



Virginia's RdV Vineyards sits on 16 acres in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

THE GRAPE

OUTDOORS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GORDON BEALL

Award-winning vintages are pouring out of Virginia and Maryland. *Capitol File* goes behind the scenes to reveal what's driving this delicious renaissance. BY LESLIE QUANDER WOOLDRIDGE

RIGHT: Linganore Winecellars' barn-turned-winery formerly housed the farm's dairy operation and now contains the vineyard's tasting room. BELOW: Wine maker Anthony Aellen visits the vineyard.



“Different soils will give you different flavors.”
—Anthony Aellen

The grassy space behind Linganore Winecellars' 19th-century barn is quiet—almost astonishingly so. Chirping sounds rise from the silence—and one, two, then three butterflies float by. The rolling hillside leads to rows of expertly planted vines, and a closer inspection reveals small green grapes hanging in clusters. Vineyards like this are the root of greater Washington's thriving wine scene. And their owners have produced vintages that please those with even the most discerning palates.

Maryland wineries have grown from just a dozen or so in 2000 to more than 60 today. And Virginia now boasts more than 230 wineries and dozens of wine trails—making it among the top producing regions for wine in the country. (The Commonwealth is now tied with Texas as the nation's fifth-largest wine-grape-producing state.)

Even better, the wines they produce are earning attention. For instance, DC Wine Week is set to roll out a week of experiential and educational events from October 12 to 19, and the Maryland Wineries Association partnered with local restaurants and wine shops to celebrate its third Maryland Wine Week this June. (The state's annual sales totaled a bit more than \$24 million in 2011, the most recently recorded year—a four-fold increase from 2001.) And Virginia wine sales have reached an all-time high, increasing 5 percent since fiscal year 2012—with more than 511,000 cases sold this fiscal year, according to new figures compiled by the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control and the Virginia Wine Marketing Office. Its international sales also increased by more than 74 percent in that same period, with more than

5,800 cases selling to places such as Great Britain and China due to increased marketing efforts. In all, the industry is estimated to contribute nearly \$750 million to the Commonwealth's economy.

Virginians have been making wine for more than four centuries, and a 1619 law even mandated that male settlers plant and tend at least 10 vines each, according to the Virginia Wine Marketing Office. Meanwhile, the earliest recorded winemaking in Maryland was in 1648.

Thomas Jefferson went on to grow European grapes for more than 30 years, though he never produced a bottle from his Monticello vineyards. And George Washington found little success from more than a decade of trying it at Mount Vernon. Although our young country had good intentions, we were more than a thousand years behind Europe, with wine cultivated there as early as 425 BC.

Clearly, we had some catching up to do.

It wasn't until the past few decades that our region's winemaking really got under way. Some vineyard owners—the area's pioneers—began planting in the 1970s, with six new Virginia wineries established during that decade.

The 230-acre Linganore Winecellars (70 of those acres are vineyards), established by Jack and Lucille Aellen on a Mount Airy, Maryland, farm in 1971, was one of the original wineries in the state. They had previously made wine as a hobby from locally sourced fruit and planted their first vineyard grapes in 1972. “We started the winery in '76, and basically there were no wineries,” explains their son Anthony Aellen, current president and winemaker.

That year (1976) the family produced about 1,600 gallons of wine (8,000 bottles), surpassing

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BLADES (GRAPES)



Harvesting each grape variety requires precision: weather and ripeness affect timing.

Virginia's temperate climate is similar to that of many notable European wine regions.



Steve and Jean Case are committed to sustainable farming.



The site of Early Mountain Vineyards is composed of mostly Virginia red clay and quartz soils.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC KELLY

“Age and maturity, combined with experience, play a role in any wine region.”

—Jean Case



Early Mountain Vineyards offers a “Best of Virginia” program, allowing visitors to sample vint from around the state.

the peak of about 175 bottles formerly produced in their basement. “It was a heck of a jump,” admits Aellen during an interview in Linganore’s wood-paneled banquet hall.

