

# A Vineyard's Gamble

The Norton grape shines in Virginia Wine

BY SCOTT ELLIFF

One of the first decisions you have to make when starting a vineyard is which varieties to plant. What grows well in our climate? What is frost tolerant? What can handle the range of abundant grapevine diseases? What has reliable crop loads? What is most rot resistant? What makes a good wine? What might be unique and interesting? And more. For me 24 years ago, I asked everyone in the industry at the time, read suitability reports from Virginia Tech and nationally, and tried samples of a wide range of locally grown wines. Wow, an overload of information, much of it contradictory and speculative.

One of our choices was to plant some Virginia Native Norton. A dark red grape, it was thought to be cold hardy and disease resistant, but nobody really knew for sure, as our industry was so young then. And as Virginia's native grape, it was certainly unique and interesting. It was celebrated for its mysterious and romanticized history, having been discovered in the wild, used for internationally acclaimed wines in the 1800s (Best Wine of All Nations – Vienna World's Fair 1873), disappearing during Prohibition in the 1920s and then reemerging along the banks of the Missouri River and subsequently being returned to its ancestral home in Virginia during the 1970s. Intriguingly, it's very high in the compound Resveratrol which is purported to have important health benefits. But oddly, it's virtually ignored by wine critics or sneeringly derided as 'bubble gum' flavored, and almost never found on restaurant menus or in wine stores.

OK, so we'll plant an acre or two in the far corner of the vineyard – give it a shot, why not.

What kind of wine it would make was an open question. And the first several vintages were, well, a little rough. Too earthy perhaps, too acidic. Rather untamed or overwhelming to put it gently. Promising maybe but with a lot more work and experience needed.

Well, 24 years later I can report that Norton can make a darn good wine. Earthy and rich, super aromatic, low in tannin so lacking that chalky sensation you get with many red wines, great with barbeque and spicy ethnic food and a great grape to use for making a port-style dessert wine. It's certainly still out of the mainstream, but several great wine books have been written about the grape and the wines it can produce. It's featured in a film on indigenous, cult wines from around the world that is currently being produced. As a native grape it's a darling of the industry regarding sustainability and climate change.

And thanks to the OMNI Homestead Resort it has its own blind tasting contest. *PV*



## SUCCESS

For DuCard, I'm delighted to report that we won the inaugural Homestead Norton Challenge Cup last year for our 2017 Norton. As well, our 2017 C'est Trop port-style wine, using Norton grapes and brandy spirits, aged in Maker's Mark whiskey barrel, was the first and only port style wine to win a gold medal at the Virginia Governor's Cup contest.

We have changed so many things since we first started over two decades ago - how we prune the vines, how we manage the canopy, how we deal with diseases and insects, how we produce the wine, and more. And we will continue to evolve – and improve.

But one thing I wouldn't change is that decision at the turn of the millennium to plant a small block of Virginia Native Norton. It's been a great ride.

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