

In the fields and cellars of wineries around Charlottesville, a local community college is training future winemakers, vineyard owners, and wine industry professionals.

Unleashing Your Inner Winemaker

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Photos by Molly McDonald Peterson

THE WINE INDUSTRY IN VIRGINIA IS GROWING. EVEN IN 2009, WHEN we were spending our grocery and entertainment dollars more carefully, the sales of Virginia wine rose more than 7 percent—to almost 400,000 cases.

That is great news, indeed. But as new wineries open and existing ones grow, the industry faces a new challenge: finding a qualified workforce.

Virginia Is for Winemakers

In 2004, administrators from the Workforce Services Program at Piedmont Virginia Community College in Charlottesville collaborated with winemakers and vineyard owners in and around the Monticello Wine Trail to develop plans for what is now two complementary certificate programs: one in viticulture (vineyard management) and one in enology (winemaking). By February 2006, the program had graduated its first class of 15.

The program is built on one-day seminars, usually held on Saturdays so that those with full-time jobs can enroll. Taught by winemakers, vineyard managers, winery owners, and business consultants, classes are held at local vineyards. The training is hands-on, not book-based, and topics include everything from blending to marketing, grafting to pruning, tasting to harvesting.

Seminars are offered year-round, and the 10 classes required for each certificate are offered each calendar year, so someone could get through the program quickly. Students are not obligated to complete a certificate, however. Among the approximately 400 students who came through the program in 2009

were hobbyists taking a single class, curious connoisseurs taking tasting classes, and career-focused students determined to complete the whole certificate program.

Recess All the Time

Classes are held in the field as the seasons allow. In fact, many classes could not be held anywhere else. A class on blending and another on winery design and equipment are held in winter, when fieldwork is slow. Soil prep and planting are taught in the spring, as is dormant pruning. Summer brings classes on canopy management and pest control. Come fall, students learn about harvesting and bottling.

A few classes stretch over both semesters. The custom crush class starts in the fall just before harvest and concludes with bottling in the early summer. What is the literal fruit of such “studying”? Each student brings home four cases of wine. In another two-semester class—vineyard management—students “adopt a row of vines” for a year at DuCard Vineyard in Madison County, where owner Scott Elliff trains them in pruning, thinning, dropping fruit, and overall decision making.

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Scott Elliff (above), owner of Madison County's DuCard Vineyard, teaches students how to prune overgrown grapevines. Those enrolled in this vineyard management class are responsible for a row for a year, from pruning to harvesting.



A few restaurants have also participated in the program. The sommelier at C&O, on Charlottesville's pedestrian mall, taught a three-session class on pairing wine and food. Siips, a few blocks away, was the venue for a series of weeknight tasting classes focusing on different wine regions across the globe. The Lafayette Inn in Stanardsville hosted a class on home winemaking.

Meet Your Classmates

On a sunny Saturday in March, a dozen people gathered at First Colony Winery for a wine marketing seminar taught by Neil Williamson of The Trellis Group. The class included a panel discussion with Martha Soden, general manager of First Colony; Sarah Gorman, business manager of Cardinal Point Vineyard and Winery; and Jim Turpin, founder of Democracy Vineyards and a graduate of the PVCC program.

The students present were at different points in their careers—some more likely to own a vineyard than work for one. Recent Virginia Tech graduate Maya Hood White studied theoretical math and physics, but now she finds herself irresistibly drawn to the chemistry of winemaking. Carol Keathley already has a career in marketing, but she is looking to make a lateral move into marketing for Virginia wineries, marrying her training and her love of local wine. After retiring from an international Fortune 100 company, Chas Lawrence is ready to pursue his dream of growing and making wine.

The Dream

It's hard to believe that a young graduate with a degree in math and physics would turn down a job offer from Northrop Grumman in this economy to pursue a career in winemaking. "I was always interested in wine but thought it was unapproachable. I wondered, 'Who makes wine?' And then I realized, 'I can do that!' When I was offered that job, I realized that I would never return to this path if I took a nice little cubicle job," said Maya Hood White.

"I've been taking winemaking classes through U.C. Davis's distance learning program. The Davis program is focused on California and South America, though, which are very different from Virginia. It's great as a foundation, but I like the idea of staying and making wine here," she explained. White, who is interning at Afton Mountain Vineyards, hopes to study enology at Virginia Tech. So in addition to taking about 10 seminars, she is taking chemistry classes at PVCC as well.

"I have a real interest in the chemical aspect of making wine—the polymerization of phenols—because no one really knows how that happens. I love that side of it. But I also enjoy making wine. It's so hands on, and it's technical but artistic as well."



The Lateral Move

"I know marketing, and I know Virginia wine as a consumer," said Carol Keathley, a marketing expert and consultant, "but I took this class because I wanted to hear what these people had to say. I want to help the smaller wineries, which don't have big budgets but are passionate about wine." She has already worked with Gabrielle Rause and is organizing an Earth Day service event, with trail clearing and tree planting, at DelFosse Vineyards and Winery.

In addition to learning more about marketing in this industry, Keathley hopes to strengthen her understanding of wine through the other classes, too. "I learn the most when I do a vertical tasting or a comparative tasting by varietal," she explained. "I've taken a few tasting classes in the program—beginning tasting, advanced reds, and advanced whites. I am now able to appreciate the different varietals, terroirs, and approaches to winemaking found around the world.

"I have a black thumb," she laughed. "I'm never going to grow grapes. But I can parlay all this knowledge to advance my career."

The Second Career

When Chas Lawrence retired just over two years ago, he asked himself what he wanted to do with the second half of his life. The answer, it turns out, is plant a vineyard and make wine. He worked through the viticulture certificate in just over a year, and is now working on the enology certificate.

But unlike most of his classmates, who live in Virginia, Lawrence drives up from Raleigh to participate in the PVCC program. "I'm taking some sustainable agriculture classes closer to home," he explained, "but there is nothing like this program near me. The one-day format works perfectly."

Lawrence and his wife bought 11 acres of land in the North Carolina mountains in 2002. A small vineyard had already been started on the property, but the previous owner had walked away from it; by the time the Lawrences bought it, it was overrun. But a lot of the hard work had been done: the site had been selected and the infrastructure, including a blacktop road, was in place. They sat on it until he started taking classes at PVCC.

"I started these classes and started learning about pruning and spray programs. There's a wealth of information about grapes here, and it's more transferable to North Carolina than anything I'd have gotten at U.C. Davis," he said gratefully. "And it's more accessible."

He just planted a group of heirloom apples and hopes to make cider as well as wine. "My wife is putting hives in," he added, "so we may try making mead, too."

Full Speed Ahead

When Greg Rosko graduated from the program, he had no idea that he'd soon end up as its director. Rosko is an educator by training—he still works for the Charlottesville City Schools—and his experience as a student is quite valuable to him in his current position. He expressed his appreciation for the support the program gets from area vineyards. "The wineries around Charlottesville are wonderful and very generous. We wouldn't be where we are without them."



Program director Greg Rosko (left) was once a student himself. Chas Lawrence (above) has finished one certificate and is well on his way to completing the second, despite his commute from Raleigh, North Carolina.