

# Virginia's Wine Boom

Wine production in the Old Dominion State is soaring to new heights



*In 1976, Barboursville Vineyards was the first in Virginia to grow European grapes, which greatly helped boost the state's wine industry.*

For most of Virginia's history, its winemaking presence was nearly nonexistent compared to those of California, Washington and New York. Virginia's climate, with its high humidity and rainfall levels, made winegrowers wary. "In the mid-1970s, there were four or five wineries, and they were exclusively planting American or French-hybrid grapes with the belief that the weather wasn't right for European grapes," says Luca Paschina, general manager and winemaker at Barboursville Vineyards in Barboursville, Virginia.

The Zonin family from Italy founded Barboursville in 1976 and was the first in the region to successfully plant vinifera wine grapes. Today, the vineyard comprises nearly 180 acres planted with such varietals as Chardonnay, Viognier, Cabernet Franc and Merlot, among others—producing about 35,000 cases of wine a year and distributing to 49 states.

Barboursville Vineyards was the catalyst for a wine-growing boom that would hit Virginia in the years to follow. "In the late '80s and through the '90s, more winemakers began experimenting with French vinifera wine grapes and found success," says Jon Wehner, owner and winemaker at Chatham Vineyards in Machipongo, Virginia. "Virginia's advantage is its diversity of microclimates. The different regions produce a tremendous range and variety of wines."

Wehner founded Chatham in 1999 with his wife, Mills Wehner, on Virginia's Eastern Shore. The winery produces 3,800 cases of wine annually, and its steel-fermented Chardonnay is the highest-rated Chardonnay in Virginia, according to the winemaker.

At the time of Chatham's first vintage year, 2004, Virginia had 74 wineries and 2,360 acres of vineyards, according to Annette Boyd, marketing office director for the Virginia Wine Board. Today, there are 232 wineries in Virginia and 3,200 acres of grapes. In 2012, 484,982 cases of Virginia wine were sold as the state held on strongly to its ranking as the fifth-largest wine-producing state in the country, behind California, Washington, New York and Oregon.

Although distribution for many Virginia wineries is dedicated to the East Coast and mid-Atlantic markets, word about the high quality of Virginia wine is steadily spreading to other states and even across the globe. "Virginia wine has been garnering a huge amount of national and international recognition," Wehner says. Paschina concurs. "Virginia wines are even being compared to some great wines from California," he says. "This is giving our wines more credibility and giving consumers the confidence to seek out labels from Virginia." Paschina adds that the consumer trend toward locally made products has also been a boon to Virginia wine sales.

At The Wine Kitchen in Leesburg, Virginia, co-owner Jason Miller has seen a steady increase in customer interest in Virginia wine thanks to the growth in wine quality and quantity. "The state's wine business has emerged from a cottage industry into a booming trade," he says. "Each winery consistently pushes the envelope in terms of quality and technique."

At his restaurant, Miller offers a "Local Flavor" wine flight, which features a revolving list of three Virginia labels (\$10). A recent flight included the 2011 Reserve Chardonnay from Sunset Hills Vineyards in Purcellville; the 2009 Long-Bomb Edition Three red blend from Tarara Winery in Leesburg; and the 2010 Cabernet Franc from Pollak Vineyards in Monticello. Numerous upscale restaurants throughout Washington, D.C., also offer Virginia wines, including BLT Steak, which currently carries five different labels (\$45 to \$90 a 750-ml. bottle).

Arrowine and Cheese, a retailer with locations in Arlington, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., stocks about 30 different Virginia wines, with Barboursville Vineyards' 2008 Octagon Red (\$49.99 a 750-ml. bottle) among the best-selling labels. "Our Virginia wine sales grow each year," notes manager Thomas Kiszka. "Two years ago, we probably carried half the number of labels we now stock."

Wine production in Virginia certainly shows no signs of slowing. "Particularly in the last 10 years, the state government has put a lot of force behind the vineyards and wineries to help promote the state's wine," Chatham's Wehner says. "As long as you're making a great product, you're bound to get recognition and be successful."

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