

DuCard Vineyards – Make it Feel Like Family

Here's a testament to what they've achieved at **DuCard** (<https://ducardsvineyards.com/>): while we were chatting, they shared the story of how one of the staff texted the manager the other night saying that as she was leaving the tasting room she heard customers say "That's why I like coming here, it feels like a family."



DuCard vineyards is a wonderfully quiet getaway from everything – the hustle and bustle, the traffic, the craziness, even a cell signal (and no guest wi-fi either!). It's far enough away even from old town Madison and nestled up against the mountains. The property borders on Old Rag Mountain and Shenandoah National Park. The owner says they're the only winery that actually borders the park. DuCard gives you the ability to fully unplug, with no work texts and no spouse reminding you to pick up something at the grocery store or fill up the gas in the car before you get home (yes, dear, I remembered). They intend for you to unplug and connect with each other here. You don't really get the option not to do exactly that.

I got here because DuCard actually replied to a post I put up in the Va Wine Love Facebook group, and I almost didn't notice it until that other Va Wine Blogger pointed it out.

My Nova Wine Blog's Post



MYNOVAWINE.BLOG

My Day on the Hazy Mountain Social Media Vineyard and Cellar Tour

A day I got to spend with up and coming winemaker and winegrowing getting a chance to stak...



Matthew Fitzsimmons and 20 others

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DuCard Vineyards Top contributor · [Follow](#)

Dan: thorough and serious write up, to your credit and differentiated from some 'influencers,'. So would be our pleasure to host you at DuCard for an in depth session. Reach us via email on website Cheers

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Matthew Fitzsimmons [Group expert](#) Top contributor +3

DuCard Vineyards Dan Redding take them up on this! 🤔

Since I'm still shocked by the idea people actually read what I write, and since Matt said this was a good idea, I jumped on it and started emailing with Scott, the owner. I landed on Memorial Day weekend as the best time to visit, in between a very busy time at work and lots of stuff happening at home.

I actually love getting "off the beaten path" if you will – lots of curvy/switchback roads lead you across the mountain to where the vineyard and tasting room sit. The view is actually stunning – you drive literally right up to the mountain and then take a side road and wind around up and up and up and then you find yourself in this great opening in between peaks.

I got there right as they were opening for the day, which is when I love to arrive – I prefer a quiet time by the woods to soak in the peace and enjoy the wine. Several staff were already there and took me to meet owner Scott Elliff. He started explaining how they were set up for tastings and how he is pleased that they have abandoned the tasting bar model for seated flights. I hear him with this – it's hard for the staff when the bar gets rushed and customers may feel they aren't getting the service or attention they deserve. At the same time, I find it a little sad that the tasting bar era seems to have run its course. At the right time, you could get a lot of good information about the winery and philosophy and goals for the

owners and winemakers. But on a busy day, I can see the drawback to it too. I grabbed a seat on the back patio and settled in for a red flight and charcuterie board.



A super-sized connect four? That's cool....

The red flight was lovely, as was the charcuterie. The red flight began with the Popham Run Red – a Bordeaux blend that felt very dark and herbal to me. I enjoyed this one quite a bit. It felt more tannic than the other wines, but it may have needed a little more time to open up. I was also hungry, so I wonder how it may have been different if I had food with it. I finished it too fast to find out.

The next wine was the 2020 Merlot. This was one of my favorites on the flight- it had some tannin on it, but was a smoother and more pleasant merlot – much more to my liking than many Virginia merlots.

The showstopper for me was the Black Bear Cabernet Franc – this is 100% Cabernet Franc and is so soft, pleasant and drinkable. I don't think it needs pairing, and this is how I love my cab franc – this can be sipped as an after-work unwind with it wine or put together with food. It was great with the baguette and cheese on the board. It's on the young side, and hence comes across a little bit light and fresh.

By this point, Scott had joined me at the table and we had a great time just talking about his experience with the vineyard and the Virginia wine community. He shared how he found this property and loved it because it was secluded and bordered on the park lands. He talked about meeting with the extension service and learning that the property had been an apple orchard and was mercifully above the freeze line. Given that the market for apples was so depressed, the rep from the extension service

recommended they farm grapes. So Scott planted grapes and for some time sold them to Rappahannock Vineyards to make wine. He did this for about ten years and got bitten by the winemaking bug. He gradually shifted away from selling the grapes to making their own with winemaker Julien. There are now three vineyards they grow and manage for their wines, with Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Norton and now Albarino joining the mix. They do source a little bit of Traminette for a white wine.

