

VINEYARD

Boxwood Winery

PIONEER JOHN KENT COOKE LEADS
MIDDLEBURG INTO A NEW WINE ERA

Boxwood Estate Winery counts as one of Middleburg's many charms. A National Historic Landmark, it was originally founded as a farm in the eighteenth century. Boxwood is also the former home of Billy Mitchell, who is regarded as the father of the U.S. Air Force. Historic Middleburg was added to the Virginia wine map in 2001. That was the year John Kent Cooke, former president of the Washington Commanders football team, and his wife Rita purchased the 185-acre property that would eventually become Boxwood Estate Winery. Cooke commissioned renowned architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen and Purdue University oenologist Richard Vine to collaborate on the design of Boxwood Winery.

WORDS BY FRANK MORGAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY R.L. JOHNSON



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With stunning architectural features, the result is a modern and elegant complex of four connected white buildings accented by fieldstone in a cruciform design. The tasting room is central, surrounded by the Chai (pronounced “shay,” a French word for an aboveground wine storeroom), containing towering steel fermentation tanks, the Bottling Room and a circular underground Cave for aging wine in French oak barrels.

Middleburg was established in 1787 by Lieutenant Colonel Leven Powell, who served in the Revolutionary War. Located an hour outside of Washington, D.C., Middleburg is surrounded by the lush beauty of the Potomac River and the Blue Ridge and Bull Run Mountains. Middleburg’s expansive horse farms and highly esteemed equestrian events earned it the

moniker of the “Nation’s Horse and Hunt Capital.” Now, thanks to Cooke and the Boxwood team, who were instrumental in the creation of the Middleburg American Viticultural Area (AVA), the region is also known as a growing destination for Virginia wine enthusiasts.

Though the circular barrel room and Cave offer one of the most Instagrammable spots in Virginia, Boxwood is about the wine. “Our wines are made from 100 percent estate fruit and have been since day one,” says Sean Martin. Martin, son of owners Rita and John Kent Cooke, is Vice President of the winery and oversees all winery operations. “Using only estate fruit is important because we’re trying to distinguish ourselves as a major wine region, which is one of the reasons we created the Middleburg AVA.”

The Boxwood team began the process of establishing the Middleburg Virginia AVA in 2006. Spearheaded by Boxwood’s then Executive Vice President Rachel Martin. The AVA was officially approved in 2012, becoming the seventh in Virginia. The lengthy process required compiling information on the geography, geology, soil, climate and history of the area for review by government agencies.

The resulting Middleburg AVA designates the area’s unique location, topography, climate and soil. It covers approximately 200 square miles (about 127,000 acres), which includes Middleburg itself and stretches deep into Loudoun and Fauquier counties, encompassing 24 wineries and roughly 230 acres of vineyards. The AVA can be an important differentiator for consumers. When the AVA is listed on the label

it means that at least 85 percent of the grapes are sourced within the boundaries of the AVA. Boxwood only uses 100 percent estate fruit.

“The creation of the AVA has helped identify Boxwood as a leader in quality Virginia wine production over time,” says Martin. “I believe it helped direct customers to the winery and helped with distribution sales throughout the DC-Maryland-Virginia area (DMV). Retail and restaurant wine buyers quickly identify with the AVA, which gives us immediate credibility with them.”

“Always look for the best land and the best talent, and you can’t go wrong,” says Cooke. “We work with Lucie Morton and Stéphane Derenoncourt, a fabulous Bordeaux winemaker, and every day the grapes and wine are cared for by Stephen and Joyce Rigby.”



Included in the STAR-STUDED Boxwood team are Joyce and Stephen Rigby.

The winery's initial 16 acres of vines were planted in 2004 atop rolling hills, under the guidance of Lucie Morton. Based in Charlottesville, Morton is one of the most renowned viticulturists and ampelographers (one who identifies grape varieties by their leaves), in the U.S. Morton was the first American woman to attend the viticulture course at École Nationale Supérieure Agronomique in Montpellier, France, and the vineyards at Boxwood reflect her French training.

Based in the Bordeaux region of France, Derenoncourt works with some of the top wineries around the world and is one of the wine industry's most renowned winemaking consultants. Respected for his deep understanding of terroir fundamentals, Derenoncourt's decades of blending expertise are largely responsible for the quality of Boxwood's blends.

