

GRAPE PRESS

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VVA WINTER TECHNICAL TO GO VIRTUAL IN 2021

Due to the pandemic, the VVA Board has decided to move the 2021 Winter Technical Meeting from an in-person meeting to a two-day virtual one. The annual gathering is typically held every February and is attended by wine grape growers, educators, viticulture experts and vendors.

An online format actually opens up many options for us in terms of available speakers and depth of topics that would have been more difficult in person.

We are currently in the planning stages regarding the dates, agenda and technical details, and will communicate more to you in early winter.

— Nate Walsh
VVA President

On Board

The VVA is looking for a few good leaders to help us navigate through the next two years.

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VIRGINIA HARVEST 2020



Rachel Lagergren

Chambourcin ripening ahead of this year's harvest at Stanburn Winery in Southern Virginia.

A Challenging Season

In our Regional Reports, growers detail their strategies as Mother Nature puts us through our paces.

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Post-Harvest Prep

As we look ahead to next year, grape pathologist Mizuho Nita details why vigilance in the vineyard is still important.

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Making It All 'Click'

VVA Honoree Helps Put New Vineyards on the Right Path

Carl Tinder, owner of Tinder Cattle and Vineyard, was honored in February as the Virginia Vineyard Association's Grower of the Year. His company has become an important force in the Virginia wine industry, having planted 275,000 vines, including 32 acres of his own. Carl lives in Earlysville with his wife and four children. He sat down with Grape Press editor Bob Garsson in August to discuss his experiences in Virginia viticulture.

Q: Your company's name is Tinder Cattle and Vineyard. That seems like quite a transition to

go from cattle to planting your own grapevines to planting and managing other people's vineyards. How did that happen?

Carl: A couple of things were happening at the same time. I saw the vineyard industry as something that was growing, and I saw the farm and cattle operation regressing over time — more and more of it was going away. My mother-in-law was the business manager and personal assistant to Mrs. Felicia Rogan, who started Oakencroft

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PRESIDENT'S CORNER

The Rhythms of the Vineyard Provide Comfort in a Rough Year

By Nate Walsh

Walsh Family Wine

For me, one of the main attractions to working in agriculture is that the growth of a plant — any crop, really, that I am aware of — is as predictable, steady, and relentless as the seasons themselves. Working in a vineyard requires you to be present, and the growth of a grapevine is a stoic reminder that nature marches on endlessly.

A vineyard in winter is silent and still, in spring burgeoning with light green and bloom, in summer sprawling and dewy and frustrating, and in fall, on a cool harvest morning, giving and beautiful and celebratory. A vineyard is all of these things, and much more, every year, in and out, over and over and over again, at least for the lifespan of those vines. This is how vineyards have always been, and there's no reason to suspect that it will ever change. There is a great comfort in this sustained consistency of nature, particularly in a world that otherwise changes in rapid ways.

This year, more than ever, working in the vineyard has been a gift. The sap dripping off pruning wounds, followed by bud swell

and bud break — those first cues of a new vintage — were a reminder that nature presses on totally oblivious of anything we human beings are going through. I think for many winegrowers, the vineyard work this spring and summer has been a relief and a source of meditation in 2020.



As I write this, vineyards across Virginia are clipping up their last rows of bird netting, rinsing lugs, digging out refractometers, and prepping for harvest. I cannot in any way predict what to expect from the 2020 vintage — in many ways Mother Nature has already handed us a rough year — but

nonetheless I still suffer from the same level of fantastic optimism that we all share. I hope we can make this vintage one to celebrate, one whose wines give us a reason to look back on 2020 with some amount of gratitude and wonder.

I hope that you all — our VVA membership — have been safe and healthy thus far through 2020, and that your employees, farms, and businesses have weathered this year well. As we progress through the harvest season, if there is anything the VVA can do for you, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Happy harvest, everyone!

VVA Leadership Positions Open

It isn't too early to express your interest in being a candidate for one of three VVA Board positions that will be open for 2021-22:

President
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At-large member

Serving on the Board is an ideal way to make a vital contribution and get to know your fellow growers. Please **contact the VVA** or any board member to learn more.

