

Virginia is now home to over 150 wineries, covering a wide expanse from the Eastern Shore to Northern Virginia to the very southwest tip of the Commonwealth. How great for the traveling wine lover, who can stop at a local winery and sample their products just about anywhere.

It's actually surprising that we have wineries all over the map. In other regions of the world, wineries are tightly clustered in small geographic areas — where conditions have proven to be “just right” for growing great wines — and the wines have distinct characteristics related to the specific locales. France has the benefit of hundreds, maybe thousands, of years of experience. California has a solid 100 years in the bank as well. They have evolved and adjusted to the conditions that exist in their regions.

In Virginia the majority of our wineries are less than 10 years old. Many are in their first or second year. So we are still learning what works best. Which grape varieties are suited to our climate with hot summers and high humidity? How do our different soils influence the quality and characteristics of the wines we make? What are the “right” practices in the vineyard: trellising systems and row spacings and canopy management regimes and harvesting parameters, and many others? On the winemaking side, the choices are equally broad: fermentation style, yeasts to use, type of oak barrel (if any) for aging, and so on.

The point is that you are witnessing a grand experiment. We're all tinkering, adjusting, and fine-tuning.

Over the nine years since we first planted at our own vineyard we have learned a lot about our specific site — the soil, sunlight, prevailing winds, the impact of surrounding woods and mountains. We have changed our pruning philosophy and the way we manage the grapevine canopy during the summertime. We are about to change most of the physical hardware that holds the grapevines in place. Every year we continue to test different approaches, e.g.: “Let's allow the grass to grow under the vines in one row, but not in the next row. What difference does it make (if any) on vigor, insect populations, ripening of the grapes and other factors?”

In my prior career as a business consultant we called this “continuous improvement” — a sort of wisdom that comes with age. We have certainly made plenty of mistakes and will continue to make more of them; we just try not to make the same ones twice. As long as we are paying attention, we should improve bit by bit every year. I know that we have; you can taste it in the wines.

Increasingly, the wines that come from the sandy soils and Atlantic influences of the Tidewater region should be different from wines grown in the rocky, clay soils and Blue Ridge mountain influences of the Piedmont. We are learning that some grape varieties, notably Viognier and Cabernet Franc, are particularly well suited to local conditions — and are producing some world-class wines — while other varieties just don't work as expected. So come enjoy our grand experiment in action. The best is yet to come.