

Virginia is for (Wine) Lovers

by Rich Warren



The perfect picnic: wine, charcuterie, friends and the outdoors. Photo courtesy of Abingdon Vineyards.

Virginia likes to say its wines “are like perfect French, spoken with a slight Southern drawl.” And with more than 300 wineries and 4,000 acres of grapes in ten winemaking regions, there’s plenty of wine to sample in this geographically diverse state. Many out-of-staters are familiar with the fine wineries surrounding Charlottesville in central Virginia. But not-so-well-known are the wineries in the southwest part of the state, nestled among the Blue Ridge Mountains which are known for the distinctive smoky-blue haze that frequently settles over their tree-covered peaks. And what better time to visit than in the autumn, when Virginia’s eye-popping foliage makes those mountains look like a crazy quilt of color? Here are several, personally-vetted wineries in the Blue

Ridge region, that I can promise you, are worth a visit.

Abingdon Vineyards, not far from the picture-perfect town of Abingdon, uses the catch phrase, “From Napa to Appalachia,” in its marketing. That slogan certainly captures what winemaker, Loren Gardner – a seventh-generation Californian with deep roots in the Napa winemaking region – brings to his craft. Gardner studied winemaking at the University of California-Davis, supplementing his education with work in both South Africa and France. Gardner produces 14 superb wines that visitors can sample at picnic tables in a peaceful wooded setting where a babbling brook intersects with the south fork of the Holston River. Don’t leave

without sampling Gardner’s exquisite 2018 “Game Changer,” a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Norton, and Chambourcin aged in French oak barrels for two years.

You’ll rub your eyes in wonderment at your first glimpse of Chateau Morrisette, one of the oldest and largest wineries in Virginia, located just 300 yards off the Blue Ridge Parkway. The towering exterior does indeed resemble a French chateau, and is surrounded by pristine lawns, well-tended gardens, and brick courtyards. Prepare for even more amazement when you step inside the tasting room with its many wooden beams. The 32,000 square foot structure is one of the largest buildings in North America, constructed of salvaged

timber. Dogs are a recurring theme at Chateau Morrissette. Dogs appear on wine labels – riding bicycles and flying airplanes – and in wine names such as their signature Black Dog®, which is a blend of Chambourcin, Cabernet, and Merlot. Hans, David Morrissette's beloved Black Lab, and the winery's canine inspiration, loved to lap up wine spills and lived to a ripe old age, proving that wine *does* increase longevity.

Not far from Blacksburg, Beliveau Farm is reached by traversing winding country roads, some of them gravel. But the trip is definitely worthwhile. Surrounded by mountains, nestled inside a bowl-shaped valley, is a cozy bed-and-breakfast overlooking a lake. A brewery produces gluten-free beers, and of course there's a winery, surrounded by lavender bushes and gazebos, that produces entirely estate-grown wines that have netted the property more than 100 regional, national, and international medals since it opened in 2012. Blessed with a variety of rich soils – a red clay that produces top-notch Merlots and a patch of rocky soils producing distinctive Syrahs – Beliveau took five silver medals in the Virginia Governors Cup this spring. The many out-of-state license plates in the parking lot are testament to this destination winery!



Photo courtesy of Chateau Morrissette.

Take another long, winding road – this time up the side of Chestnut Mountain – to Valhalla Vineyards. Your reward will be astounding views of both the city of Roanoke below you, and of the mountains stretching into the distance. Both the 2,000-foot elevation, and the decomposing

granite soil, contribute to the production of high-quality wines that are aged for long periods in an underground cave, 60 feet below the surface. Adjacent to the winery's tasting room, a long hallway is lined with some of the more than 100

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Wine tasting with friends. Photo courtesy of Valhalla Vineyards.

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ribbons and trophies Valhalla has received since it began producing wines in 1998, confirming the high quality of the entirely estate-produced wines bottled there.

Valhalla produces mostly dry reds, aged to superb perfection. I tasted a 2001 Syrah, a 2006 Bordeaux blend, and a 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon, currently Valhalla's best seller for good reason; it was sublime. A Viognier, the state wine of Virginia, is also available, but alas, no Chardonnays can be sampled at present, even though the grapes are grown on site. I was told that bears have eaten all of those grapes for the last two years!

Not far away, AmRhein Wine Cellars produces an eclectic mix of wines. It's only one of two wineries in Virginia that grows Aglianico, a grape native to southern Italy, used to produce a medium-bodied red wine of the same name. Legend has it that Aglianico was served at the Last Supper. AmRhein's Aglianico has taken bronze in the Virginia Governor's Cup in both 2020 and 2021. Another of the winery's award winners includes Petit Manseng, a white varietal grown widely in Virginia, which is second in production, only to the south of France. AmRhein

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scored another bronze medal with its Petit Verdot. The winery was the first to bring this red to market in Virginia. A secret to AmRhein's success may well be that its grapes are grown at three different vineyards, at three different elevations, and with varying soil types, supporting the production of a wide variety of wines.

Several other small wineries are sprinkled through Virginia's Blue Ridge wine region, including the delightful West Wind Farm near Wytheville. West Wind Farm is situated on a fourth-generation family farm that produces small batches of wine from their estate-grown Vidal Blanc, Chambouzein, Riesling, and Gewürztraminer grapes. And although it's not technically a winery, the Wine Lab in Blacksburg, located next to the Virginia Tech campus, offers flights of local, domestic, and international wines. There's an entire wall of world wines for sale at the Wine Lab. Consistent with its laboratory theme, the Wine Lab's tasting bar resembles a scientist's work bench. And your wine is served in beakers!

The fine wines and breathtakingly beautiful wineries of Virginia's scenic Blue Ridge region are sure to steal your heart and please your palate. Virginia really is for wine lovers! 🍷



Dinner in the vineyard. Photo courtesy of Beliveau Farm.



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