He says residents’ renewed interest in local goods has spurred the region’s wine industry. “You used to go to the baker and buy bread,” he recalls, “and then the supermarket came along and the consumer, the end consumer, lost the connection to all of the growers [of wheat].” With megacorporations now selling everything from strawberries to salami, he says, people felt they had lost control over the formerly simple process of buying food. “We’re now going back,” Aellen explains, revealing that he participates in community-supported agriculture. “In probably just the last 10 years, [local winemaking has] really blown up. It’s neat to see that, and it’s neat to see these wineries not only surviving but thriving.”

Offering Bordeaux-style blends with a Virginia terroir, the 16-acre RdV Vineyards in Delaplane—owned by retired marine Rutger de Vink—is one winery that is thriving. Out of the military

and seeking fulfillment beyond his corporate job, the Dutch-born de Vink began apprenticing at Linden Vineyards in Virginia, a family-owned business in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He later began searching for his own property, and spotted an option in a rocky Virginia hillside, eventually acquiring it in 2004 from a skeptical farmer who was no fan of the scrubland, then covered with bramble. After two years of extensive soil science with experts from France and California, he planted his first grapes in 2006 and released his debut 2008 red blends—Rendezvous and Lost Mountain—in 2011. Following that first release, critics called his 2009 wines “lustrous” and “polished,” respectively, and they retailed at a surprising price: \$88 and \$75 per bottle. That year’s offerings are now sold out, but subsequent blends have followed annually. (His latest, two 2010 blends, just debuted in September, and both wines outscored 377 entrants to become one of the 12 wines that form the Governor’s Cup Case of gold-medal winners this year.)

“I did this in the beginning to reconnect with the land,” he recalls, now living in a silver

Airstream on the property and working alongside his team to ensure vintages are up to his standards. He is so focused that the winery is open to visitors by appointment only, unlike others that host public events and private weddings. “The vines are always growing. You’re always a part of them,” he says. “It’s more of a way of life.”

Over the years, the area’s vineyard owners have perfected their techniques. After all, the East Coast’s wine growing regions share a similar climate and latitude with many of Europe’s growing regions, according to the Maryland Wineries Association. That means that even with our region’s humid summers and erratic winters, our wine grapes—from Cabernet Franc to Virginia’s signature Viognier variety—flourish.

And so Middleburg’s The Boxwood Winery, which also produces red wine in the Bordeaux tradition, has earned fans across the region. And Sugarloaf Mountain Vineyard in Dickerson, Maryland, recently earned 2013 best-in-show honors at the Maryland Winemasters’ Awards for its Comus 2011 offering.

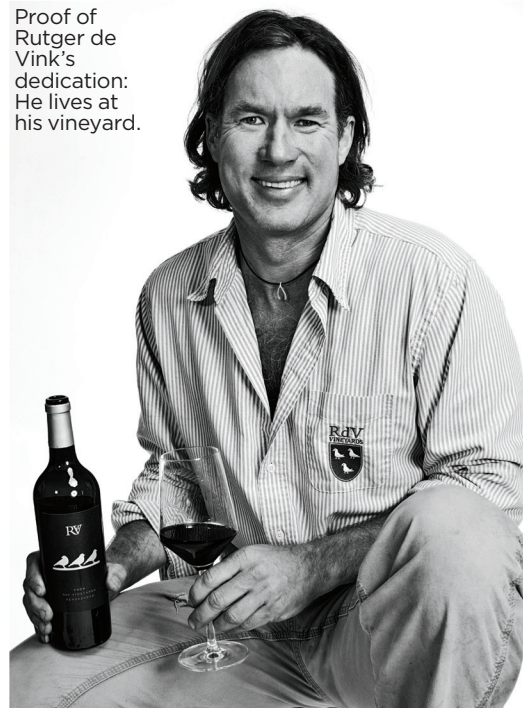
Linganore, too, has thrived. It receives thousands of visitors annually for its anticipated festivals. And it has earned more than 400 medals since 1992 in national and international competitions, though Aellen first concerns himself with patrons’ opinions. “The person on the other side of the tasting table is the ultimate judge,” he notes. He now produces more than 30 wines, from just-sweet-enough varieties made from raspberries to the oak-aged, estate-bottled Black Raven.

