

# A tasty tour of the vines of Virginia

In horse country, just a four-hour weekend journey away, are wineries inviting you to sample wares that Thomas Jefferson dreamed in vain of producing at Monticello.

By Joyce Winslow  
Special to The Inquirer

MIDDLEBURG, Va. — One of the few things that Thomas Jefferson, patron saint of Virginians, tried hard to do, but failed at, was to make good wine in Virginia. Having developed a palate for good wine during his years as ambassador to France, he hoped to change America from a rum-guzzling republic into a wine-sipping one.

But the hot and humid climate at Jefferson's Monticello vineyards produced only such funguses as black rot and downey mildew, the scourges that had attacked grapes in Virginia since the 1600s. Jefferson's failure seemed to signal an end to Virginia's early attempts at becoming a commercial center of viticulture.

Then, about 14 years ago, another Virginian tried the same noble experiment. William Garrett, now publisher of National Geographic magazine, reasoned that Virginia was

blessed with a climate warmer than New York's Finger Lakes region and with soil and altitude suitable for grapes. Garrett's experimentation and that of others launched Virginia's wine industry, one that has grown swiftly to become the seventh largest in the country, with more than 1,300 acres of vineyards and 30 bonded estate wineries.

Many of these wineries are open year-round and offer free tours and tastings to visitors. Some of the best are near Middleburg, just four hours from Philadelphia and one hour from Washington, in fox-hunt country. Perfect for a weekend getaway, the wineries are near charming historic country inns and restaurants with oversize fireplaces and cozy and romantic accommodations in the winter and early spring.

When Garrett's interests turned to wine, he set about trying to find the kind of vines that could flourish on



Guests sip the wares at the Meredyth winery, which started humbly in the basement of a home

the slopes of the Shenandoahs. In 1964, he imported six kinds of commonly planted grapevines from France and planted them at his home, just over the Virginia border from his Washington offices. He used all the latest chemical sprays — advantages that Jefferson never had.

Still, the results were not encouraging. "We harvested six kinds of grapes; all the wine was blah," he recalled recently. "We thought it was

it was us and ripped out almost all the vines."

But Garrett planted again, this time with a sturdy French hybrid grape called Baco Noir. Finally, Garrett had stumbled upon a root stock that seemed to take to Virginia soil. "It grew unbelievable tangles," Garrett recalled. "The actual harvest was small, but the wine it made was fantastic."

Garrett's persistent experiments,

and those of a handful of other home winemakers, were what persuaded commercial growers to give viticulture in Virginia another try. In 1972, Garrett and other growers had only 50 acres of grapes under cultivation, but it was demonstration enough that, this time, the dream of making good wine could come true.

You know you've entered wine country when you reach Middle-

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section

# M

## The Philadelphia Inquirer travel

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# Touring to taste Virginia vintages

## WINERIES, from I-M

burg; the Exxon gas station on the edge of town has wine-barrel halves filled with chrysanthemums. Once an overnight stagecoach stop between Alexandria and Winchester, Middleburg offers two main cross streets lined with colonial inns, historic taverns, garden and saddlery shops and stores with picture windows filled with antiques. Folks here tend to wear red winter tartans and forest-green ties with horseshoe insignia.

### *The oldest vineyard*

Middleburg is a fine place to stay overnight, but you're there to visit the wineries. So head for Meredyth Vineyards, the state's oldest (10 years) family winery and its most decorated, with more than 50 medals of recognition, including a Silver Medal won at Wineries Unlimited, the premier competition for Eastern wines, for a 1982 Seyval.

From Middleburg, take Route 50 to the Middleburg blinker. Go south 2.4 miles on Route 776. Turn right onto Route 628 and drive two miles to Meredyth, only 15 minutes from the center of Middleburg.

The road takes you through pretty countryside with stone fences, well-brambled and blackberried. Creeks run through the cow and horse pastures. Just past the Virginia Forest Research Station, part of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, you'll cross a wooden bridge and drive by a stone house. Meredyth's tours begin in the long green building to your left.

Here, Archie M. Smith 3d, an intense, handsome man in his early 30s, will greet you. Smith left Oxford University, where he taught philosophy, to expand the family business started by his father, Archie M. Smith Jr., and his wife, Dody.

On a brief and impromptu tour, you can see the winery laboratory, steel vats and oak casks in the aging cellar. The cramped quarters and unmatched equipment in the winery are testament to the "from scratch" operation at Meredyth, a winery that quickly grew from a humble home basement into a big business.

Back upstairs, in the tasting room, you can sample red, white and rose wines. Be sure to try the 1984 Cabernet aged in French oak. Broad and tannic now, it may mellow, in four years, into a contender for a medal.