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► NORTHERN VA.: “I’ve kept a very tight spray schedule this year.”

By Dean Triplett
Greenstone Vineyard

Summer of 2020 is almost at an end. As I write this report during the last week of August, we have had our first harvest of the year. Muscat Ottonel is the first fruit to come off the vine in my vineyard each year. Last year we harvested it on Aug. 19. This year it was Aug. 28. Our predictions of when harvest would take place this year have been all over the place.

Back in April, when things were warming up quickly, many of us felt that harvest would be early, if not very early, this year. And then as things cooled off in May we weren't so sure. When June came around, it brought more-or-less normal temperatures and rainfall. So, we were up in the air again as far as our predictions.

July showed up and it got hot, very hot, for an extended period of time. We had 20 consecutive days of 90 degrees or higher temperatures, with a one-day break, then straight back to the 90's. We've had some moderation of the heat since then, but still plenty of 90-degree days, though, fortunately no 100-degree days. So, here came the predictions of an early harvest.

And then August rolled in with at least three times the amount of rain we'd normally see. Reagan National Airport received nearly 9 inches of rain when 3 inches is more the norm. Parts of Leesburg got more than that, with up to 6 inches in one night!

Now it seems that this year's harvest is actually going to be a week to 10 days later than last year. We did get lucky regarding Hurricane Laura. It slammed into the Gulf Coast, but just brought me a bit over 1 inch of rain and no heavy winds.

With all this going on I can't believe how good the vineyard looks. The hard-working crew that I am so fortunate to have doing all the heavy lifting for me has the place in great shape. They've been able to keep up with the weather and get the tasks done in a timely fashion. I've kept a very tight spray schedule this year, which so far worked well. So far I've put down 18 sprays!

The last couple of years I've maintained pretty close to a 7–10 day spray schedule using primarily our old standbys, mancozeb, sulfur, captan, Phostrol and copper. I do add the high-dollar, heavy hitters during the bloom period, with one or two added as Botrytis concerns dictate but always with an eye on what I've sprayed in the past. I try very hard to keep the FRAC numbers of the products I use rotated so as to try to keep resistance at bay. So far this year it's worked well. But of course we're



Photos by Dean Triplett

Extending the height of posts by about a foot and adding a higher training/catch wire for some varieties at Greenstone Vineyard allowed for more beneficial shoot positioning and also kept bird netting from smashing foliage onto the fruiting zone.

not out of the woods yet, especially with hurricane season really heating up.

Many of the growers I've been keeping in touch with this season have been able to keep up with their sprays as well, though I have heard of some downy mildew outbreaks. Typically, these are upper canopy incidents but can certainly be an issue if left untreated.

And, of course, keeping up with the weeds in the vineyard has been a real chore with all of the rain in August. One other problem that I've heard of is the loss of Chardonnay due to the spring frost events back in April/May. Merlot is also a variety that seems to have been hit hard in some vineyards. I've again been very lucky to have had just minor leaf injury to my Merlot which can't be detected now.

And I seem to have had very good fruit set pretty much across the board in my vines. The Muscat Ottonel harvest we just finished was the



biggest we've ever pulled off those vines. And the overall quality was very good. The crew I work with did a great job of shoot positioning and leaf pulling at the right time and they placed the electric netting and bird netting up much earlier than we have in the past. These things all seemed to work together to let the crop hang with very little loss due to predation. Knock on wood, but the critter issues of the past have been greatly reduced so far.

One benefit of the August rain is that the section of the vineyard I replanted has done very well. I ripped out my Traminette and replaced it with Albarino and Valvin Muscat. Both varieties took off and have made very good growth. Most growers

I know who put vines in this year have seen similar results.

With the vineyard getting into good shape a

See *NORTHERN* on page 4

► NORTHERN VA. (cont.)

NORTHERN, from page 3

bit earlier than in the past, I had my guys work on placing a training/catch wire onto the trellis of my Merlot and Petit Verdot, which are both trained to a high-wire cordon system.

