

HARVEST IN A BOTTLE

BY SCOTT ELLIFF, owner of DuCard Vineyards

FALL IS A GLORIOUS SEASON on Virginia's wine trails. The mild temperatures and breathtaking scenery lure throngs of visitors to our state's wineries—day-trippers who may stop at a pretty spot to stretch

their legs and depart with a newfound appreciation for Virginia wine (not to mention a case of a preferred vintage in the hatchback).

Of course, beyond the buzz of conversation and clink of glasses in the tasting rooms, out there in the vineyards, it's also harvest season, a crucial, exhilarating whirlwind that can foretell the future for us winemakers. With 220 wineries scattered around the state, and perhaps as many more independent grape growers, there are multiple harvests going on every day from August through November.

For me, the season's odyssey started with winter pruning and spring bud break. All summer long we battled mildews, destructive insects, humidity, finicky equipment, nutrition imbalances, and unruly canopies—seeking the elusive ripe, balanced, oh-so-perfect cluster of grapes.

Today, as a chilly daybreak unveils the backdrop of fall color in Shenandoah National Park right out our back door, that season comes to its literal fruition. A hardy crew of 10 is attacking the grape trellises with specialized harvest snips, picking by hand into five-gallon buckets, then dumping the buckets into tractor-mounted bins. From the tractor seat, I've got the best view in the house, watching the bins fill up, 1,000 pounds at a time, as I roll up and down the rows.

These grapes are beautiful jewels: translucent, golden viognier; reddish-purple cabernet franc; small, delicate petit verdot. All told, we'll pick 200,000 clusters—whew! Actually, the vines started with about 300,000, but we dropped a third of them to the ground—sacrificing perfectly good fruit to help achieve an even higher quality for what remains.

The old adage says that great wine is made in the vineyard. How do we know we're ready? We measure sugar content and acids every day, hoping for high levels of each but resigned to the fact that they go in opposite directions. We chew on skins, analyzing for soft tannin levels and smooth textures that help avoid bitterness in the finished wine. We sample seeds, looking for a nutty crunch that connotes maturity—a somewhat mystical

“you know it when you taste it” moment that the Type A gene within us can barely abide.

And sometimes we're reminded that we are but small pawns in Mother Nature's hands. Fall can bring hurricanes. If the grapes absorb the torrential rains, they swell up and crack, starting a downward spiral of degradation. So in some years, we scramble to pick when we have to rather than when we want to.

Yes, the tractor-seat vantage point is an interesting one. As I chug along, I catch sight of visitors entering the tasting room to uncork our labors from last year. And I spot the crush pad, where we'll begin to transform this harvest into the wines that those visitors



will drink next year. Sometimes a winemaker has to remember to pause briefly at the junction between past and future, to appreciate the glory of this season in Virginia wine country. There. Now on to the next row.



WINE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

We invited Jeffery Mitchell of the Frenchman's Cellar in Culpeper to select some Virginia wines perfect for upcoming celebrations. Here are his season's pairings.



THANKSGIVING

With a crowd at the dinner table, wine can play to both personalities and food.

King Family Vineyards **Crosé**

This merlot-based rosé in a dry Provençal style has a cranberry finish, making it a wonderful pairing with traditional turkey or pheasant.

● Pollak Vineyards **Pinot Gris**

Got leftovers? This wine's notes of crisp citrus and melon are a natural with the last of the holiday ham.

CHRISTMAS

Baby, it's cold outside. Give yourself (or a friend) a gift of wine that'll make everyone feel warm all over.

Gabriele Rause Winery **Nebbiolo Reserve**

A finish that goes on as long as a winter night. Elegant, balanced, and in blind tastings at Frenchman's Cellar, better than many imports.

● King Family Vineyards **7**

Not as sweet as a typical port, this is made with merlot, fortified with brandy, and aged in Kentucky bourbon barrels.



NEW YEAR'S EVE

Ring it in with bubbly, of course!

● Thibaut-Janisson **Virginia Sparkling Wine**

Five generations of Champagne-making know-how, now doing it in Virginia.

Veritas **Mousseux**

Merlot-based sparkling rosé offers small, elegant bubbles, in a package that beckons to be opened. A hint of sweet makes it perfect for toasts.