As we talked I finished the flight with the 2019 Triskele, another Bordeaux blend that is their flagship red. It's nice and very drinkable, maybe a little bit more rounded to my taste than the Popham Run was. I finished up the charcuterie board with this pour also.

Scott and I talked about shifts in Virginia wine with a seeming move to bigger venues that host the party crowd and have more of a mass-produced feeling. He wondered whether that would end up foreclosing opportunities for smaller boutique operations that didn't pack in hundreds of guests at a time. I really do believe that there is an opportunity for balance out there, however, because younger folks gravitate to the party scene of the big venues, but older folks like me tend to want the quieter more reflective experiences. There is a market for both approaches, and this likely will continue (at least I hope it will!). We talked a lot about the ongoing collaborative nature of Virginia wineries supporting each other and lifting each other up, sharing what they have learned along the way. DuCard continues this with an instructional program at Piedmont Virginia Community College that includes students "adopting" a row of vines and taking care of them for a season (under heavy supervision of course). This is the kind of thing that I think is amazing – the established wineries sharing the lessons learned and raising up the next generation of winemakers here. Scott even **shares some of his experience on the DuCard website (<https://ducardvineyards.com/fun-stuff/our-occasional-musings/>)**, with a great style of tongue-in-cheek writing.

The team brought us a pour of the "C'est Trop" Port-style Norton – this had a fun story – they've developed a relationship with Virginia Distillery Company who lend them their used whiskey barrels. They age their Norton in these barrels and fortify it, and then give the barrels back to the distillery to use to age whiskey in to add that port feel. I love that there is this collaboration in the Virginia local spirits scene – they're supporting each other in achieving their end goals to make a better product for their customers. This kind of collaboration is what separates Virginia from some other wine regions – the sense of supporting each other and lifting the whole industry – we all rise together. This is a nice Norton port – while I don't usually enjoy Norton grapes, done in this port style it's very pleasant. It's not overly sweet nor is it heavy with alcohol, and feels like a good after-dinner sipper.

DuCard also just launched their Pet Nat (or pet gnat) – made mostly from Viognier – this is a case of taking a tough situation (Viognier is hard to fully ripen in Virginia, and they don't see it fully ripen in this vineyard) and using it to your advantage – the Viognier goes into their sparkling program, and in this case, some went into the one year Pet Nat program. Pet Nat is very trendy in Virginia right now, partly because it's a fast turnaround from harvest to selling and serving, and partly because it is just light, refreshing and fun – and this one has a great label.



They're obviously having a ton of fun with this wine, and with their whole operation. They do a nice job presenting each wine and talking you through what it is – This helps with what I miss from the tasting bar era.

As we sat and talked, Scott greeted many of the customers who came by name. Before Scott came over, as I sat and started on my flight, a local artist who had set up shop in the corner of the indoor tasting room came out and talked – he may have thought I worked at another winery, but stuck around to chat, and even came back to talk more while I was tasting. The whole environment is friendly and relaxed, and it really does feel like they want you to feel like you are part of the family while you visit. Even on an overcast, cool day the atmosphere was warm and welcoming. This is exactly the atmosphere Scott described wanting to create – a place you unload any stress, connect with others and enjoy being outside with good wine and good people.

They've really got the setting for this, as you take in the quiet countryside. In fact, Scott mentioned that he recently signed the winery up to be a "Harvest Host," so that RV's can sign up to camp there for the night, and within 15 minutes of signing up, he had their first customer book time there! They actually pulled up while I was there and he went over to meet them and get them situated and comfortable. He's determined that every visitor will have a great experience at DuCard.



They book a lot of live music, which adds to a fun atmosphere, and they have food trucks on the regular. Even so, their homemade charcuterie board provides a great base for your tasting, and there are other items to nibble on their menu.



DuCard is about an hour northwest of Charlottesville, but pulls a lot of customers from Northern

Virginia/DC and some from Richmond. Scott told me he doesn't get much traffic from Charlottesville because of all the wineries right around there. While I understand that, an hour isn't far to drive for good wine and peace and quiet. My personal thought on the C'Ville winery scene is that it's getting crowded and active and some of the well-traveled places feel less relaxing when you visit. So an hour drive to soak in the woods and relaxation is well worth it. The good wine is a great bonus!

I feel like I'm late to the party at DuCard – they weren't really on my radar prior to this. Maybe that's the plan – don't draw an overwhelming number, but keep it light and fun. There's an intentionality to keeping a boutique feel and offering a quality product here, and tying together the whole package, entertainment, relaxation, good food and great wine. The personal touch with a warm and welcoming staff is the glue that holds it all together. Every staff member was friendly, helpful, and went out of their way to make sure guests were having a good time. And that's what we love about Virginia Wine. While the industry has grown to roughly 300 wineries, it's a community and a family. Of course there is competition, but there is also support. DuCard is representing that sense of community and family wonderfully, and making sure that in their corner of the Virginia Wine World, it continues to thrive.