Meredyth is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, year-round, except major holidays. No appointment is necessary. For further information, contact Meredyth Vineyards, Box 347, Middleburg, Va. 22117; telephone 703-687-6277.

In sharp contrast to Meredyth's mix-and-match winemaking machinery is the state-of-the-art equipment from France and Germany that you'll find at nearby Piedmont winery, once a dairy farm (you can see the milking troughs in the aging cellar) but now one of Virginia's fanciest high-tech wineries. Here you'll see stainless-steel grape crushers, advanced German bottling systems, new stainless-steel holding vats and many beautifully crafted French oak barrels for aging the wines.

To get to Piedmont from Meredyth, just 25 minutes by car, return to Middleburg. Turn left onto Route 50. Proceed for 2.7 miles until you see the sign for Piedmont, a 32-acre vineyard owned and operated by a wine-making dynasty that includes Elizabeth Furness, 88, her children and her grandchildren.

Furness, a doyenne of Washington society, spent \$400,000 on winery equipment, \$50,000 on renovation and \$150,000 on planting the vineyards, just to prove she could make wine. Such groundbreaking enterprise runs in the family, whose members include Plymouth Colony pioneers, one of the first graduates of Harvard and Alexander Graham Bell. Piedmont was established in 1973, when Furness was 75.

"She planted some grapevines, then watched us plant [the rest]," remembers Jimmy Cockrell, Piedmont's vineyard manager. "Mrs. Furness followed us across the vineyard with her folding chair. When we passed her, she'd get up, fold the chair, walk past us, and set it up again."

These days Furness tends her art collection inside the estate house, built in the mid-1700s and furnished in period antiques. The front-yard pond that supplied the house with



water in the 18th century is now elegant with swans. A gazebo graces the back lawn.

The house, called Waverly, is often the starting point for fox hunts; expensive horse farms nearby train and breed horses especially for fox-hunt competition. Piedmont produces Chardonnay, Semillon and Seyval Blanc, all free for the tasting. Tours are informal and casual. Open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, year-round, except major holidays. No appointment is necessary.

For further information, contact Piedmont Vineyards, Box 286, Middleburg, Va. 22117; telephone 703-687-5528.

One of the most scenic wineries is on a mountainside, on the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Naked Mountain Winery, begun in 1976, crests the mountains and commands sweeping views of grapes. Hawks swoop over the vines in search of rabbits, and a resident Irish setter that runs like a red wind chases those same rabbits through the rows of vines.

Naked Mountain is situated off Route 688, 1.7 miles north from the Markham exit (exit 4) of Interstate 66. Owner Robert Harper renovated his tasting room last year. Large and pine-paneled and the size of half a city block, it offers vistas of the mountain, an enormous fireplace, tables for sitting and snacking and tasting the wines. And, after the chase, an affectionate dog.

Harper makes German-style Chardonnay, a Sauvignon Blanc, a Riesling and a claret from just 4½ acres. Wear a warm sweater for the cool cellars and comfortable shoes for the slippery cellar floors. Bring binoculars if you enjoy spotting birds.

Naked Mountain is open from noon to 5 p.m. on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays and from 10 a.m. to 5

p.m. on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. Weekends only during January and February. No appointment is necessary, but you can call for an appointment during non-regular hours.

Fees for tours are \$1 for groups of 10 or more; no charge for groups of fewer than 10. Contact Naked Mountain Winery, Box 131, Markham, Va. 22643; telephone 703-364-1609.

Three wineries in a weekend is a good pace, but if you wish to fit it in, stop also at Oasis Vineyards, which has a 10,000-square-foot cellar and a banquet room that accommodates more than 500 people.

Here, more than 24 acres of vines, begun as a hobby in 1977, produce award-winning red and white wines, as well as champagne. You can taste Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Semillon, Gewurtztraminer, Chardonnay, Seyval Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chelois, champagne.

(From Naked Mountain go south for two miles to the T in the road. Turn right onto Route 757 for one mile. Turn left onto Route 688 and proceed about 20.5 miles to Hume. At Hume, turn west onto Route 635 and go 5.4 miles to Oasis. This winery is about 45 minutes from Naked Mountain.)

For further information, contact Oasis Vineyards, Box 116, Hume, Va. 22639; telephone 703-635-7627.

The vineyard that helped start it all is not open to the public. It's Bill Garrett's Patowmack Vineyards, part of his private residence. Garrett says he started his winery in total innocence but became so dedicated to producing quality wines that he would go to any lengths to get the equipment he needed, albeit used and battered.

