

At Va. wineries, high design invades the tasting room

If you've ever made your way into Virginia's wine country, you've probably seen your share of log-cabin chic. Golden-hued wooden beams are the material of choice for holding the roofs of tasting rooms aloft, while the tasting bars are cobbled together from rustic stone. Countrified kitsch fills every corner not occupied by wine bottles.

Your first visit to one of these cozy dens of commerce is always memorable. But after you've spent several summers sipping cabernet franc, viognier and chambourcin — the wines the state makes in abundance and, some argue, with the most success — the wineries begin to blur. At least they have for me. These days, I'm thirsty mostly for a different point of view.

So I roll out to Middleburg, where Boxwood Estate Winery began doing public tastings in 2012 in a pristine temple of winemaking designed by the Washington firm of avowed modernist Hugh Newell Jacobsen. Passing through the estate's white wooden gates, I catch a first glimpse of the building's churchlike silhouette peeking out of the valley — a vision in white set off by 21 acres of green, manicured grapevines. It's modern, but with its glass cupolas and the mouse-brown fieldstone flocking the structure, Boxwood seems to evoke the traditional as well.

[If you go: Virginia tasting rooms](#)

Rachel Martin, Boxwood's executive vice president, confirms this impression when she and her brother Sean, the winery's vice president, meet me down the road, in the tasting room. "It's supposed to look like it belongs in the countryside of Middleburg," she says. Middleburg, of course, being the opposite of modern — a town founded in 1787, just after the Revolutionary War.

Less than a mile from Middleburg's main thoroughfare, East Washington Street, Boxwood and its surrounding acres are owned by John Kent Cooke, the son of the late Redskins owner Jack Kent Cooke, and operated by his family (including the Martins). After the winery was established in 2005, it largely served as a family compound. The family opened a handful of locations of a wine bar called the Tasting Room to serve the winery's signature salmon-pink rosé and Topiary red wine in Middleburg, then Reston and National Harbor. The winery itself was to be solely the production site of [as many as 5,000 cases a year](#). (Nine years in, Boxwood produces about 2,500 cases.) But in 2012, Boxwood shuttered the wine bar down the road and began welcoming guests to the estate on weekends to brisk business, particularly now that the mammoth new Salamander Resort and Spa is [a carriage ride away](#).

And now I'm soaking up the cavernous, sanctuary-like tasting room, with its round, steel tasting bar and glass-and-stone walls. The Martins walk me through Boxwood, and I'm instantly struck by the fact that

here, glass walls expose what other wineries keep behind the scenes. I look straight through to a laboratory, the offices of the winery's staff, the bottling and fermentation rooms, all of it uncluttered, as if permanently ready for its turn in *Architectural Digest*.

A couple of days later, however, Simon Jacobsen, a partner in Jacobsen Architecture, tells me that Boxwood wasn't planned with visitors (or photographers) in mind. But that didn't mean that it shouldn't be beautiful.

"If you look at other wineries, they really do look like agricultural buildings," Jacobsen says. Boxwood's architects hid winemaking's telltale hoses, pumps and pipes behind the walls. It's one reason visitors can now settle in at tables between the towering steel fermentation tanks without feeling as if they might get splashed.

"The overall mantra in the back of our heads was, 'This is where Dr. Evil makes wine,'" Jacobsen says. "It's all Le Corbusier and glass."

Visitors can see an underground cellar at the Hugh Newell Jacobsen-designed Boxwood Estate, whose modern, *Architectural Digest*-worthy look breaks an aesthetic mold. (Bonnie Jo Mount/*The Washington Post*)

Thinking back to Boxwood's tasting room, I just don't see "Austin Powers." Nevertheless, I'm left with a question: Why don't more tasting rooms bear this kind of personal stamp?

There's increasingly an incentive to do so. As small-production operations, Virginia's wineries rely heavily on wine-tasting fees and on-site sales of glasses and bottles to keep them in the black, says Bruce Zoecklein, a Virginia Tech professor emeritus of enology and adviser to many of these start-ups. So, as the number of wineries in the state grows exponentially, most have begun paying closer attention to the details that will keep visitors from quickly skipping off to the vineyard down the road.

The approach to aesthetics in Virginia, however, remains vastly different from that of the bustling tasting rooms of California's Napa Valley, where the trend has long been to flaunt a certain architectural excess. There, you can sip in Italianate McMansions or castles that look like something out of "Game of Thrones."

In Virginia, the emphasis "has not necessarily been on Napa Valley glitz, but on the features that make people feel as comfortable being in a winery as they would be in their living room," says Zoecklein, whose guide to winery planning and design is a much-referenced blueprint for budding Virginia vintners. Most people, he reminds me, have an image of the state as largely pastoral, and the wineries are part of a relatively new ecosystem of foodmakers and brewers that is evangelically agricultural. "That," he says, "is not necessarily consistent with an opulent palace."

It requires a trip 20 miles north of Boxwood, through bucolic pastures to Purcellville, to land at a textbook example of the Virginia wine country aesthetic. On a blink-and-you'll-miss-it turn off the Berlin Turnpike, a family of Pennsylvania Amish builders were brought in to transform an 1870 oxblood-red barn into the tasting room for Sunset Hills Vineyards.

Sunset Hills, which opened to the public in 2008, was the first of three vineyards in the portfolio of Mike Canney, a former NASCAR driver, and his wife, Diane. The barn's origin story, complemented by offerings of Amish cheeses and Pennsylvania goods, is much of the reason as many as 400 visitors flock to the winery on a typical Saturday in the spring and fall. The builders have returned twice to add new tasting stations, but the old barn, with its two levels of woodsy charm, high ceilings and flood of natural light, remains the star.

On a recent visit, I order a glass of summery, unoaked chardonnay and make for the second level. It's closed to all but the winery's club members on weekends, but on a weekday, it's a homey, wood-lined place to take in the views of the winery below, and the deck offers an unmatched view of the rows of leafy vines that hang heavy with petit manseng and cabernet franc. The place telegraphs quaintness.

In Madison, Va., at Early Mountain Vineyards, the agricultural motifs are much subtler but still there. The sale of Early Mountain, north of Charlottesville, to Steve Case, the one-time AOL Time Warner chief executive, and his wife, Jean, has come with a stunning redesign that has more of the look of a swanky hotel lobby than a winery.

Janie Molster, the Richmond-based interior designer, was tasked with reinventing a tasting room that had been too spacious and too dark. After touring wineries in the area, "we wanted to do something different," she said. "Another barn structure would have been too repetitive."

So she picked up on the colors inherent in wine-growing — the brisk white of farmhouses, the earthy browns of the soil — but used them in faux-leather banquettes, rough-cut oak coffee tables, pillows crafted from Turkish rugs and custom-made wrought-iron chandeliers.

The new tasting room was unveiled in 2012, and these days, guests can borrow games for kids or blankets to spread out on the lush hillside. Chilly? Just ask for a pashmina, and one will appear.

"It's recreation," Molster says. "The experience is so important for drawing people back." The goal for Early Mountain, she says — and, perhaps for all Virginia wineries, if you think about it — is to walk the "fine line between being memorable, and having an interior that's slightly more edgy but not intimidating."