Published by

Dan who loves Wine.

Someone who's learning a little bit more about wine but knows what he likes and likes to share what he likes. [View all posts by Dan who loves Wine.](#)

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10 thoughts on “DuCard Vineyards – Make it Feel Like Family”

1. **Ely Shemer** says:

[MAY 29, 2023 AT 7:22 AM](#)

loved your post.

This is what I see in your post

What a wonderful experience you had at DuCard vineyards! It definitely seems like they are focused on providing a personal touch and a relaxing atmosphere for their guests. I love the idea of RV's being able to camp there and enjoy the peaceful surroundings. My question is, how do they balance the desire to stay smaller and boutique with the need to grow the business and attract more visitors? Does the owner have any plans for expansion? Thank you for sharing your experience!

Thanks, Ely Shemer

Reply

Dan who loves Wine. says:

MAY 29, 2023 AT 7:26 AM

It's a great question! I suspect it's a balancing act for many of these smaller operations – they have to keep a loyal base and attract some new customers every year. Get too big and it's really hard to keep that sense of community that makes it so special. I'm hoping Scott will read your comment and share his thoughts....

Reply

1. **Scott E** says:

MAY 30, 2023 AT 1:43 AM

Maybe 1/3 larger and then that's it

1. **Scott E** says:

MAY 30, 2023 AT 1:42 AM

Thanks for your interest. Balance is tough but we find there's some 'natural selection' as some folks love our style and others are looking for larger or more country club feel or more 'prestigious' (?). We are expanding both customer facilities, winemaking and acreage. But not so much that we lose our special character

Reply

2. **Tammy** says:

MAY 29, 2023 AT 11:46 AM

I think it's great that you had a good experience there. While I think that there are many younger people that prefer the "party scene" wineries, my experience with my kids (32 and 30) and their friends is to the contrary, possibly because my kids were brought (once legal, of course) to more of the boutique wineries, not to the "event" wineries or ones that were likely to cater to the party bus crowds. And while I agree that many of the Cville area wineries do get crowded and overwhelmed, I can also think of several that are much quieter and rarely crowded.

My personal experience with two of the people at Ducard, unfortunately, was not matched by your warm and welcoming one. I remember quite liking their Popham Red, and the facility was lovely, if somewhat scary to get to, but the bad taste left by those people mean I won't be back.

Reply

Dan who loves Wine. says:

MAY 29, 2023 AT 7:56 AM

Oh no! I'm so sorry to hear about that! I was impressed by the warmth I saw towards everyone who came in. There are a couple cville area ones that offer the calm and quiet I love, and I even enjoy the party ones at the right time.... I just really like to relax and breathe when I visit a winery....

Reply

1. **Tammy** says:

MAY 29, 2023 AT 9:52 AM

FWIW, the nastiness I experienced wasn't done in a public setting, but on social media, but it was quite personal and misogynistic, so it definitely turned me off permanently. I'm glad the public face of the winery is much more welcoming.

3. **Scott E** says:

MAY 30, 2023 AT 1:52 AM

We like to focus on customers while they are there, sit and chat and answer questions and get to know each other. Snd that's a vibe I can set snd reinforce as the owner. I have no control over social media and find it often to be a major distraction and subject to misinterpretation and both intentional and unintentional rudeness. We ask to be judged by the wine in the glass, the views of streams snd mountains, the great local music snd the knowledgeable and friendly service. On site and tangible

Reply

4. **Nance Montgomery** says:

JUNE 8, 2023 AT 8:32 AM

We visit the VA wine regions at least twice a year. I never miss a chance to visit Ducard. While visiting the region with friends years ago, we stumbled upon DuCard and were blown away by the setting, staff and of course, the wine. Love the laid back atmosphere and welcoming feeling. My husband and I were there last Monday – we commented on the young people working in the vineyards, and after reading your blog, I am guessing they are students in Scott's workshop at the community college. What a GREAT idea!

I agree there is a balance between the boutique wineries and the larger, more commercial venues. Personally, I prefer the smaller vineyards and DuCard is the most genuine vineyard I have had the pleasure to visit. You can feel the love and dedication Scott and his team put into DuCard to ensure it is a fantastic experience for all who take the time to relax, grab a seat and enjoy the wines, view and appreciate the remote location.

Reply

5. Pingback: **Fresh Air and Pét-Nat at DuCard | Wine Trails and Wanderlust**

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