At each end and line post, a two-foot piece of 2x4 was attached to extend the posts by about a foot. A training/catch wire was then strung along the length of the trellis. My vines in this section of the vineyard run northeast to southwest. The guys got the wires installed early enough in the spring so that, as the shoots grew up, they could be gently pushed to the west side of this wire.

The training wire kept most of the shoots from drooping over to the east side of the row. I have always tried to shoot position these vines so that the canopy is trained to droop over to the west. That way the fruit zone is opened up to the morning sun and shielded from the hotter mid-day and afternoon sun.

This helps, I believe, in overall fruit exposure, but also helps dry out the fruit from the early morning dew that we get so often in the summer.

An added benefit of this system is the placement of the bird netting. Before, the netting was placed directly onto the top of the canopy. This would smash the foliage down onto the fruit zone in such a way as to sometimes completely cover the fruit with leaves. This, in turn, could cause the early morning dew to stay wet longer, possibly adding to late-season fruit rots.

Now that the bird netting is attached to this wire, it allows the fruit to hang below the top of the netting. Besides not covering fruit with foliage, it also makes it more difficult for the occasional bird that might sit on the netting and peck at any exposed fruit. I've been toying with this project for quite some time and I'm so far very glad with the results from this simple fix.

I have to apologize for not including comments from other growers from my area in this report. I've had very limited contact with other growers due to Covid-19 of course and I've learned over the years not to pester people too much during harvest. I hope to be able to talk directly and through emails with growers and wineries after harvest to give you all a better sense of how this vintage fares. So until then, here's to more missed hurricanes and a little less rain in general, please! And of course, staying safe and healthy.

Editor's Note: Dean Triplett is a regional reporter for Grape Press, covering Northern Virginia. We'd like to feature more news about vineyards in the region, so please contact Dean at: gsvineyard13@gmail.com if you'd like to provide information for upcoming columns about growing conditions, new plantings or anything else you think would be of interest to other growers.

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▶ CENTRAL VA: “Then came August. In Afton, my total rainfall ... was 15.03 inches.”

By Grayson Poats
Valley Road Vineyards

When I give vineyard tours, I often note that growing grapes is somewhat like entering into a one-sided contract with Mother Nature. We, as growers, must strictly adhere to our side of the bargain (the harvesting of wonderful, peak-of-ripeness grapes for winemaking) or the contract is void.

But Mother Nature apparently believes that she's under no obligation to uphold her side of the contract. She is expected, of course, to provide growers with reasonably pleasant weather, sunshine, modest rainfall, etc., so that we can do all the various tasks that will, at summer's end, result in a harvest that will be transferred into a memorable vintage.

I say this to those touring the vineyard only half in jest, for as we have seen in 2020, Mother Nature has not held up her end of the bargain.

Two major freeze events in April and May resulted in severely depleted crop yields for Central Virginia growers. A post-harvest survey of crop yields will tell the full story, but the vast majority of growers that I have spoken with expect yields to be down 30 to 80 percent, depending on their site.

Some took such a hard hit that they have made the decision that the cost of expensive black rot and Botrytis sprays and the cost of labor to perform canopy management tasks are not worth the return for the yields they might see. They have therefore made only minimal applications of fungicide sprays to keep vines alive, stopped extensive canopy work, and will not harvest any grapes from those vines in 2020.

Meeting to Give Updates On Spotted Lanternfly

Blue Ridge PRISM (Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management) will host a free virtual meeting from 1 to 4 p.m. Oct. 21 that will include updates on the Spotted Lanternfly in Virginia. The speaker will be Mark Sutphin, Virginia Cooperative Extension agent in Frederick County.

Registration for the meeting on eventbrite.com is required. Contact Rod Walker with any questions about the meeting.

Learn more about Blue Ridge PRISM and the meeting at blueridgeprism.org.

Another difficult feature of 2020 was that following a quite warm March we experienced a much cooler than average April. This put growth well behind what we have seen traditionally. Bud break came on March 30, but other growth stage benchmarks — bloom, cluster close, and veraison — were delayed by a week or more.

