Chrysalis Estate Bottled Norton 2011 Virginia

15 Nov 2012 by Jancis Robinson

From $17

I am writing this in New York just before flying home from a week beating the drum for *Wine Grapes*, so I have been tasting even more unusual grape varieties than usual.

On Wednesday night, at one of the Terroir wine bars in Manhattan, Paul 'Summer of Riesling' Greico and Aldo Sohm, Austrian sommelier at Le Bernardin, very kindly organised a get together of the city's leading somms and their like so that I could ensure they all knew of the existence of *Wine Grapes*. (You can see a coincidentally similar concurrent gathering of top somms in Chicago here - they dress more smartly in the Windy City). The New York event had to take place after the evening's dinner service, and 11 pm to 1 am is far from my favourite time for a party, but the energy and enthusiasm of the crowd kept me going.

At one point I found myself raving about the quality of the Norton grape with a fellow sommelier enthusiast. I had included one in a tasting of unusual varieties at the Astor Centre last Monday night and it went down well. And I shall be showing the same wine, the 2009 vintage of this week's wine, on Sunday afternoon at the Decanter Masterclass in London to be presented by me, Julia Harding MW and José Vouillamoz, all three authors of *Wine Grapes* in the same room for only the third time ever.

The sommelier and I were lamenting the fact that there is not more general enthusiasm in the US for this thoroughly American grape. It is called Norton after the physician who identified it and promulgated its use for winemaking in Richmond, Virginia, in the mid nineteenth century. Dr Norton himself thought that it was a hybrid of a member of the European *Vitis vinifera* species and *Vitis labrusca*, the very strongly 'foxy' flavoured American vine species whose most famous member is Concord, the grape used commonly for grape juice and jelly in the US.

Much more recent DNA analysis has shown that in fact its American parent is a member of the *Vitis aestivalis* species, which perhaps helps to explain why, unlike so many American vine varieties, it is not plagued by that almost rank foxy *labrusca* flavour but actually tastes 100% *vinifera*. I love its bright fruit, its earthy undertow and what seems like innate balance in most of the examples I have tasted over the years.

I know of no one more besotted by Norton than Jennifer McCloud, whose Chrysalis Vineyards in Virginia specialises in the variety. (We seem to be having a very Virginia sort of week, what with these tasting notes and this vintage report from Jim Law.) She wrote to me with some exasperation yesterday, 'I don't get it. I don't get why more of us don't get behind our own grape (although there are 30+ varietally labelled Norton wines now in Virginia.) It's our own grape... a Virginia grape, for goodness' sake! In a world of *vinifera*, one standout native grape. And the history of it is so engaging that you couldn't dream up a better story if you had to.' She sent me a selection of Nortons from which to make my choice for these two tastings and I published my tasting notes in August in All-American Nortons.

I'm a little wary as I have yet to taste the **Chrysalis, Estate Bottled Norton 2011 Virginia**, having tasted only the 2009, but I did taste the more expensive **Chrysalis, Barrel Select Norton 2011 Virginia**, which is stunning. I'm really highlighting this to try to make more people aware of Norton's respectability and interest value.

The easiest two places to buy it are Astor in New York, which bought some of the 2011 in to sell after my tasting of the 2009 (which has run out), who are selling it for $17.99 a bottle and Chrysalis Vineyards themselves, who are offering it at $17. Chrysalis are also making a special offer to visitors to this website. If you order any wine from them in the next week and mention JancisRobinson.com, you can have any quantity of Chrysalis wine shipped to anywhere in the US for just $10. The more you buy, the cheaper it is per bottle. Purple Pagers can read my tasting notes on other Chrysalis wines by putting Chrysalis in the search box.

You could go searching for more Nortons on wine-searcher.com but would of course have to weed out many a wine from the eponymous Argentine producer. Missouri still grows quite a bit of it and it is not too difficult to find throughout the Midwest.

I'll be sharing some Norton facts on Sunday - such as that it has twice as high a level of supposedly health-giving resveratrol as Cabernet Sauvignon.