



WILL WORK *for* WINE

An inside view of the Virginia wine grape harvest, from vine to glass.

BY STEVE RUSSELL • PHOTOS BY CARL ZITZMANN

BY MID MORNING, A THIN FOG IS burning off the foothills around DuCard Vineyards in Madison County, but the early October sun is still weak enough that the dozen people I've joined at the edge of the vines are clad mostly in long sleeves and fleece. It is a decidedly middle-aged crowd, with tans just fading from recent hikes and beach vacations. An observer might assume that we're weekenders on one of those wine-trail tours that pack Virginia tasting rooms this time of year. Nope, we're here to work, thank you very much. Specifically, we've signed up as free labor to help bring in the 2011 grape harvest.

Judging by his magenta-splattered cargo shorts and cap, DuCard owner Scott Elliff has already been at this task for a few hours, so can probably use the short breather needed to give us our marching orders. To be frank, 2011 has been a difficult harvest. Dry skies and cool nights are preferred, optimal conditions under which grape sugar and acidity levels develop with a harmony that makes winemakers giddy. But starting with Hurricane Irene in late August, the season has been wetter than usual, and Tropical Storm Lee added soaking insult (and hail) to injury in September. When maturing grapes absorb all that moisture, they can swell and split, starting a downward spiral of decay. Thus winemakers make wrenching, on-the-fly decisions about exactly when to harvest each grape variety grown in their vineyards, typically starting with the whites and then on to the reds.

Elliff holds up a couple of clusters of deep-purple cabernet franc grapes. They look plump and pretty enough, until he points out skins dusted with grayish powder—the form of fungal botrytis that degrades grape quality, not the “noble rot” prized for producing distinctive dessert wines. “In Virginia, we don't get that good botrytis,” Elliff cracks. He

points out another area where the flesh has gone mushy, commonly called sour rot. “We don't want this,” he says, unceremoniously pitching the compromised clusters aside. “If you can save part, great, but if not, just let it drop to the ground. Be tough for us; only bring in the good stuff.”

The rest of the work party is probably more familiar with such judgment calls. Many are students in Piedmont Virginia Community College's viticulture and enology program, which mixes classroom study with plenty of opportunities for real-world, skinned-knuckles experience. A few students are enthusiasts who want to boost their knowledge of local wine; others are seriously investigating the possibility of a new or second career in Virginia's booming wine industry. As we pick up five-gallon buckets and sharp gardening snips, I figure I'll just copycat what they do. We spread out, and our harvest begins.

The vines have been trained to grow along elevated cables, so the fruit is conveniently located in a waist-to-shoulder zone—no stooping necessary. And clusters are abundant; enough in one spot to almost fill a bucket. I simply reach into the thick leaves,

many of which are turning an autumnal red that matches the surrounding mountainsides, and start snipping away. Pull out the cluster and gently drop it into a bucket—*plomp*.

Almost immediately, we run into patches where sour rot and botrytis have taken hold, and it makes us tentative. Acting on a helpful tip from a PVCC student picking nearby, I add a second sense to my evaluation process—if a cluster smells of vinegar, ditch it. “I'm dropping a lot of grapes over here,” someone finally mutters. “This doesn't feel right.”

“If it's bad, they don't want it,” another picker reassures. “And I think we're getting into a better section up here anyway.”

It goes on like that: good patches where grapes hit the bucket, bad patches where grapes hit the grass. We start to find our rhythm, making snap decisions as our arms piston in and out of the vines—*snip, plomp, snip, snip, plomp*. I look down the 100-yard row. Yep, there are a *lot* of grapes out here.

When the buckets are brimming, Elliff reappears atop his trusty blue Landini tractor, carrying a big square bin. The Italian import is designed for vineyard use with a



Opposite: From vine to bucket to crusher...to bottle. This page: The volunteers at work.



narrow wheelbase that fits between rows. Even so, as he chugs close, it becomes apparent that the Landini fills the entire space, forcing our ducking retreat into the vine canopy while the wheels roll past. Once he stops, we unload a new set of empty buckets and replace them with our full ones, stacked in two tiers until the tops stick over the edge of the bin.

Elliff eyeballs our first load and plucks out a few clusters that don't pass muster. "Great. You guys are doing great," he says, hopping back on the tractor. "Just remember to enjoy yourselves. Harvest is supposed to be a good time."

Now seems like a good time for a short break, so I follow Bob and Chris Garsson over to another row where Norton grapes hang heavy, but not quite ready for harvest. Turns out, the couple is quite familiar with these Norton vines through their season-long PVCC class on vineyard management. "We started last winter with dormant pruning, then into the spring and summer with tying shoots to the wire and pulling leaves so that the canopy is balanced," says Bob. "I can't believe how much we've learned right here."

Bob is nearing retirement from his job in public relations, and the Garssons hope to use that knowledge to start their own vineyard or boutique winery. "Really, we'd like to build our time around viticulture and the local wine industry," says Bob. "We're big fans of Virginia wine."

Back in the cab franc, the climbing sun has caused many in the crew to ditch their long sleeves. Unfortunately, that exposes more skin to the squadron of miniature bees that has also arrived with the heat. They aren't really out for blood, just here for the same reason we are—ripe fruit—putting their stingers and our fingers in constant proximity. Sometimes they get too close and wind up sliced in half by the snips.

