

# Bottling Dixie

SOUTHERN WINERIES  
OVERCOME  
DIFFICULTIES TO  
PRODUCE **WORLD-  
CLASS WINES**

by Roxanne Langer

There is a new war going on in the South and it's got nothing to do with taxes, slavery or tobacco and everything to do with vineyardists and winemakers fighting a climate that has humidity, heat and rain—lots of rain, sometimes tons of rain right before harvest—to make not just palatable but world-class wine. Vines have been planted and wine made in the South for centuries, but with the difficulty of the various climates, the lack of regional research from local universities, a location in the Bible Belt and non-supportive laws as a result of Prohibition, Southern wine has had its issues. But change has come. The South is actually winning this war.

Wineries are opening up at record speed. Kentucky, always considered to be a non-wine drinking bourbon state, now has 60+ wineries; universities and state agriculture departments throughout the South are hiring viticulturists and fermentation scientists, laws are being changed and consumers are showing their appreciation by inundating local wineries to taste and purchase.

This shot of vineyards at Biltmore Estate shows the humidity issues that Southern wineries must deal with.





An aerial view of Boxwood Winery in Virginia.

Recently returning from a ten-day tasting tour of most of the South, Southern winemakers have convinced me that they are making good wine, even *great* wine. Admittedly, not all are good, but there's a lot of mediocre wine coming out of California, too—and it's a hell of a lot easier to make wine in California than in the South. According to the winemakers I visited with in the Southern states, making Southern wine requires serious winemaking skills—similar to the skills required to make great wine in other difficult climates such as Burgundy or even Bordeaux.

And, frankly, I have to agree with them. Their results are proven in the bottle. If I poured a glass of good Southern wine from a bottle with a California appellation, most consumers would go nuts over it. What I realized on my wine tasting excursion was that the biggest problem for the good wineries in the South is not their grapes, climate or abilities, it's the names of their states—a true marketing problem. On the contrary, I was surprised at how many wineries I visited actually had out-of-state distribution—a good sign that wines of the South are getting more market penetration.

## Virginia

Virginia is leading the “quality wine” pack with the best and most consistent wines. At the end of my tour, I was a wine judge for the 12th annual Wines of the South competition held at the University of Tennessee, which allowed entries from any of the 14 Southern states. For “Best of Class,” I voted for a beautiful Viognier that I now know was from Virginia. It eventually won Best of Show.

In addition to Viognier, both Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay are doing well. However, I was also impressed with **Barboursville Vineyards** Vermentino, a crisp and clean version with floral, stone fruits and minerality. Winemaker Luca Paschina—born in Italy but in his own words “now a Virginian”—has produced Virginia's most famous and, possibly, most awarded wine, Octagon. It's a Bordeaux blend and quite pretty and well balanced with fruit, leather and spice—and a great value at \$45. For me though, it was Luca's other wines that really caught my attention: the 2011 Cabernet Franc and 2010 Nebbiolo Reserve. The first was fruity and juicy with soft tannins and loads of finesse and the latter was true to its Italian heritage—elegantly aromatic with dried fruits and leather.

In Northern Virginia, at **Boxwood Winery**, owned by the Kent-Cook family of Washington Redskins fame, I began to realize a commonality in the red wine terroir of Virginia. Even though there are several AVA's in the state, terroir driven Virginian red wines appear to have similar earthy flavor profiles, with dark fruits and beautiful finesse—more subtle fruit than the typical Californian with the elegance of many of the French. These are food wines to be sure. Boxwood produces just four wines all from traditional Bordeaux grapes, all extremely well-priced. Three are red: Trellis, Topiary and Boxwood; one is a Rosé (which I didn't have a chance to taste.) Trellis, the lightest of the three is earthy with a bit of herbaceousness and fruit (\$18.) Topiary is earthy with dried strawberry notes, a pit of pine and some pepper (\$25.) Boxwood has tobacco and leather with fresh,



Luca Paschina, owner-winemaker at Barboursville Vineyards.



### The Trump New World Red has mature flavors of dark fruit.

black fruit flavors and a nice finish (\$25.)