Yet another unfortunate consequence of the frost/freezes was the explosion of lateral growth in the fruit zone of my vines once the weather warmed and growth resumed. This had to be cleared out as much as possible once fruit set was complete, which meant extra time and expense for a crop yield that would be significantly lower than was expected. To have not done so would lead to a canopy microclimate highly conducive to fruit rots and further reductions in yield.

For a while it looked as though our weather would settle into a more normal pattern. June and July were a bit on the rainy side (at least at my site in Afton), with 4.99 and 4.79 inches of rain, respectively, but there was plenty of sun and heat to begin to make up for the shortfalls experienced in April and May.

Then came August. In Afton, my total rainfall for the month was 15.03 inches. That is not a typo. In 2018, which is considered the benchmark for rainy years in Central Virginia, we had “only” eight-and-a-half inches of rain in August. If you have managed to keep your vines free of downy mildew in the midst of all that rain and humidity, my hat is off to you. I have not been so fortunate. We truly need a

dry September.

Grape chemistry has been less than ideal, with Brix numbers for samples on Sept. 1 running about where they were mid-August of 2019, and pH numbers fairly high, but only because fruit is still on the vine that in another year would be harvested by now.

I understand the importance of picking whites primarily on pH but I am also looking for the varietal flavors typically associated with those varieties and, unfortunately, with all the rain of August much of that flavor so far is lacking.

Many growers have by now picked the early whites, those for sparkling wine, Sauvignon Blanc, and Pinot Gris. Some are now picking Chardonnay, if they have any, with Chambourcin, Viognier and Merlot most likely up next for me.

Let's hope September turns out to be kind to us. We've certainly earned it, and it would give us a chance to salvage what can only be described as a lousy year, at least to this point. Good luck the rest of the way.

Editor's Note: Grayson Poats is a regional reporter for Grape Press, covering Central Virginia. We'd like to feature more news about vineyards in the region, so please contact Grayson at: grayson@valleyroadwines.com if you'd like to provide information for upcoming columns about growing conditions, new plantings or anything else you think would be of interest to other growers.

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► SOUTHERN VA.: “There is no visual damage from cicadas.”



Rachel Lagergren

Spring frosts may have reduced crop totals at Stanburn Winery, but two white varieties, including Chardonnay, fared well this season.

By Rachel Lagergren
Stanburn Winery

After May’s late frosts, spring rolled into early summer with bright blue skies and an encouraging breeze.

The real work in our vineyard had to wait until the vines could send out new shoots after all the late frosts in May. Once the canopies filled out, we were challenged with keeping all the “shrubbery” under control.

I found dead plant material, many stunted primary shoots with secondary and tertiary shoots and lovely laterals just for more fun. We did find fruit in all our varieties but decided to wait on crop estimates until we thinned the canopy. Our strategy consisted of removing dead plant material, positioning and thinning shoots and removing leaves to bring in sun and improve air flow and spray penetration.

As we moved through June and into July, the temperatures climbed into the 90s with

late-day thunderstorms. Crop estimates were performed in late July. Overall, compared to 2019, our crop is down about 70 percent.

Two of our white varieties fared well. We are down about 11 percent in the Vidal Blanc and about 37 percent in the Chardonnay. With our reds, Chambourcin is down about 57 percent, and the Cabernet Franc is close to a total loss.

There is no visual damage from cicadas. I was concerned about the large number of casings we found in the Chambourcin block and the tender new plantings which had grown out of tubes. However, it appears the cicadas preferred the nearby woods.

Last year, pheromone traps were set out to monitor for the adult grape root borer. The greatest number of captures were found at the Dry Pond, Va., location, so this year we began using pheromone mating disruption and will continue monitoring all blocks.

As I write this in early September, Stanburn’s owners, Nelson and Elsie Stanley, reported back on some berry

sampling. Our whites are at between 14 and 17 Brix and Chambourcin is at 18 Brix. Go Chambourcin! Our goal is to harvest the grapes as clean and ripe as possible, so now we watch and wait.