Included in the star-studded Boxwood team are Joyce and Stephen Rigby. The wife and husband team have been behind Boxwood's vines and wines since 2019. Joyce taught viticulture at Central Pennsylvania's Community College and has managed vineyards on the eastern seaboard for three decades. She originally came to Boxwood on a recommendation from Lucie Morton. "Boxwood needed to get the vineyard crew back on track during the pruning season, so I came for two weeks and worked with them and quickly found that we were compatible," says Joyce.

As fate would have it, Boxwood was soon in need of a winemaker too. At the time, Stephen Rigby was





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working at a custom crush winery in North Carolina, making more than 70 wines at a time for multiple clients. “I asked him, ‘How would you like to focus on six wines a year and work with grapes from a vineyard that I manage?’” says Joyce.

The prospect of working with his wife and at a winery with Boxwood’s reputation made it easy to answer yes. Have there been challenges working so closely together? Stephen says, “We started working together in the mid-80s, and we’re happiest when we are working together. The main challenge is when the harvest is over. Joyce is ready to relax and take some time off, but I’m busy in the cellar with the grapes that were just harvested.”

“Our biggest challenge has nothing to do with

working together,” adds Joyce. “It’s Mother Nature and the dice she rolls each year. Every vintage is different and presents some of the same challenges and some different ones. We’re constantly learning and adapting because the bottom line is, this is an agricultural enterprise and you have only one chance per year.”

The Rigbys say they appreciate the Boxwood team’s collective focus on making quality wine from grapes grown exclusively on their estate vineyards. “The vision, purpose and drive to produce quality wine starts at the top and is emphasized in everything we do,” says Stephen.

Today, Boxwood Winery cultivates 26.7 acres of the noble Bordeaux varieties—Merlot, Cabernet Franc,





...the chance to sit out on the EUROPEAN-STYLE patio beside the tall, RICHLY TEXTURED STONE WALL and stunning MODERN ARCHITECTURE is a treat.

Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, Malbec, Sauvignon Blanc and Sauvignon Gris. First planted at Boxwood in 2016, Sauvignon Gris is an obscure pink-hued grape primarily found in Bordeaux. It's the rarest of the Bordeaux varieties and in France is used almost exclusively in blends. It produces energetic, delicious white wines, and Boxwood is one of the only wineries in the Eastern Seaboard to cultivate this compelling grape. They use it both as a pure varietal and in more traditional white Bordeaux-style blends.

Boxwood focuses primarily on French-style wines with an emphasis on those Bordeaux grapes. Six of the seven varieties they grow are ENTAV certified, meaning that the French government has verified them as authentic clones of old-growth vines, exact

genetic copies of established vines from French vineyards. Each grape variety is planted in a block with terroir uniquely suited to its growing needs and carefully monitored by Joyce and her team.

The Rigbys' minimal intervention in the vineyard and winery allows the terroir—that combination of vineyard management style, soils and climate—to be reflected in the wines. They produce about 5,000 to 6,000 cases of fine wine a year, depending on vintage, including four Bordeaux-style red blends, a rosé, a Sauvignon Blanc, a Sauvignon Gris and a white blend called Cupola.

For visitors to Boxwood's tasting room, the chance to sit out on the European-style patio beside the tall, richly textured stone wall and stunning modern



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architecture is a treat. In cooler weather, several of the tables include built-in fire pits, and the trees lining the gravel are wrapped with fairy lights that begin to glow as evening approaches. The unique experience of sitting among the vines at the vineyard Pavilion is also not to be missed.

The winery menu offers a full complement of charcuterie plates as well as several baguette sandwiches and appetizers. In addition, Boxwood offers many experiences, including chocolate and wine tastings and pairing dinners that can be reserved on their website. These events are primarily held in either their Pavilion among the vines or in their spectacular underground “Cave,” with guests seated at a table and surrounded by rings of their multihued French oak wine barrels.

As for the quality of their wine, their collaborative approach is working wonders. They’ve garnered top scores from notable critics like James Suckling and from publications like Robert Parker Wine Advocate. Suckling recently rated the 2015 Boxwood Estate Reserve at a premium 93 points, and Parker’s Wine Advocate gave it 92 points. The Reserve is a premiere red blend, made only during exceptional vintages.

The Boxwood team’s commitment to research, expertise and developing the best wines possible, utilizing Virginia terroir, is commendable. They continue to be an example to the Virginia wine industry as a whole, and whether you are a wine professional or a consumer, sitting among Boxwood’s scenic vines to sip their award-winning, Middleburg-grown wine is always worth the trip. –