

Celebrating a Major Milestone

It's been a memorable decade or two in the wine business...

BY SCOTT ELLIFF

I can't believe it's been 20 years since I first planted some vines at our Madison County property. This fall, my DuCard Vineyards will be celebrating our 10th anniversary as a Virginia farm winery. Wow!

We started with three key principles: 1. Produce fine wines of outstanding character, 2. Be environmentally responsible, and 3. Provide knowledgeable service in a beautiful, relaxed setting.

Ten years later: Mission Accomplished (so far). Our wines have been awarded gold medals in the prestigious Virginia Governor's Cup competition and we've been recognized for our green environmental approach and our team. And patrons give us top ratings.

I looked back over prior columns I've written for *The Piedmont Virginian*, which basically asked "are you crazy?" and were answered independently in separate columns by my wife and me.

Yes, dear, you were right. Totally insane thing to do. High capital cost, high labor cost, weather risks of all kinds, many diseases and conditions that can ruin the grape crops, various issues that arise in winemaking that can ruin the wine, with Virginia as an unknown and certainly unproven region for wine production, and with DuCard located on a remote back road.

But I was right, too. It was an insanely fun and fulfilling thing to do. An opportunity, starting from scratch, to do it "right" in terms of values, business practices, quality and customer service standards, culture, and community involvement. And the results are gratifying, too. If you do it right, customers, staff, and business partners will support you and become loyal fans--and friends--who market and spread the word for you.

In a subsequent column — ten years ago now, when Virginia had a total of 150 wineries, and DuCard had not yet opened to the public — I ventured that "the best was yet to come." Indeed, Virginia now has more than 300 wineries, and while our industry certainly is still small, it is getting significant recognition nationwide and beyond. And DuCard's remote location has proven to be a great plus, as consumers seek venues with natural beauty, wide open space, and tranquility. In the current COVID period, our back lawn has become an oasis of sorts. Who knew?



DuCard Vineyards owner Scott Elliff

Recently, I wrote about "authenticity" in the industry. With growth comes innovation and creativity and new business models, which is inevitable and is commonly labelled "progress." But I guess I'm now officially an old codger because back when I started, when you went to a winery, the wine you tasted was entirely from grapes grown on the property and was all made by the owner and his staff right on the premises. Not so in a number of Virginia operations now, with outsourced wine production or grapes that are mostly purchased from elsewhere (including California). Sure, DuCard's approach involves more risk (yes, from time to time; like after this spring's crippling frosts — my wife does refer back to her original column on this point). But we still approach it in this old fashioned, authentic way, come what may.

All in all, quite a run. And I still believe, as we approach our 10th anniversary and release our Decade One commemorative wines, that the best is ahead of us. But it's time to celebrate how far we've come — and that we're just here at all!

Please join us!



It's been 10 years since Elliff opened his winery in Madison County.