Meanwhile, Emily Belcher, winemaker at Chateau Morrisette, reported similar weather-related issues. Like many wineries in Virginia, Chateau Morrisette was hit hard with frost damage. At one point, she said, the vineyards experienced three consecutive frosts in a single week. The winery’s 15 acres of Niagara, at an elevation of 3,000 feet, suffered a 100 percent crop loss for 2020.

“If there are any grapes, they will be sold at the farmer’s market,” she said.

Emily continued: “We were hopeful at the beginning of the season that our vines would be able to recover from the severe weather changes, but the weather had different plans. We have had a lot of green,

See SOUTHERN on page 9

It Pays to Stay Vigilant After Harvest

By Mizuho Nita

Grape Pathologist, Virginia Tech

Some of us are about to be done with harvest, and others may still have a few more weeks to finish this season. If you are seeking options for very-late season fungicide applications with short PHI materials, please visit my blog (grapepathology.blogspot.com). I posted a table of short PHI fungicides on Aug. 24.

The main reason for you to keep your vines clean after harvest is to prepare vines for the winter. Grapevines need to store carbohydrates to survive the cold temperatures during the winter. Thus, if there is not enough healthy foliage on the vine, it can increase winter injury risk.

Since grapevines are perennial crops, what happened during this growing season can

impact the next season. For example, we observed many vines fell short in the 2019 season because of a rainy 2018 season followed by a sharp temperature drop in January 2019.

The 2020 season brought challenges such as downy mildew, to some of you, and it is better to keep the vines as healthy as possible until the time of hard frost.

The primary target diseases are downy mildew and maybe powdery mildew. I do not typically worry about powdery mildew this late in the season unless you already have an ongoing outbreak that started a few months ago.

Downy mildew is common after late August in our area because of nights with high relative humidity, which drive spore production, and fall rains, as we have been experiencing, that help spore dispersal.

If you fail to protect your vines, severe infection by downy mildew can result in

defoliation. Therefore, in a typical year, downy mildew is what I would like to control after harvest.

Since it will be an after-harvest spray, you do not need to worry about the PHI (pre-harvest interval). You can apply a combination of mancozeb plus sulfur or captan plus sulfur, if you are concerned about powdery mildew. If powdery mildew is not a concern, you can use mancozeb or captan or fixed copper by itself.

Depending on the cultivar and weather conditions, you may need to spray once or twice in a two- to three-week interval. If your vines are not protected for more than two weeks and received more than two inches of rain, then you may consider using a phosphite fungicide (e.g., Prophyt, Phostrol, etc.).

I hope we will not receive any surprises toward the end of the season. Good luck with the harvest!

REGIONAL REPORTS

► SOUTHERN VA. (cont.)

SOUTHERN, from page 8

and we've had vines pop out 20-30 shoots. Between Covid19 and the crazy weather, it's been a devastating year. Luckily, we were all blessed with a wonderful 2019 harvest. Looking ahead, we are hoping that the vines will mostly recover next year. We planted, replanted, and replaced vines after most of the frost/freeze events. After all, it can't get any worse than 2020."

I also heard from Kevin Sutherland at Nicewonder Farm & Vineyards, who reported that his vineyard in Bristol suffered a 75 to 95 percent loss from the spring freeze. Hardest hit was the Chardonnay, Viognier and Merlot. "The Petit Verdot came through these events the best, but losses still ran 75 percent," Kevin said. "Our 2nd year replacement plants are showing some increased crown gall pressure. Regrowth after freeze was slow, but by the end of July, we had a full canopy, with a lot of shoot thinning and the

first hedging completed.

"With a catastrophic reduction in crop, our strategy moving forward from the freeze was to try and cut costs where we could. We used minimal labor to keep canopies open and saved expensive spray materials, but we are keeping the vines clean and healthy for next year. And all this happened while we are dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic."

Kevin added that, while the excessively wet spring was followed by a very dry hot summer, the vineyard is still a foot above average on rainfall. Japanese beetle pressure was very light (only two sprays) and started about a week later than normal. "And there were no cicadas, other than the few annual summer guys," he said.

