Virginia's new star

16 Sep 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT

See Virginia wine - tasting notes, Sparkling Viognier at Horton Vineyards and this video.

Rutger de Vink is a young man blessed with a memorable name, and considerable funds at his disposal. So far so typical of many of those making the dream of owning a vineyard and winery come true. But he is rather different. For a start this ex-marine, who spent three years in hi-tech ('with a tie on - I was miserable'), could hardly be more hands on. He lives in a silver airstream camper in a wood on the edge of his property so as to maximise the hours he can devote to his 16 acres of vines overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. I sincerely believe his considerable efforts stand a good chance of putting the state definitively on the world wine map.

Wine grapes have been grown in the Commonwealth of Virginia, a short drive south-west of the White House, since Thomas Jefferson tried out vines he had imported from Europe but which succumbed to native American pests. But it has been only in the last few decades that a serious Virginia wine business has developed, helped considerably by a bold investment in Barboursville Vineyards in the late 1970s by young Gianni Zonin of the prominent Italian wine-producing family. Barboursville continues to uphold high winemaking (and restaurateuring) standards for what is one of the state's larger wine operations (none are enormous).

Dennis Horton at Horton Vineyards has also kept innovating, leading the charge into full-scale adoption of Viognier as the state's signature grape after Chardonnay, and being one of the first to plant the Petit Manseng grapes of Jurançon that have become another VA speciality. Horton and Chrysalis Vineyards are two of the strongest supporters of the local American grape variety Norton that produces some of the finest red wine made anywhere from non-vinifera vines, vinifera being the European vine family responsible for most of the world's wine.

A key figure in raising standards in Virginia grape growing (not easy in hot, humid Southern summers) and winemaking has been Jim Law of Linden Vineyards, whose wines have been exceptional almost from when he started in the 1980s. It was Law whom de Vink originally saw as a role model, and he worked the 2001 vintage there - but we may well see pupil overtaking master to judge from the first three vintages of RdV wines I was able to taste at the brand new RdV winery last July.

The son of an equally outdoorsy Dutchman (they both like nothing better than a few weeks camping and skiing in Alaska) who sold his pharmaceutical company when Rutger was 15 and brought the family over to the US, Rutger decided to make vine growing his life in 2000 and took a serious look at California's Sonoma Coast. 'But I wanted to be where it hadn't been done before', this rangy, rust-haired, puppy-like creature explained to me as he drove me from Dulles airport to his vineyard in horse country west of the handsome Civil War stone houses of Middleburg.

It took him several years to find the perfect site for the red Bordeaux varieties he wanted to plant. The hillside's previous owner, a fifth-generation Aberdeen Angus farmer, warned him 'nothing will grow on that heap of rocks' but, after some extremely thorough soil mapping, intensive input from specialists in soil and viticulture on both coasts, and a certain amount of re-landscaping, the wines are already looking thrillingly good.

Indeed the first samples, from vines just three years old, so intrigued the Médoc's most famous oenologist Eric Boissenet that this highly respected Bordelais volunteered to become a consultant for RdV Vineyards, advising on the blends for the main wine RdV that is designed for long ageing in the Bordeaux tradition and another rather more accessible expression of each vintage called, neatly for Francophones, Rendezvous. 'There is an atmosphere at RdV that attracted me', Boissenet explained in an email, 'an exceptional team spirit and a humble determination to get every detail right, in Rutger, his assistant Josh Grainer and the [six] Mexican vineyard workers'.

Rutger made his first visit to Bordeaux in 2002 with a group of Virginia wine producers and struck up a friendship with fellow Dutchman Kees Van Leeuwen, viticultural consultant at first growth Château Cheval Blanc in St-Émilion. Two years later on a trip to the US Van Leeuwen came to visit the embryonic RdV vineyard. Over dinner in the height of summer he teased Rutger, 'This is the tropics. You can't grow grapes here.' Van Leeuwen was particularly impressed by the fact that, rather than try out vines on land he already owned, de Vink practised the particularly precise science of site selection in a state where expediency and tourism are the more usual factors.

Rutger was to work the 2005 vintage at Cheval Blanc and it was his deep exposure to some of the top wines and properties of Bordeaux that left him with the determination to find a site that is well drained enough to stop the vine from producing vegetation midway through the season and to divert all the energy into developing flavour and quality in the grapes. 'The Californians can do it by withholding irrigation, but we have rain', he explained on a particularly noisy, bumpy tour of his estate in an ancient jeep. 'When you look at the climatic data for Virginia, you don't jump up and down and go "Wow, that's great for wine!"' Average precipitation during the growing season in Virginia is apparently 690 mm, very much more than Bordeaux's 525 mm.

'My favourite wine is northern Rhône actually. Syrah can be magical, but with Syrah you'd be taking a taking huge gamble here, with our rain in the last part of ripening. I'm a gambling person but there's a limit…' As it is he has planted 40% Cabernet Sauvignon, 40% Merlot, 12% Petit Verdot and a little Cabernet Franc that has so far failed to make the cut for his top wine - even though in Virginia as a whole it has become more popular than Cabernet Sauvignon. 'It can be a struggle to ripen Cabernet Sauvignon in Virginia', he admits, but he clearly has his sights set on making a Virginia first growth.

For the moment, his few thousand cases of 2008s have been sold exclusively from the airy, carefully designed modern winery (picture above taken from the RdV website), at $55 and $88 a bottle. There are many attractive wines made in Virginia but what marks Rutger's wines out is their density without heaviness or marked alcohol. I suspect they will have a long and glorious life and, doubtless, raise the bar for other vignerons in the native state of America's most famously wine-loving president.

MY TOP VIRGINIA PICKS

Ankida Ridge Chardonnay 2010

Barboursville Vermentino Reserve 2010

Barboursville Cabernet Franc Reserve 2002, 2008

Barboursville, Octagon 2002, 2007

Barboursville Malvaxia Passito 2006

Breaux Vineyards Viognier 2010

Chrysalis, Lockeley Reserve Norton 2008

King Family, Meritage 2007, 2009

Linden, Hardscrabble Chardonnay 2008 and Hardscrabble Red 2009

Linden, Claret 2009

RdV Vineyards, Rendezvous 2010

RdV Vineyards 2008, 2009 and 2010