

Hobby Gone Wild(er)

DuCard Vineyards owner Scott Elliff reveals the difficulties, challenges, and absolute joys of the vineyard *and* winery business

BY SCOTT ELLIFF



When you watch poker on TV (OK, I admit it), the best moment is the long pause after someone bets, when the other player looks at his hand, frowns, ponders his options, and then declares with great fanfare, “I’m all in,” and pushes his entire stack of chips into the pot.

Well, that’s us. DuCard Vineyards is going all in. We recently opened a tasting room and winery at our Madison County farm. No big deal to you — Virginia has 160 others who have also gone down this path. But for us it’s a big decision that we are excited to announce and don’t take lightly. A sobering thought, if you don’t mind the pun.

Longtime readers may recall the first columns my wife and I wrote in this space — a pair of “He Said, She Said” essays about what it’s like to have a vineyard. Answer: 10 years of trial and error, success and challenge, constant learning, and a whole lot of fun. In short, a hobby gone wild.

And now it’s going wilder. Yes, our small and wonderful group of customers loves the wines we have made over the past several years. And yes, we have a gorgeous location backing up against the Shenandoah National Park. But like everything else involving wine, it takes

money and time, and lots of decisions to be made — all fraught with uncertainties . . .

What to produce and how much to sell? Those white-knuckle decisions have long since been made. We grew and set aside red grapes during 2008 in order to produce and age the wine that will be poured this season, two and a half years later. And this summer we made decisions about how much crop to devote to wines planned for release another 18 months further into the future — all still without the benefit of consumer feedback about our new operation.

OMG, what if it turns out you don’t like what we’ve made? It would take a really long time for us to drink it all at home. Or (worse?) what if you really love the wines and we haven’t made enough and sell out? You might think that’s a good problem to have, but not really — since we want you to sample the wines, be happy, take them home, come back for more, and spread the word.

P.S., that’s easy compared to growing the grapes. If a new grape and wine variety become “in vogue” there is nothing we can do about it for most of a decade: a year at least until we can get and plant new vines, three more years until we get our first, very small crop (five or six years to full output), and then another two years to make and age the wine until it’s ready to sell. We

hope you’re patient. Frankly, we also hope that whatever it is goes back “out of vogue” quickly, so that we resist the temptation to chase it.

What about the “competition?” You have a lot of choices on a nice Saturday afternoon, and probably will pass a number of wineries on the way to our place. So we need to provide a superior experience for you to make the effort, but we still want those other wineries to refer people on to us (and vice versa). Virginia has a unique little industry where we see each other not as competitors, but rather more as fellow partners and collaborators. We recognize that a rising tide lifts all wineries in our little universe.

How about helicopter rides and rock concerts and “agro-entertainment?” Uh, no. We are focused on the wine, the scenery, and the overall experience. Not college hoops on TV. And we hope you value the opportunity to relax in a tranquil setting; engage in some fun banter with friends, other customers, and our tasting room associates; sample local gourmet foods that accompany the wines; and take in some nice guitar music set up in the corner.

We’ve learned a lot over the past decade in growing the grapes. And I’m sure the adventure will continue as we take this next step. Our chips are in the pot. ■



PHOTO COURTESY OF SCOTT ELLIFF

Elliff recently opened a tasting room and winery at his DuCard vineyards at the foot of the Blue Ridge.

“Virginia has a unique little [wine] industry where we see each other not as competitors, but rather more as fellow partners and collaborators.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Scott Elliff is the proprietor of DuCard Vineyards in Madison County. His new tasting room is now open. Visit www.ducardvineyards.com for more details.