



Greg Vaughn Photography

In classic pose, **Mike Harper** plays Dionysus, the ancient Greek god of the grape harvest on our FRONTcover. In real life, he's, well... not far from that role. A certified culinarian and specialist of wine paring, Mike graduated Magna cum Laude from Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts. He's on staff at Wine Gourmet in Roanoke, which does not require you to wear a toga to visit.

Vino Virginia >

Executive Summary:
Cost and quality of Virginia's wines are catching up with the competition, and the natives are responding favorably. So's the rest of the nation.

By Anne Piedmont



Wine

A Report from the Grapevine

Boy, would Thomas Jefferson be surprised!

America's third president dreamed of producing fine wines. He cultivated European grapes at Monticello for three decades, but never produced a bottle of wine. Before him, the English settlers at Jamestown hoped to supply the folks back home with American wine. Pests, disease and, ultimately, lack of interest, doomed those efforts.

Today there are 213 wineries operating in Virginia (16 in the greater Roanoke and New River Valley Valleys), an increase of 34 from a year ago, says Annette Boyd, director of the Virginia Wine Marketing Office. She attributes the growth to several factors, starting with the fact that more Americans are drinking wine. She says the United States is on track to surpass France in total wine consumption. (Note here that there are 65 million Frenchmen and more than 300 million Americans.) This love affair with wine began in the 1970s with the Baby Boomers. Generation X may like its beer and Cosmopolitans, but the Millennials – 77 million strong – are driving a new bump in wine drinking. Boyd says wine is more natural and healthier than other beverages.

The eat local/drink local movement is fueling the popularity of Virginia wines and wines within Virginia's regions, as well. "What's better than having a glass of wine produced in your area?" she asks. That trend has not gone unnoticed by wine sellers in the region. Bill Philips, owner of Mr. Bill's Wine Cellar, says that local wineries tend to raise the profile of Virginia wines. His store has one of the region's largest selections of Virginia and local wines, which he says have built a following, thanks to people visiting the wineries and attending festivals.

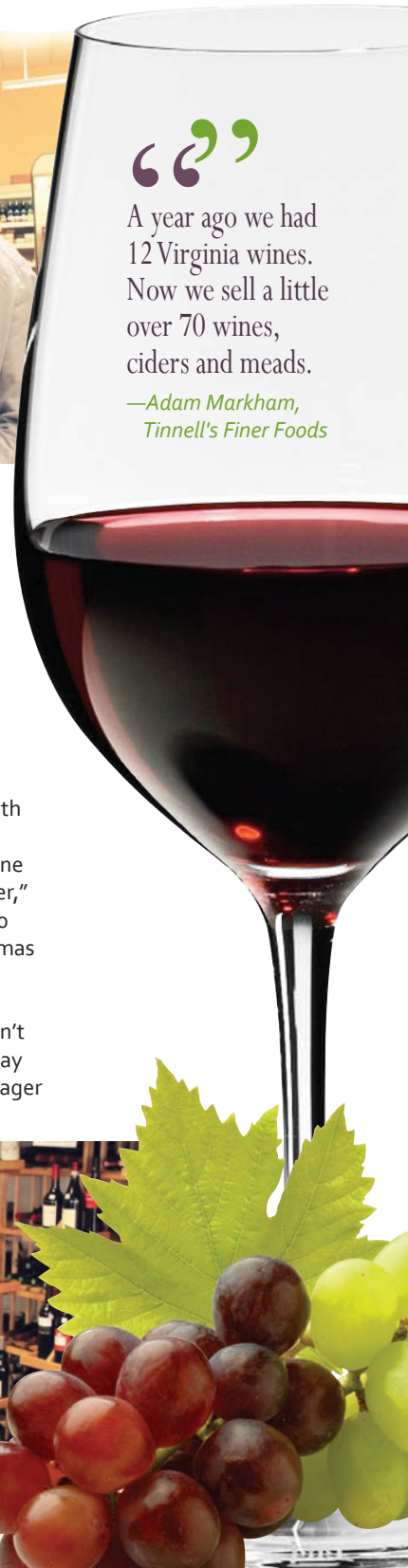
Kimberly Eakin, who founded Wine Gourmet 10 years ago and who has been helping her mother at Blue Ridge Vineyard in Botetourt County since she was 16, says there is a "synergy between the local wineries and local wine sellers." A customer

COVER STORY



Dan Smith

Adam Markham, beverage manager at Tinnell's Finer Foods.



