

Etlan vineyard a 'hidden' gem

By Jane DeGeorge
Eagle Reporter

Rain droplets sprinkled on Scott Elliff's windshield throughout his 42-minute drive north to Madison County. But by the time he set foot on his Etlan vineyard, the sun was shining on his grapes.

Wearing blue carpenter's shorts and a white long sleeve T-shirt with "DuCard Vineyards" printed on the left side pocket, Elliff describes his 7-year-old vineyard as "kind of a hobby gone wild."

After close to 10 years in operation, the vineyard

seems to remain more of a "hobby" than a full-blown business, although the Charlottesville resident harvested 20 tons of grapes last year, most of which he sold to a nearby winery.

What keeps his property quiet is the lack of a See VINEYARD, page A3



JANE DEGEORGE / Madison Eagle

Set on the edge of Shenandoah National Park, Scott Elliff's Etlan vineyard enjoys constant breezes off the mountains. The property was once home to an apple orchard owned by the Graves family.

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traditional tasting room. The vineyard is closed to the public, although private group tours can be scheduled by appointment.

Elliff – a retired Washington D.C.-based business consultant – likes to do things differently.

"I like to approach businesses in interesting and new ways," he said.

His current setup allows his customers – who purchase wines on-line or over the phone – to feel as though they are part of something exclusive. And they are – the DuCard Vineyards wine label is in limited supply.

"We sold out last year and we're about to sell out again," he said last month.

While most wineries focus on attracting visitors to taste the finished product, the vines are rarely marketed as a destination.

"Most people go straight to the tasting room and never to the grapes," he said.

But "good wine comes from good grapes," Elliff said as he walked through his Gibson Hollow Lane property, once an apple orchard owned by the Graves family.

The vineyard is located on a piece of land adjoining the "weekend getaway" property Elliff and his wife, Karen Elliff, first purchased when they were living in Washington, D.C.

The vineyard includes seven acres of vines, which he admits, "doesn't seem like



Photos by JANE DEGEORGE / Madison Eagle

DuCard Vineyards Owner Scott Elliff (right) clasps a cluster of Viognier grapes on his Etlan property. Some of these grapes will be used to make the vineyard's 2009 Viognier white wine, which will come out this coming spring. Here is a closer look at some of Elliff's plump Petit Verdot grape clusters (above). The juice from these grapes will age in an oak barrel for two years before its bottled and sold as wine.

much," but is the equivalent of a five-mile hike walking along every row. With the help of a full-time vineyard manager, the owner combs through these 4,000 vines every season.

"Every single vine gets touched every season," he says.

A section of the vineyard is also tended by about 20 students in Piedmont Virginia Community College's viticulture program.



Before Elliff got involved with the Charlottesville-based college, classes consisted mostly of "slideshows in conference rooms," according to the Etlan grape grower.

"I felt it was important for people to actually get out into the vineyard to learn about this," he said.

The students work to remove extra foliage and clusters of grapes in order to

increase airflow, sunlight and wind to the vines, which always produce more grapes than a winemaker actually wants, according to Elliff.

Keeping the canopy "light" ensures the grapes that he does harvest contain the highest sugar content and strongest flavors.

Grapevines are very prone to diseases, but the vineyard owner uses some "green" practices to help reduce the amount of insecticides he sprays on the vines. He's planted wildflowers nearby – "they host beneficial insects that attack the ones you don't like," he said.

Elliff's appreciation for nature has blossomed ever since he started growing grapes. "You have to use what nature has given you, we have very little control over weather events," he said.

Although his daily schedule changes throughout the grape growing season, he always starts his day now by checking the weather report – "and I don't mean the weather on the news, I look at the 'industrial' version," he says smiling.

For now, Elliff enjoys his vineyard's current setup and looks forward to trying new things with his business.

"I see this as a laboratory for continuous experiment," he said. "We do a lot of trial and error."

For information about DuCard Vineyards, visit its Web site at www.ducardvineyards.com.