Truth told, as farm labor goes, harvesting grapes is pretty easy. Sure, you might break a sweat and get a bit messy, but compared to baling hay in August, it's a cakewalk. Especially when the striking scenery of a Blue Ridge fall is just a glance away, and you dreamily realize that this same scene is repeating itself right now at more than 400 other wineries and vineyards across Virginia.

Ouch! Bee got me on the fingertip before I even saw the little bastard. Wow, that stings, and the grape juice smeared into my hands isn't helping. Still, I'm not the first picker to get stung today, so I suck it up, protect my throbbing digit with a Band-Aid, and get back to work. Except now I keep my gaze more focused on the grapes.

During our next breather, I hear the voices of another crew, speaking Spanish I think, about a dozen rows away where the petit verdot grows. I wander over, and it doesn't take long to realize that these guys are *mucho*



Bunch by bunch, the writer and his group harvested about two tons of grapes.

mas rápido than we are. This is partly due to the fact that they're snipping everything, leaving the quality sort for others at the crush pad. And it's also because this isn't a weekend lark or an educational experience; these guys are full-time farm laborers, tackling one harvest after another to pay rent or buy groceries. One thing is for sure—I don't hear them complaining about little bees.

My crew has completed several more rows by mid afternoon, and my fingers have been slick with purple juice for so long that they're actually starting to pucker. We're well on our way to picking about two tons of grapes, loading the big white bins about a dozen times.

Those bins are tracted across the gravel parking lot, where a steady stream of wine tourists has been building throughout the day, and behind DuCard's handsome, sustainably built tasting room to the outdoor crush pad. There, vineyard manager Julien Durantie is working with a middle-of-a-tough-harvest intensity that none of us can match. He culls even more grapes that have been picked by both crews. He repeatedly climbs a step stool to dump buckets into the couch-size crusher-destemmer machine. He climbs back down to clear jams from the rolling metal sieve on the underside of the apparatus. And he and Elliff



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DuCard owner Scott Elliff relies on a compact Landini and his merry band of pickers.

steadily ponder the partially crushed mass of grapes that falls into the fermenting bin below. Observing their furrowed brows, I discern that the crush pad is where the labor of the harvest morphs into the art of winemaking—an art that will shepherd this cab franc vintage all the way until its release about 18 months later.

More cars keep pulling in, and a local band is setting up on the tasting-room patio for an evening of music, wine, and food under the stars. For the first time in a while, there is no chance of rain, and the scene is tempting. But there are still grapes to be picked, and still daylight by which to pick them. My meager contributions today can't begin to compare with the efforts of others who will live and breathe the harvest until the

last grape is plucked from the vine. But I can't help but feel that this is now *my* harvest too. I pick up an empty bucket and head into the vineyard one more time.

Ten months later, I'm back at DuCard, and again find Elliff among his vines, pruning runners that want to turn orderly trellises into grape bushes. All the clusters are still green at this point, though the cab franc is starting to show faint blushes of purple. I'm tempted to pick up some snips, but today I'm not here to work—I'm here to drink the literal fruit of my labor from last fall.

Since then, those grapes bubbled in fermentation bins for 10 days, then the juice was separated from the solids and settled

in 2,000-liter stainless-steel tanks for two months before being transferred into French and American oak barrels. And that's where Elliff uses a tool that resembles a turkey baster, known as a "wine thief," to extract a sample of the vintage-in-progress, which he dribbles into a glass. Next to it are pours of its 2009 and 2010 predecessors, vintages that have already been bottled and released.

The 2011 vintage is a shade lighter in color, which Elliff attributes to its youth and the wet conditions that prompted us to harvest the grapes before they were fully mature. "You take what nature can give you," says Elliff, who bottled his first vintage in 2008. "It's different every year, and just like with local foods, we celebrate that."

Indeed, the 2009 vintage's most prominent characteristics are intense cherry notes, while the vintage from 2010, which was regarded as an excellent harvest for Virginia wines, is even more aromatic and structured. Finally, I swirl the glass containing the 2011 vintage. I'm a bit nervous, and not just because the winery owner is staring right at me. This young wine is directly connected to the work I did last fall, and I find myself feeling a bit protective. I close my eyes and sip.

Mmm. Instead of the deep, structured quality of the 2010, pleasing notes of fruit and oak are in the spotlight. Of course, this wine will continue to evolve over the next eight months, but as far as I'm concerned, it's already totally drinkable. "We are our own worst critics," says Elliff, "but we've proven that we can make good wine even in not-so-ideal years."

Indeed, as I exit the tasting room and gaze over the ripening rows again, I wish it were possible to take a couple of bottles home now. And I think about my fellow pickers Bob and Chris Garsson, who since last fall have planted 150 vines in their fledgling vineyard in Nelson County. They will likely need to wait another two years before their own first harvest.

Oh well, anticipation is an integral part of the pleasure of wine. And you don't even have to get your hands dirty to join in that pleasure. Just grab a corkscrew. 🍷

For more about DuCard wines and tasting-room hours, go to ducardsvineyards.com.