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A year ago we had 12 Virginia wines. Now we sell a little over 70 wines, ciders and meads.

—Adam Markham,
Tinnell's Finer Foods

might not be able to get to a winery to get his favorite wine, but can find it at a local store. She sold the store six months ago to Brian Powell.

Virginia's location in the center of the East Coast, within a day's drive of about two-thirds of the U.S. population, is another reason for the growth in popularity of the state's wines, says Boyd. When the recession hit, out-of-state oenophiles chose Virginia over the Napa Valley or the South of France, and Virginians began using their "stay-cations" to explore the state's many wineries. What have all the wine tourists discovered? "Our wines are getting so much better," says Boyd. She says it has taken Virginia's wine industry 30 years to figure out what grows here and what works. Thomas Jefferson was right; he was just way ahead of his time.

The rap against Virginia wines has been that the quality isn't there and that the prices are too high. Local wine sellers say that's no longer the case. Adam Markham, beverage manager



Dan Smith

Brian Powell, new owner of the Wine Gourmet in Roanoke.



Wine festivals also allow us to offer samples to many people who have not yet visited the winery or even heard of us. Quite a few of our best customers have discovered us at festivals.

—H.T. Page,
Brooks Mill Winery



H.T. Page of Brooks Mill Winery bottles.

at Tinnell's Finer Foods, has made a commitment to carry Virginia wines. He says there was a "pushback in the past" because of the cost, but notes that there are some great bargains in Virginia wines. His customers are discovering the quality. He sold 15 cases of Virginia wines in October (Virginia Wine Month) and has seen that number continue to increase.

Philips agrees: "There are some excellent wines being made in the state." As to the cost, he says Virginia wines likely will never be able to offer low cost labels, like Yellow Tail, for example, because the wineries here tend to be small and offer unique, handcrafted wines. Virginia wines are made in the European tradition, he says, with a "more fruit forward" taste than wines from California or Australia. He says they tend to be less expensive than their European counterparts.

Living the dream

There are 16 wineries, including a cider maker and meadery, in a region that includes the Roanoke and New River Valleys, as well as Bedford, Carroll and Floyd counties. They range from the well-established, like Chateau Morrisette on the Blue Ridge Parkway in Floyd County, to the brand new, like Franklin County's Brooks Mill Winery, which opened just three years ago last December. They all started with a dream.

H.T. and Rhonda Page opened Brooks Mill after making wine as a hobby for many years. They decided to try it commercially to continue into retirement. They researched the process through the library, internet, and other small wineries, and credit Hilltop Winery in Nelson County and Bright Meadows Winery in Halifax County for their help during the opening process.

In 1995 Danny Johnson's Peaks of Otter Winery in Bedford

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County was the 50th in Virginia to be licensed. His was the Commonwealth's first all-fruit winery. Johnson says the company decided to start making wines as a way to get more people onto the farm to buy fruit. Seventeen years later, "Wine is the tail that's wagging the dog." He and his wife, Nancy, learned the business by reading and taking classes. They use his great grandmother's recipes.

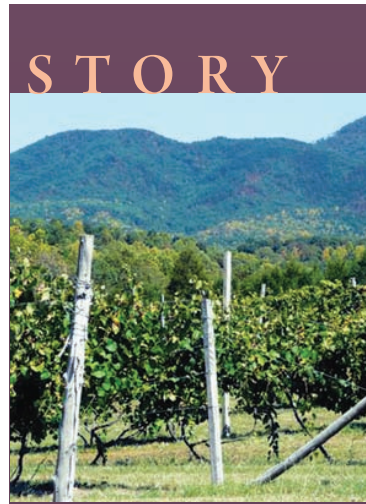
AmRhein's Wine Cellars is another progression from an existing business. Owner Russ Amrhein is part of the third generation in his family's jewelry business, AmRhein's Fine Jewelry (see story in December FRONT). The winery produced its first wines in 1999 and opened a public tasting room in 2000. In the early 2000s, Amrhein started transitioning out of the retail business to focus on the winery. Russ' son, Chad, serves as general manager.

