

eating my words

Behind the scenes and on the road with *Southern Living* Executive Food Editor, Scott Jones

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03/05/2008

Jefferson would be proud

By Scott Jones



Thomas Jefferson was onto something back in the day when he envisioned the hills of Virginia planted with vines whose fruit would yield top-notch wines. Unfortunately, Jefferson moved on to the great Rotunda in the sky before his dream was realized; however, based on the current state of winemaking in Virginia, I reckon he'd be pretty darn proud.

I'm in the plane back to Birmingham (you Carlin fans out there will appreciate his bit about getting "in" the plane and letting the daredevils get "on") thinking about all the cool things I experienced the day before--one of my most enjoyable days in "wine country" anywhere in the world.

I was performing a little culinary field study in the towns, er, hamlets (if there's something smaller than a hamlet, then both spots qualify) of Linden, in Fauquier County, and Huntly, in Rappahannock County, for an upcoming travel story (slated for this September) I'm working on with my buddy, Warner McGowin, who runs our Travel department. The piece will focus on the state's wine country experience. I don't want to steal any of the story's thunder (and it's gonna be a good one), but I do want to pass along a little info and personal reflection in advance of it hitting newsstands.

Let me begin by admitting that I'm certainly no expert on Virginia wines, but I've sampled a few over the years and even judged the annual State Fair of Virginia wine

competition a couple of times. That said, there are so many exciting new wines coming out of the state, that it's nearly impossible to stay on top of things.



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Now I realize most folks don't think about visiting any wine producing region in the world in the middle of winter, but I promise, at least as far as northern Virginia is concerned, it's rich in its own frosty beauty. So out of Charlottesville I drove yesterday headed north en route to **Linden Vineyards** and **Rappahannock Cellars**. Once I broke the traffic vortex of the metro area, I immediately realized one of the advantages to visiting in February: No traffic. This unexpected gift gave me the permission I needed to slow down, chill out, and take in the sights. There are miles of hand-crafted stone walls, sprawling horse farms, breathtaking vistas of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and more cozy little towns along the way than you can shake a stick at.

Another huge advantage to an off-season visit is you get plenty of undivided attention in the tasting rooms. Which is pretty sweet. So don't leave without asking plenty of questions and taking the opportunity to brush up on your tasting and evaluation skills. One more thing, there's very little, if any, cell phone reception in the more rural areas, so just chuck your phone and concentrate on the amazing views and equally impressive wines.



Linden Vineyards

My first stop was Linden Vineyards, perched near the top of the Blue

Ridge mountains. I knew the wines, but had never been to the winery. This time of year, the tasting room is only open on weekends, but owner/winemaker, Jim Law, was nice enough to lead me through a few of his upcoming releases. What an experience. You have to pay a visit if you're anywhere near this neck of the woods. Highlights were the 07 Avenius Sauvignon Blanc, 04 Boisseau Chardonnay, and 05 Hardscrabble Red (more details and tasting notes to follow in the September story). Jim also turned me on to his 05 Late Harvest Petit Menseng, which was wonderful, but completely new to me. In fact, before yesterday, I'd never even heard of Petit Menseng (which, in case you're wondering, is the name of the grape used in the wine).

Taking a post-tasting walk through the hibernating vineyard and looking at all the pruned vines resting up for spring's bud break and eventual harvest later in the fall was very cool – literally and figuratively (even with the sun out at high noon it was still 28°). Even during our tasting, Jim spoke about how he and his staff, like the vines, take time to rest up in January and February, knowing that bottling was just a few weeks away, followed shortly by the rush of spring.



Rappahannock Cellars



Located a few miles down the road from Linden Vineyards is Rappahannock Cellars, another of the area's well-respected, award-winning wineries. Its tasting room is open daily year-round (except for major holidays). It's also worth noting that Rappahannock Cellars is part of the **Blue Ridge WineWay**, along with eight other wineries. The winery offers a number of tasting options (all reasonably priced). Highlights were the 06 Meriwether Chardonnay, 06 Chappell Charlemagne Vineyard Chardonnay, 06 25% Viognier–75% Chardonnay Blend, 06 Cabernet Franc Second Bottling (as with Linden, more details and tasting notes to follow in the September story). Be sure to say hello to proprietor John Delmare, who's easy to talk to and knows the area like the back of his hand.

Tastings: The Wine Joint

Knowing it took me just under two hours to drive up, I decided to head back to Charlottesville after wrapping up at Rappahannock Cellars. I wanted to get into town before dark, plus I'd spied a neon "Tastings" sign the night before just off the downtown Main Street Mall I wanted to check out. I was hoping to find a place to sample more of the state's finest without having to buy a bottle or full glass of wine. Turns out, I'd run up on the perfect spot. **Tastings**

butts up to a public garage and is actually a restaurant, wine shop, and wine bar all-in-one. For the record, the garage is you're best bet for parking, since street parking is almost impossible. It'll set you back about two bucks for two hours. Make sure you carry cash because they don't take debit or credit cards (ask me how I know...). I was greeted by Bill Curtis ("Le Grand Fromage"), who's been in the wine business "forever." This dude knows his wine – particularly those made in Virginia. He's an incredible source of info. I suggest looking him up before heading out on any excursion into Virginia wine country. Bill turned me on to several dynamite wines such as **Villa Appalaccia** "Toscanello," **Chester Gap Cellars** Reserve Viognier, and Thibaut-Janisson Brut sparkling wine (yes, an awesome sparkling wine made just a few clicks from downtown Charlottesville).

What a day! I can't wait to go back.

Do you have a favorite Virginia wine? If so, I'd love to get your thoughts and feedback.

More Virginia wine resources: Virginia Wine Lover: www.vawinelover.com/newsletters/jan08.html

Monticello Wine Trail: www.monticellowinetrail.com

Loudoun Wine Growers Association: www.loudounwine.com

Virginia Wineries Association: www.virginiawines.org

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