Early on, for example, he discovered that National Geographic had a large old refrigerator that was difficult to remove through the front door. Garrett hired a construction elevator to lower the refrigerator out a window from the 10th floor. The refrigerator, which today sits in his winery behind his home, now holds his excellent wines, enjoyed by privileged guests at his private tastings.

But you don't need an invitation to a private tasting to experience Virginia's wines. Some of its highly recommended varieties, such as Meredyth's Seyval Blanc and Piedmont's Virginia Semillon, can be bought for between \$6 and \$12 a bottle at Washington liquor stores.

For a free booklet describing all Virginia wineries and their tours, write: Virginia Division of Tourism, 202 N. Ninth St., Suite 500, Richmond, Va. 23219, or telephone 804-786-4484. Ask for the "Virginia's Wine Country" booklet.



# Dining, lodging in wine country

By Joyce Winslow  
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If you're planning a tour of Virginia wine country, you'll want to do your wine tasting on a full stomach. You'll also want a cozy and comfortable place to sleep. What follows, then, is a short guide to attractive eating and lodging facilities in the Middleburg area.

One of the best restaurants for tasting Virginia wines is Leathercoat in The Plains, at Loudoun and Stuart Streets (703-471-5327), not far from the wineries mentioned. You can taste more than 10 wines by the glass.

A second restaurant that is convenient to the wineries and conducive to invoking colonial Virginia spirits is the Green Tree at 15 S. King St. in Leesburg. The Green Tree serves continental-colonial food in two dining rooms lighted by candles and hurricane lamps.

We had lunch there, an unusual spicy ham loaf cooked with Riesling, plus salads and rum-and-black-walnut pie. The bill came to \$21 with wine and tip. Supper runs about \$40 for two. Call 703-777-7246. Credit cards accepted.

We returned to Middleburg that evening for supper. The unofficial capital of fox-hunt country, Middleburg is a small town of horsey gift shops, auto-parts stores, restaurants and garden-supply shops. Along Washington and Main Streets you'll find the Scotland Shop with jams and kilts, the Fat Cat antique shop and the Saddlery, where classic clothes for women are emblazoned with some form of horse motif.

Restaurants here are expensive and marvelous. The Red Fox Tavern, a cozy restaurant and inn, offers working fireplaces, old-oak floors, tables with hunt-red cloths. Stuffed foxes and horse pictures are displayed with dried-flower bouquets. Food is hearty and a la carte. Call 703-687-6301 for restaurant reservations.

Lighter fare can be had in a little white house at the back called the Night Fox Pub: Hamburger and chips for \$6. But one of the cheapest places in town is the Magpie Cafe, at 112 W. Washington St., about two blocks from the other restaurants. It's a melange: tables with linen cloths and paper napkins, hearts-of-palm salad, a fireplace and two TV sets going above the service bar. You can order anything from a BLT to barbecued steak for under \$4, and you can spend less than \$13 for a full-course dinner.

You can stay at the Red Fox Tavern, which has four nicely decorated rooms on its third floor, some with canopied beds, some with fireplaces. Eight other rooms, under the same management, are available in the Stray Fox Inn, a 258-year-old refurbished stable a block away. The McConnell House, also under the same management, is directly across the street from the Stray Fox Inn and has five rooms. Rates range from \$65 to \$175 per room per night. Call 703-687-6301, or write to the Red Fox Tavern, Box 385, Middleburg, Va. 22117.

For accommodations a la *Gone With the Wind*, opt for Welbourne, a private estate just out of Middleburg, one that looks like Tara as you drive through the swan pillars at the gates and into the yard.

It is run by its owner, Mrs. N.H. Morison, an elderly lady full of great charm. Her father was a big-game hunter in his spare time. His collection of giraffes in ivory, wood, cloth and almost every other medium, adorn sills, shelves and nooks.

We stayed in a downstairs guest room with antique Oriental rugs, Chinese jade dressing-table appointments, linen hand towels, brass beds and the ring of the maid's bell in the morning. That signaled the full Southern breakfast that was ready in the dining room.

The earliest part of Welbourne was built in 1775. The family made it their home in 1820, with major additions to the home made as late as 1870. The 600-acre farm is near a golf course and not far from the Skyline Drive. Double-size rooms are \$81.20 per night for two (or \$40.60 for a single) for any room inside the manor. Cottage rates range from as low as \$92.80 per night to \$104 per night, double occupancy.

All prices include breakfast, taxes and gratuities. Firewood is \$5 extra per night. For reservations, write to Mrs. N.H. Morison, Welbourne, Middleburg, Va. 22117 or call 703-687-3201.