Amrhein says he opened the winery because he's "an agriculturist at heart," and he and his wife, Paula, love wine. They traveled a lot, even overseas, visiting wineries to learn the business. "I spoke to winery owners, winemakers, and delved into research," he says.

Jim and Barbara Kolb Holaday have been making wine at Blue Ridge Vineyard in Botetourt County for more than five years and growing grapes for 28 years. Barbara Holaday says they opened the winery because they "wanted to make our own style of wine with our varieties of grapes." She has a Master of Science degree and PhD work in microbiology and biochemistry, in addition to 28 years of continuing education studying viticulture and winemaking.

Logical progression

Marie Gibbs, who with husband David, operates Virginia Mountain Vineyards, also in Botetourt County, saw producing



The view at Blue Ridge Vineyards.



I would help anyone who wants to open a winery, because I think the more wineries we have the more we are a destination.

—Barbara Kolb Holaday,
Blue Ridge Vineyard

Barbara Kolb Holaday
with Thomas Jefferson,
the father of Virginia wine.



Noel Turner harvests grapes at Blue Ridge Vineyard.





Bill Philips of Mr. Bill's Wine Cellar

A Tale of Two Wine Stores >

What is it about wine? From the making to the selling to the drinking, it seems to bring happiness. The people who run two Roanoke-area wine stores are no exception.

"I don't feel like I'm working," says Bill Philips, who opened Mr. Bill's Wine Cellar in September 2010. He had been in the wine business as a distributor for more than 35 years and saw opening the Brambleton Avenue store as an opportunity to do

something for himself. "I'm doing the same thing, but differently."

When he moved to Virginia from South Carolina in 1981, the Virginia wine industry was young, but Philips could see the potential. Today, he has one of the largest selections of Virginia wines in the region. In the slightly more than a year since Mr. Bill's has been open, it has far exceeded Philips' sales goals.

When he opened his store, he joined Wine Gourmet in the market. In its third location, Wine Gourmet just celebrated 10 years in business. Kimberly Eakin, who has, since she was 16, worked with her mother



A lot of people are enjoying good wine nationwide. Local wineries raise the profile.

—Bill Philips,
Mr. Bill's Wine Cellar

wine as a logical progression from growing grapes. They've been in business for 14 years and she likes having "complete control of the process to produce a quality product." Like many other wine makers, she and her husband attended numerous classes, seminars and industry conventions related to wine grape growing and production to learn the business. They visited different vineyards and wineries throughout the state and participated in different facets of the process from planting, pruning, harvesting, and grape processing.

Two of the region's wineries listed in the 2011 Virginia Winery Guide don't actually make wine in the traditional sense. Foggy Ridge Cider and Blacksnake Meadery, both located in Carroll County, make cider and mead. But the owners got into the business for many of the same reasons their winemaking counterparts did.

Diane Flynt of Foggy Ridge "wanted a 'last career' that would allow us to live in a rural area and produce a value added agricultural product. Our elevation is not ideal for grapes, but I have a background in horticulture, so we decided to plant an



Kimberly Eakin, former owner of Wine Gourmet

Barbara Kolb Holaday, at Blue Ridge Vineyard, opened the store at the Botetourt Commons in Daleville. They had a billboard advertising the store on Interstate-81, and it attracted then-Senator Joe Biden, who came in a bought a bottle of wine.

