



# Wines down South



## SUGARLEAF VINEYARDS-MONTICELLO'S NEIGHBOR *Virginia's African-American owned Winery Is A Star*

By Doc Lawrence

Wine has been around since ancient days. Old Testament heroes like Moses, Abraham and King David, enjoyed it and legend has it that King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba had a penchant for good red wine. Wine played a role in the miracles of Jesus and was the metaphor for blood at the Last Supper. Wine has been produced and consumed in many parts of Africa from time immemorial and is still made in a distinctly French style in parts of North Africa. Today, South Africa produces some of the noblest wines on earth.

America is a very young wine-producing nation, something that began with of Thomas Jefferson, our first major wine advocate. Before Prohibition and prior to California assuming wine dominance, states in the east and Midwest-Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia and Missouri-were significant wine producers.

Close to Monticello and the University of Virginia campus are several noted wineries and vineyards. One standout is Sugarleaf, a multiple award winner at the Wines of the South competition. The owners, Jerry B. Bias esteemed alum of the University of Virginia and wife Lauren Maillian Bias are serious about their wines and their high standards. They are also African-American and their lovely facility is the only African-American winery in the Eastern United States. Nationwide, the best guess is that there are ten.

Jerry initially purchased the farm as a private retreat and with the help of the University of Virginia's Environmental Sciences Department, assessed the property and determined that the land could sustain a vineyard. Jerry's getaway became his vision leading him to plant by hand over 300 of the existing 2075 vines. As Sugarleaf's CEO, Lauren managed the design and construction of the winery and is responsible for all of the day-to-day activities including accounting, marketing the emerging boutique vineyard, ensuring that high quality standards are maintained and implementing procedures so that the regulatory issues surrounding the wine industry are followed. Lauren and Jerry are totally committed to producing fine wines.

Just 15 minutes south of Charlottesville and the University of Virginia and on the Monticello wine trail, Sugarleaf is connected to core America and a relationship to the land and its history. "Our elevation," Lauren said, "is from 800 to 1100 feet, with five natural springs-we have no irrigation system-loamy soil with underlying limestone platelets, natural drainage from the surrounding mountains airflow and an adjacent pond that helps to maintain cool evening temperatures." Sugarleaf's location, she explained, has advantages. Virginia was named as



Jerry and Lauren Bias

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one of the “Top Five Emerging Wine Regions in the World” by Travel + Leisure magazine and the Monticello region is the most prestigious part of the region.

“It’s no secret that great Napa Valley cult vineyard Cabs have always been Jerry’s favorites,” Lauren said, “and together we explored Italian wines, some of which we already loved that inspired us like Brunello, Barbaresco, Sassicaia, and Gaja. Austrian whites like Gruner Veltliner have my interest and curiosity. Every wine that we taste and like impacts us in some way and we bring away from that wine the aspects that we liked most and try to bring out those qualities and characteristics in Sugarleaf’s wines. Our 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon and Cuvee Nebula taste nothing like a Virginia cabernet and were made in the new world style, but the wines have many similarities with wines from other regions.”

## SUPERLATIVE WINES

Wine savvy visitors are bound to be curious about Virginia’s terroir. Lauren’s answer is comparative: “the Loire Valley of France is ‘hidden’ at the end of a private road in Monticello offering nature’s purest attributes needed to grow outstanding quality fruit. A bit of France has been transplanted in Virginia.” The wines produced at Sugarleaf are impressive. The 2006 Viognier is almost a flowering peach that brightens the nose, fruit forward, rich with apple, citrus and orange peel with a hint of spice and toast, while the 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon, reflecting Jerry’s Napa passion, has a remarkably lush dark cherry nose that unfolds into currants, ripe berry and complex silky tannins culminating in a balanced, lengthy finish of, tobacco, toasted heads, and spice. Another 2006 release, Sugarleaf’s delicious Chardonnay, has nose of citrus and apple, is also fruit forward with a crisp round finish. The Petit Verdot 2007 is thick, full bodied and big, offering a wonderfully smooth finish of currant and spice that lingers.

Those who know this impressive couple could reasonably assume that some surprises are on the boards. “Our daring new releases,” said Lauren, “include a single varietal 100 percent Petit Verdot, Petit Manseng and Neubia Nectar a blend of Vidal Blanc and Petit Manseng. Our Cabernet Sauvignon and Cuvee Neubia are outstandingly jaw dropping.”

Lauren came up with the name Sugarleaf Vineyards. Today, Sugarleaf Vineyards is an award-winning boutique vineyard in the heart of the Monticello region, producing limited quantities of each varietal, a continuing commitment to Jerry and Lauren’s vision of producing fine wine. Lauren said that they also wanted the winery to remain a quaint and inviting space overlooking the vineyard. “The winery was completed in the beginning of 2006 and we seamlessly produced our first Sugarleaf vintage in our new state-of-the-art facility. Sugarleaf is living proof that with patience, diligence and faith, dreams do come true.”

Sugarleaf Vineyards mirrors the wine heritage and stunning natural beauty of this part of Virginia. Thomas Jefferson would be very proud. [Click this link for a YouTube video presentation of Jerry and Lauren Bias](#)