Nicewonder Vineyards was established in 2014 in Washington County, near the border of Virginia and Tennessee. The vineyard elevation ranges from 1,860 feet to 1,980 feet. Nicewonder has over 10 acres of vinifera, divided among Chardonnay, Viognier, Merlot and Petit Verdot, and will

be adding two-plus acres of Cabernet Franc next spring.

"I will echo Grayson Poats of Valley Road Vineyards from the Summer 2020 Grape Press," Kevin said: "A big thank you to Tony Wolf and his staff for the Virginia Cooperative Extension virtual vineyard meetings that they have conducted. The ability to view these after the fact has been a great help.

"I have heard an old farmer's saying over the years that I think applies here: 'Next Year,'" Kevin said. "I hope 'Next Year' is as good as 2019. 'Next year' I will do better at whatever. 'Next year,' Mother Nature will not be as cruel. 'Next year,' we will hopefully have the pandemic behind us.

"Here's to Next Year!"

Editor's Note: Rachel Lagergren is a regional reporter for Grape Press, covering Southern Virginia. We hope to feature more news about Southern Virginia's vineyards and wineries in future columns. Please contact Rachel at lager0862@gmail.com if you'd like to provide information for upcoming columns about growing conditions, new plantings or anything else you think would be of interest to other growers.

"We have had a lot of green, and we've had vines pop out 20-30 shoots."

— Emily Belcher
Chateau Morrisette

Advancing Viticulture in Va.

GROWER, from page 1

Vineyard and Winery in Charlottesville. I knew nothing about the vineyard industry, absolutely nothing. So, I asked (Oakencroft vineyard manager) Phil Ponton some questions. First of all, what is a ton of grapes worth and how many tons per acre can you get? When he started sharing those numbers with me, my interest began to grow.

So then it became a question of how to best use the land we had. Were there areas that we could put to better use if we planted vineyards? We identified sites, did some due diligence, and decided to move forward. And once we did that, we learned everything about what not to do. We made every rookie mistake you could make.

And from my own errors, I was able to recognize the same naïve ambitions people have when they want to start their own new vineyards — how much work there is after you get it planted and after you get the trellis up. You know these vines don't just take off and roll on their own. They need a lot of love and tender care. So, from our struggles and missteps and misfortunes and errors, we were able to help others get off to a better start. Once we started planting these vineyards, we were able to move in and help with the management and all.

What were the first varieties you planted?

We were thinking of selling our fruit to Oakencroft, and so we put in Merlot at their recommendation. We planted two acres of Merlot the first year. We managed to kill those vines, and so the second year we replanted the Merlot and put in two acres of Cab Franc. And then in '06, we did the vineyard at Adventure Farm, which is next to the Charlottesville airport in Earlysville. We put in four acres there, two of Viognier and two of Cabernet Sauvignon. Then we put in some Petit Manseng. It was becoming trendy, so we thought it would be a good grape to have.

In 2014 at Grape Lawn, in partnership with Pippin Hill (in North Garden) we planted more vines of Sauvignon Blanc,

Viognier, Chardonnay, and then some more Merlot and Tannat .

So you were helping other people at the same time you were planting your own.

That's right. I was working with Chris Hill at the time, and he asked if I would come up and lay out and drive posts on the Pippin Hill install. So we got involved early there before they even built the tasting room. They laid out the driveway and I was there laying out Pippin Hill's vineyard over top of the driveway. I was very pleased with how that turned out.

Once we got it planted for them, Chris asked: Since you're already spraying Adventure Farm and hauling your equipment to Nelson County to spray yours, would you mind stopping and spraying at Pippin Hill so they didn't have to buy a tractor and sprayer the first year? Well, yeah, that made sense. We were already trucking equipment up and down the road, being in the cattle business, so it was a natural transition.