Eakin moved her store to Franklin Road in Roanoke, to complement the non-wine-selling Ukrops grocery store. Store manager Mike Harper, a certified specialist if wine, said that move allowed Wine Gourmet to increase its customer base by at more than 50 percent, which continued to grow even after Ukrops closed. When their lease came up for renewal, Eakin and company started

looking for yet another home. Which they found on Electric Road in Roanoke County. Eakin has since sold Wine Gourmet to Brian Powell and only helps out when needed.

Harper, Eakin and Philips agree that the wine-consuming local market can support several wine shops (not counting outlets like Tinnell's Finer Foods and large wine sections in supermarkets). In fact, Harper noted, they will work together to meet customers' needs. "If we don't have something someone wants, we'll send them to another store that might carry it."

—Anne Piedmont



Virginia Mountain Vineyards pastoral scene.



I'm so impressed with the quality of our Virginia wines.

—Kimberly Eakin, founder of Wine Gourmet



Pippin gold cider apples from Foggy Ridge.



There were 191 wineries when the 2011 Virginia Wine Guide went to print. Now there are 213.

—Annette Boyd,
Virginia Wine Board

orchard of cider apples with the intent of making hard cider. Our goal is to create a sustainable farm and winery that will keep this beautiful corner of the Blue Ridge Mountains in productive farmland." They planted the orchard in 1997 and got their ABC license in 2004.

Learning to make cider took her around the United States and to a professional training program for cidemakers in England, at an agricultural college in Pershore. She took enology classes at Virginia Tech and Surry Community College. She worked with cidemakers across the country for two years before opening Foggy Ridge. "Gaining hands-on experience was essential to having a successful startup," she says.

Steve and Jo Villers opened Blacksnake Meadery five years ago. They wanted to start their own business, and Steve is passionate about fermentation. They make mead—honey wine—and were attracted to the idea of beekeeping. Like Diane Flynt at nearby Foggy Ridge, they wanted a business that focuses on the land and could be sustainable.

The Villers say they are self taught. They both have science backgrounds. Steve has a bachelor's in biology and a master's in conservation biology and Jo has a bachelor's in biochemistry.

Meeting expectations

It appears running a winery is a satisfying as enjoying a nice glass of wine. Despite the challenges, local winemakers say the experience has more than met their expectations.

The Villers continue to sell out of mead and want to expand. They say the best element is "pride. We did it ourselves from startup to where we are now. We are the only decision makers. We get to share our creativity with others. As educators by profession, we enjoy sharing the history and diversity of mead with our customers." A significant challenge is time: "We are still employed fulltime as high school science teachers."



Blacksnake Meadery bottle.



Blacksnake Meadery owners Steve and Jo Villers with one of their trophies.

COVER STORY



Nancy and Danny Johnson relax after a tough day at Peaks of Otter Winery.

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We started out small. As we've grown have added to the winery and bought equipment. Paid for it as we went along.

—Danny Johnson,
Peaks of Otter Winery

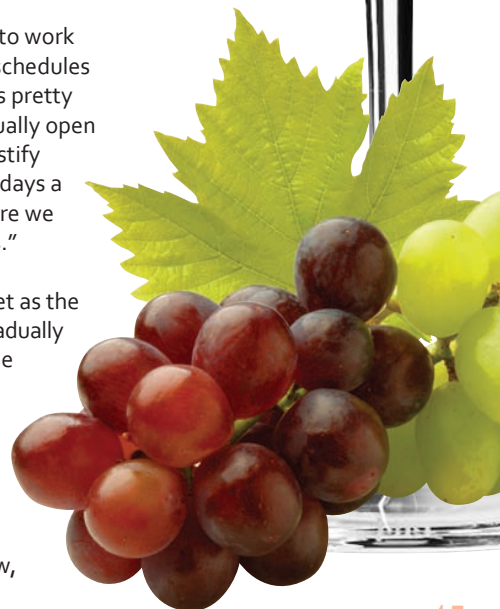
Flynt's experience with Foggy Ridge has exceeded her expectations. "We've had tremendous success in the market and have sold out of our cider each year. We distribute to five states; we have good working relationships with four distributors and have had double digit growth in sales each year. I love working with our many creative restaurant and wine shop customers, as well as those customers who visit Foggy Ridge. And I'm pleased with the national publicity and award we've received both for growing heirloom cider apples and for our hard cider."

