Grape vines have long been woven into the fabric of Virginian history. They played an integral role in the formation of this great Commonwealth. With new varieties and new economic agrotourism, Virginian wines play a great role in the continued gastronomic, agricultural and economic success of our state. Virginia wineries and vineyards help preserve our agricultural heritage and land in a time when they are quickly disappearing.