And then Highland Orchard in Coveseville put in vines the same year Pippin Hill did. So we were helping manage Adventure Farm, Pippin Hill, stopping at Highland orchard to help those guys out and continuing on down the road to my vineyard at Grape Lawn in the Woods Mill area of Nelson County. And then in 2014, Michael Shaps approached me about a project over in Keswick, at Rougemont Farm. He

said that the owner was partnering up with him and wanted to put in a big block, 10 acres, and needed me to manage as well. So that's when I started getting serious about it.

What's your favorite grape to grow?

I like the vines that come out first, so I like Chardonnay. With Viognier, we have a love-hate relationship. We're trying to figure out how to be a better Viognier grower all the time, but as soon as you think you've figured it out and pat yourself on the back, she comes back the next year and tells you you're not as smart as you think you are. Viognier is a little frustrating to grow,



VVA Grower of the Year Carl Tinder

especially if you're a commercial grower getting paid on tonnage. Yields can be sporadic and its flavors really come on late as the fruit gets ripe, so it needs to hang on the vine for as long as it can. There's a fine line between ripe and rotten some seasons.

How about reds? What are your favorite red varieties?

I really love Merlot. Cabernet Franc, too. But my favorite grape to grow right now is Tannat. I really like Tannat and the wine it produces. I like Merlot for its versatility. It's a very popular variety for the rosé market that can be picked earlier, or it can be ripened for a varietal or blend. Cab Franc is a workhorse with good yields and a loose cluster structure that allows us to weather some tough conditions. Tannat is really performing well in our vineyards, with good tonnage. It can ripen quickly for picking relatively early in the season for reds.

Our main varieties that we are putting in a lot of vineyards would be Chardonnay, Viognier, some Petit Manseng, and some Sauvignon Blanc. And then on the red side, Merlot, Cab Franc, Petit Verdot, and on the right sites, some Tannat. That seems to be the combination that does really well for us

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here in Virginia.

And then we'll test a few things. Some owners want to do Pinot Gris, and we even planted some Pinot Noir and Reisling at 3000 feet on top of the mountain at 12 Ridges on the parkway in Vesuvius, Va.

What's your least favorite grape to grow?

Cabernet Sauvignon is very challenging. You have to have the right site. If you have the right site, in the right year, it's magical, and we can ripen it really well and make a great wine. But it will leave you frustrated more years than it will leave a big smile on your face. But we still plant some of it here and there.

As a consumer of wine, what's your favorite varietal?

I like them all. And I appreciate the differences in them. As far as whites, it's probably Sauvignon Blanc or Viognier. As far as the reds go, I would say probably a good Cab Franc.

How did you do with the late frosts this year?

We would have fruited about 145 to 150 acres if we hadn't had the spring freeze. We lost about 100 acres between the April freeze and the May freeze. On the blocks we were able to save, the sites did most of the work — the elevation was key on a lot of things. But there were a lot of helicopters and a lot of sleepless nights in April and May. So we'll be harvesting only about 47 acres.

Are you getting any fruit from secondary buds?

With a lot of the vineyards we're in now, it's more of a distraction than anything else. If you go in and do the count, it's less than a half-ton per acre, and you just can't make any money picking fruit for that. It's costing more money than it's worth. We're trying to bring the vines through this the best we can, and trying to get good wood. There were some vineyards I didn't have any vegetation at all until the first of June. It took a long time to bounce back.

So everything is focused on next year,

getting good wood out there, keeping the vines from getting too vigorous so that the canes don't get too big. We're going to have a lot of cane rejuvenation going on next year. It got so cold on May 10 in spots that we did have some vine damage in some young vines.

What are the biggest challenges you face in Virginia today?

Labor is always a challenge. You've got people coming and going just like in any other business. You try to hold on to the best ones, keep them there, and hopefully they feel like they've got a home. We're fortunate enough to have enough work that we can keep a lot of our staff on year around.

So, as soon as we get through harvest, the main guys usually stay and we get into hilling up young vines. By the time we

put the vineyards to bed for the winter and clean up from harvest, it's about the first of December, so we start on pre-pruning and then have the holiday break.