She enjoys the variety. "One day I am a farmer, the next a lab worker and the next a salesperson. It's a role that exercises many muscles." After a long career in the corporate world, she's found a challenge in running a complex small business. Her solution: bringing others on board who can keep the business organized.

The Pages at Brooks Mill, like the Villers, continue to work their other jobs and see that as a challenge. Their schedules do not allow them to establish regular hours, so it's pretty much hit and miss for their customers. "We are usually open on weekends, but the hours vary. It's difficult to justify hiring someone to keep the business open several days a week. We tell our customers to call ahead to be sure we are open if they are making a special trip to visit us."

They're pleased to see their expectations being met as the business continues to grow. "Not too quickly but gradually as we prepare for retirement from our careers." She says that "surprising to some, is the fact that we continue to grow even in this economy."

For Danny Johnson and his family at Peaks of Otter Winery, the experience has been "far beyond what we expected. I had absolutely no idea." The farm used to be open from August to October. Now,





Make sure you have enough money to survive 10 years without turning a profit. You don't do this because you hope to make millions. You do it because you love it.

—Russ Amrhein,
AmRhein's Wine Cellars

the winery is open seven days a week from April to December and on weekends from January to March. It allowed his son, Shannon, to come back to the farm from teaching. Johnson says a daily challenge is to “reinvent ourselves to stay up-to-date and fresh to keep people coming in.” They make 30 different wines and last year sold out all but eight of them.

Russ Amrhein says the experience has been a lot of fun. “I get to meet great people and do something I love.” He jokes that as a winemaker, “You get to drink on the job.” Mother Nature remains a sometimes antagonist: “There’s no control over the weather, and a particularly rainy fall like we just had can ruin grapes and thus wine production for that year.”

Gibbs says that “no amount of total pre-entry activity can fully bring an understanding of the total commitment and dedication needed to make this endeavor succeed.”

Standing Out from the Crowd

With more than 200 wineries in the state, each one needs to find a way to stand out. Holaday says Blue Ridge’s old-growth vines (they started growing when there were only seven vineyards in Virginia), estate-grown and estate-bottled wines, and beautiful view bring in the visitors. They are part of the Botetourt Wine Trail and market their wines through their tasting room, events and at festivals.

AmRhein’s has three vineyards (Bent Mountain, Franklin County, Botetourt), offering the ability to grow different grapes at different elevations, something no other Virginia winery does. Russ Amrhein notes that the winery’s German-



AmRhein's Wine cellars.

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influenced wines have won numerous awards, locally and internationally, and are considered to be some of the finest on the East Coast. AmRhein's is part of the Mountain Road Wine Experience and markets itself in a variety of ways.

Peaks of Otter is an all-fruit winery. Beyond that, Johnson says the winery's outlook makes it stand out. "We think wine should be fun," he says. Peaks is host for the Horse and Hounds Wine Festival each year, which brings in thousands of people.

Brooks Mill is a fruit winery. Page says people are surprised that not all of its wines are sweet. "We offer some very good dry and semi-dry wines." The young winery has entered only one competition so far, where its Blackberry and Blueberry wines won awards with the Blueberry receiving a gold medal.

Foggy Ridge's Flynt sells a lot of cider through the tasting room and through events. She promotes her cider through distributors and customers.

Blacksnake's mead stands out from the crowd, as well, since it is made from honey, not grapes. Blacksnake markets the meadery through social networking, the wine trail, visitor center brochures, event listings in local newspapers, retail shops and a newsletter to customers.

If you're thinking of becoming Virginia's 214th winery, Marie Gibbs suggests spending a full year at an operational farm winery, experiencing the different seasons and the multitude of jobs required to make the endeavor happen and endure.

The Villers offer this advice: "Just like starting any business, do your research, have a business plan and know your market. Be creative." 🍷



Dan Smith

**AmRhein's Owner
Russ Amrhein.**



Vines at AmRhein's.