Broadly distributed **Trump Winery** is in the rolling hills near Thomas Jefferson's house, Monticello, and offers a landscape that is stunning. The vineyards, winery and Albemarle House estate once belonged to the infamous Kluges and is now under the domain of Donald Trump's third youngest child, Eric. Wines made while the Kluges were

there received many awards, and as the winemaking team is still intact and as the Trumps have already spent big sums of money upgrading both the winery and the vineyards, this winery is well on its way to becoming truly world-class. The winery produces both sparkling and still wines and the following are some of my favorites. The sparkling SP Rosé (\$29) and the SP Blanc de Noir (\$35) were both excellent and worthy competitors to France or California and provide a wine list price point that many restaurants are looking for. The 2012 Viognier (\$19) has floral tones with slight honey and peaches and ends with a crisp, clean finish. The 2008 New World Red (\$28) is full and round with mature flavors of dark fruit and has a lingering finish.

### North Carolina

With 100+ wineries, I would put North Carolina next in a Southern

wine line-up. Not quite as terroir-driven as Virginia, most of the state's wineries are small and not all focus on vitis vinifera. Wines made from fruit, Muscadine grapes, and hybrids such as Chambourcin and Seyval Blanc are common and quite popular. Wines made from vitis vinifera tend to be Bordelais with the exception of well-made **Raffaldin** wines, which are all Italian varietals. **Childress Winery**, owned by retired NASCAR driver and now team owner Richard Childress, produces several wines. One of his more popular wines, Trio, was just changed to "3" (\$12.99) to give tribute to deceased driver Dale Earnhardt, who drove the iconic No. 3 car for him. The wine is a basic, consumer friendly white blend but with the immense fan base of NASCAR is sure to be a big seller.

**Biltmore Estate**, America's most visited winery, has a unique, no ego, business model: sell good, clean wine to the 650,000 potential customers that pass through the winery each year and continue selling to them via various distribution options once they've returned home. I tasted most of the wines produced by Biltmore and they were all well-made, many receiving awards from respected wine competitions. Several of the wines carry an American AVA, as the grapes

**Biltmore's pink Pas de Deux is targeted at younger female wine buyers.**

are from California. There are a few North Carolina wines in the repertoire from grapes on the Biltmore Estate and surrounding areas. The winery's marketing and sales team stays on top of what their customer wants in wine and recently released a sparkling wine targeted to the younger (21–35) female: Pas de Deux Méthode Champenoise Sec (\$18.99), made from Muscat Canelli and packaged in pink—in my opinion, perfectly positioned to that age group.

### Georgia

Prohibition killed the wine industry in Georgia and it wasn't until the early 1980s that the industry resurrected itself. **Habersham**, in North Georgia, was one of the first wineries to open its doors and like Childress produces a bit of everything. The 2011 GA Creekstone Limited Chardonnay (\$20) was quite Burgundian in style and very pleasant. Habersham wines are available in several states in the South.

### Tennessee

Along with whiskey, Tennessee is producing a few standout wines, such as the 2011 Fallen Oak Syrah—lush with blackberry fruit, spice, and soft tannins—from **Reedy Creek Vineyards and Cellars**, which has the largest commercial vineyards in Tennessee and is in the top 5% on the East Coast. Speaking of blackberry, **Old Millington Vineyard and Winery** near Memphis produces an award-winning blackberry wine which to this very Californian/French sommelier's palate actually tasted like "wine."

This war in support of great wine making is one the South can be proud of, so move over West Coast wines and let your Southern brethren in. ■■



PHOTO COURTESY OF TRUMP WINERY



PHOTO COURTESY OF BILTMORE ESTATE



PHOTO: JESU ANTON

## The Southern Somm

**Joon Lim**, Sommelier at **Kevin Rathbun Steak** in Atlanta, Georgia, is currently studying for his Master Sommelier exam and took a few minutes to discuss Georgia wines with me. Lim includes two Georgia wines on his list and at the moment is offering Wolf Mountain Vineyards & Winery's Blanc de Blanc, which recently won a Silver medal at a prominent West Coast competition, and the Sangiovese from Frogtown Cellars. He believes that the terroir in Georgia lends itself to producing good Rhône varietals and would love to see more wineries experiment with Syrah, Mourvèdre and Grenache.

**Joon Lim**, Sommelier at **Kevin Rathbun Steak** in Atlanta.