“I think age and maturity, combined with experience, play a role in any wine region,” explains philanthropist Jean Case, the co-owner of Early Mountain Vineyards in Charlottesville, Virginia, with her husband Steve, cofounder of AOL. “The vines need time to age and mature. Winemakers need time to gain experience. People in the vineyard need to figure out the climate: what works here and what doesn’t.” She adds: “Now we’re at the place where we’ve learned those lessons, and we’ve applied those lessons as a sector, and we can use them to help make the wines even better.”

De Vink’s lush vineyard is planted with about 45 percent Merlot, 45 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 12 percent Petite Verdot, and 8 percent Cabernet Franc. “We grow them and vinify them all separately, but during the blending process we start to mix and match,” explains technical director Joshua Grainer.

Fruits at RdV Vineyards slowly reach full ripeness in the early days of October.

Proof of Rutger de Vink's dedication: He lives at his vineyard.



**“I did this in the beginning to reconnect with the land.”
—Rutger de Vink**

He enters the tank room, enclosed with concrete walls and home to 12 containers between 35 and 46 hectoliters. He explains that the mixtures inside—seeds and skin in all—are gently pushed down. “We can warm the tank and cool the tank as necessary,” Grainer says, noting that mixtures remain in the containers from two to six weeks before being aged about 18 months in French barrels. “And we’re tasting all the time.”

That tasting may be a rewarding part of the winemaker’s profession, but it can also be among the most stressful. Timing for harvesting can come down to days, and vintages vary from year to year. “I really don’t know what I’m working with until the grapes come off the vine,” says Aellen. “Every vintage will come out slightly different, even if you duplicate [the method].”

Credit the variation to Mother Nature. “Different soils will give you different flavors. The plant itself is pulling minerals out of the soil,” Aellen explains, noting that grape vines, which can go down 40 to 70 feet, are among the earth’s most deeply rooted plants. “They’ll go down for nutrients. They’ll go down for water. Typically, grapes are grown on some of the poorest soils in the world.”

But that partly explains why RdV’s fruit is doing so well. “Grape vines need to struggle a little bit,” says Grainer during a leisurely drive along the vineyard’s hillside. He stops at the base of a hill to gaze toward several Angus cows reclining on the grass below. “If grape vines are grown on this flat, fertile ground, they’re very happy to grow big and strong, and put all their energy into the leaves and into the trunks,” he explains. “And if they go up onto these rocky hillsides where they’re stressed for nutrients and stressed for water during their growing season,

the roots... release a series of hormones to the plant that says, ‘stop growing leaves, put all of your energy into the fruit.’” That process reflects the Darwinian principle, he notes, of survival of the fittest. The plants “make those grapes really super ripe, because a bird will come and eat that, and carry that seed hopefully to that fertile ground,” he says. “What makes it good for the birds makes it good for us.”

The grapes, then, are the stars. And the area’s wine producers appreciate their lauded turn. As Virginia residents for more than 30 years, Early Mountain’s Case and her husband have an affinity for the area. But they didn’t see the region’s winemaking potential until more recently. “We were truly blown away at the difference between our first experience with Virginia wine in the ’90s and our experience with Virginia wine just a few years ago,” she recalls.

With more regional wines popping up on Greater Washington’s gourmet menus and in trusted shops, more recognition is on the horizon. “Our view from the beginning was, ‘Gosh, there are all of these great wines and people don’t know about it,’” Case says, noting that her winery also offers other area vintages to introduce visitors to additional varieties. She adds: “We began to see the potential for this to become a great sector within the state, as well as a potentially great wine region to compete with any wine region in the world.”

De Vink, like many others, is looking ahead. As he sits at the head of a table in his tasting salon, humble yet enthusiastic, the precisely planted vineyards outside the windows act as emerald art. “We want to be focused on what is expressed uniquely here,” he says finally. “We love Virginia. We are proud of it.” **CF**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GORDON BEALL; STEPHEN VOSS (DE VINK)



After taking private tours, visitors can settle into RdV Vineyards’ modern tasting salon.