

Experience the South by People Who Know it Best



Wines down South



Jefferson, Virginia Wine and Liberty

By Doc Lawrence

RICHMOND, VA—A few days in this progressive and lovely city connects even the casual visitor with contemporary America and our past. The once capitol of the Confederacy where Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis lived and worshiped is now a showcase of modern lifestyles rich in cultural diversity. The American ideal- a vision with backbone- was proclaimed by two Founding Fathers: Patrick Henry speaking in an old church in downtown Richmond and Thomas Jefferson, whose sacred words defined us as a people.

And there are Virginia's vineyards and all the splendid wines they produce. Everything relating to wine in America begins with Jefferson and this year's Virginia Wine Expo in Richmond, an event very much in the Jefferson tradition, showcased over 350 wines from more than 60 of Virginia's top wineries leading to the awarding of the Governor's Cup, the state's top accolade for wine excellence. Here, the glory of the grape is very serious business.

I visited the wine cellar at Monticello, a glimpse into the Jefferson's daily living and dining customs. Thomas Jefferson not only described the universal principle's for America in the Declaration of Independence, but his cellar and the bottles shelved there confirm that he championed of style and grace, placing entertaining alongside farming, governing, architecture and law. For Jefferson, dining with fine wine was de rigueur.

Jefferson cultivated his love of the fine wines while living in Paris. Later, he advised America's presidents about serving and pairing wines, often providing them with wines from his well-stocked cellar. One entry in his journal described an experience with Nebbiolo, a sparkling Italian Piedmont wine, as "superlatively fine." His earlier introduction to Nebbiolo in Turin was remembered as "about as sweet as the silky Madeira, as astringent on the palate as Bordeaux, and as brisk as Champagne. It is a pleasing wine."

Serving as the nation's first ambassador to France, Jefferson lived comfortably on the Champs-Élysées and traveled to the vineyards of Bordeaux, Burgundy, Hermitage, Cote Rotie, Champagne, through Provence, into Italy, along the Italian and French Riviera, through Languedoc on the Canal-du-Midi, touring and tasting along the Rhine stopping



The first great wine cellar in America was at Jefferson's Monticello which can be viewed today. The wines, while primarily French, were from throughout Europe.



Tamra Talmadge-Anderson is the Director of Public Relations for the Virginia Tourism Corporation and joined Doc and other journalists for a tour of Monticello and nearby wineries.

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off at famous German vineyards. The experiences assured that his dinner guests in Paris and later at Monticello and the White House would enjoy the world's finest wines.

Jefferson was a Francophile. In 1824, Daniel Webster noted that wine dinners at Monticello were "served in half Virginian, half French style, in good taste and abundance." Dinner at Monticello was described by Jefferson's granddaughter Ellen Randolph Coolidge as a "feast of reason," where between sips and bites, ideas were freely shared and discussed. To minimize disruptions, to keep wine constantly available and to prevent bottles from being shaken, wine was resupplied by dumbwaiters used to bring undisturbed bottles up from Monticello's heralded cellar.

During the bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase, I attended a seminar at the Cabildo in New Orleans' French Quarter where this land transaction was consummated. The lecture was about Jefferson's favorite wines, particularly Bordeaux. Bottles were opened and poured from some of the Chateaux' that Jefferson visited, a transcendent experience.

In Burgundy, Jefferson was enamored with Chambertin (as was Napoleon), Clos de Vougeot and Vosnee-Romanee and praised Montrachet the best white wine of Burgundy while maintaining a fondness for Meusault. Jefferson frequented the vineyards of the Rhone Valley and championed dry white Hermitage "marked with a touch of sweetness" that he called it the "first wine in the world without exception."

Today, family-owned King Family Vineyards and Pollack Vineyards are important wineries in the Monticello American Viticultural Area, part of Virginia's position as the nation's fifth largest wine producer, featuring primarily French varietals.



ABOVE: Saturday afternoon enjoying wine at Virginia's King Family Vineyards.

AT RIGHT: Matthieu Finot, a native of France, is the winemaker at Virginia's King Family Vineyards.



AT TOP: Fox Meadow Winery's Dan and Cheryl Mortland won the 2011 Virginia Governor's Cup for their red wine.
NEXT PHOTO: Tony and Elizabeth Smith produce heralded Virginia wines at Afton Mountain Vineyards in Charlottesville.



Virginia tourism is on a roll. The four-year observance the Civil War Sesquicentennial, is now underway. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts offers a stunning Picasso exhibit. Richmond's thriving fine dining includes Tarrant's Café, Julep's and Balliceaux, gourmet experiences equal to the best in Fort Lauderdale, Charleston and Atlanta. A culinary primer for a visit to Monticello should include breakfast with homemade biscuits at Richmond's legendary Perly's followed by the authentic Deep South lunch experience at historic Michie Tavern just down the road from Jefferson's home.

Jefferson's living wine legacy seamlessly combines Virginia's abundant fresh food and a tradition of heralded hospitality to form what Americans still claim as our right to pursue happiness.



This stunningly beautiful building, close to Monticello, is home to Michie Tavern.
AT LEFT: Enjoying a traditional Southern lunch at historic Michie Tavern.