After the New Year, we really start full-gear pruning. So we seem to find enough work to keep everyone busy. That helps with the labor. Because if you are just working people nine to 10 months out of the year and letting them go, then staffing up can be a challenge. But we've been able to hold on to some guys for six years, and then have the ones that cycle through.

Virginia is also challenging with the weather. You never know what you're going to get from one year to the next. You are always learning and adapting because every vintage is a little different.

So I would say that weather in Virginia is the most challenging thing we have to deal

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with. Take this past year, it was hot and dry in June and early July. Then in the second half of July, the water spigot opened back up.

We are seeing some fruit that we thought would be a little further along, sitting there at like 13 brix with the pH starting to rise and our winemakers are getting a little nervous.

How about disease pressure?

Absolutely. Disease, wildlife, birds and deer — we won't put in a project unless we do a deer fence around it. Particularly, close to heavier populated areas — the more people we get, the more deer we get because nobody is hunting. Deer find havens in subdivisions and then come over to our vineyards at night.

Are you seeing the effects of climate change?

It's such a small window of time to judge — I just deal with what Mother Nature gives me each day. It's always been hot, it's always been cold, there have always been variations. The cold snap we had in May broke a record we set in 1932. So, we had cold like that in 1932.

Some years you just get bad luck. You know, we had a tornado come through and hail just the other night. Mother Nature just keeps bringing it to us.

Looking back, what might you have done differently if you knew what you know now?

Once we figured out what we were doing wrong, we adapted pretty quickly, and I

think we've moved forward pretty well. We try to do what works in Virginia. I don't try to look at what they're doing in California or look across the ocean and see what's going on in France, because this climate and area is different.

After the (Virginia) Governor's Cup, I look at the best wines and see where they are coming from. Is it Northern Virginia or Central Virginia? I want to know what soil types they're grown on, what trellis systems are used.

And if you can prove to me that planting a vineyard with a meter between vines and seven feet between rows is going to produce better fruit, cropping two and a half tons per acre, I'll listen. But until they prove that to me, a nine-by-four vineyard cropping four tons per acre is producing wines that are winning gold medals and getting into the Governor's case every year.

What does the future look like for Virginia viticulture?

Well, I think 20 to 30 years ago when this got started, you had people saying let's plant grapes here because this land is what I've got. Some of the first vineyards that were put in weren't on great sites.

We've learned now what a good site looks like. So now you have people actively searching, trying to find vineyard sites. Not just where you can grow grapes, but where

you can do a nice tasting room and event center and get people in.

Now the vineyard industry, especially in the Charlottesville, Albemarle and the

Nelson county corridor, is really starting to look to drive their business that way. You're going to see people come in and really focus on the grapes and wine production and the tasting room experience. Now it's going to be really competitive for those consumers to come out.

So just putting a few vines in your back yard, making some wine and putting a shingle on your post isn't going to be as easy as it used to be. You have some really sharp players starting to come into the game. As long as we come in with what we do well — and over the last 30 to 40 years, we've identified what Virginia does well.

What make Virginia a good place to make wine?

The people. Look how many people we have, how many we can get into our tasting rooms and event centers and that sort of thing. And when everything clicks right, we can grow great fruit and make great wine.

Are wet years a challenge? Heck yes. But we still put some pretty good wine together, even in those challenging years. And Virginia is just absolutely beautiful. So we have some great things going for us that other places in the world just don't have.

"We're trying to figure out how to be a better Viognier grower all the time, but as soon as you think you've figured it out and pat yourself on the back, she comes back the next year and tells you you're not as smart as you think you are."

Nominations Open for Next Year's Grower of the Year!

Do you know someone who's deserving of the VVA's annual Grower of the Year Award? The VVA will begin considering nominees soon in anticipation of presenting the award during our 2021 Winter Technical Meeting. The recipient must be an active VVA member with at least seven years of experience managing or operating a commercial vineyard of at least five acres. The nominee must be an active and respected participant in the Virginia viticulture community with a track record of service to our industry.

Send your suggestions to info@virginiavineyardsassociation.org