

GRAPE PRESS

Summer 2021

The Quarterly Newsletter of the VIRGINIA VINEYARDS ASSOCIATION

Vol. 37 No. 2

VVA SUMMER TECHNICAL SET FOR JULY

► Save the date for our in-person Summer Technical Meeting! It will be a daylong event on Wednesday, July 28, at Virginia Tech's AREC location in Winchester.

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Cluster Concerns

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Grower of the Year

In a Q&A with Grape Press, Carrington King of King Family Vineyards discusses varieties and growing strategies.

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Andrea Richter

CHALLENGES OF 2021: Depending on where you're growing, vineyard concerns have ranged from overly dry conditions to cicadas. Regional Reports (starting on page 3) provide updates, including how one grower has been trying to foil cicadas.

President's Corner

Stepping Up Response To Survey

By Skip Causey

Potomac Point Vineyard
& Winery

Calling on all vineyard owners, operators, and foremen — we need your help!

After some reworking and delays, the 2020 Commercial Grape Report (CGR) will soon be released. The delay is due to a very low response rate, with only 44 percent of known vineyards reporting.

This survey response rate has been falling for years. Ten years ago, more than 85 percent of the state's vineyards responded to the survey, but participation has steadily fallen and dropped to 67 percent in 2019. Any time the response rate drops below 50 percent, as it did in 2020, the results are suspect and extrapolation near impossible.

This is my plea for 2021:

See *PRESIDENT* on page 2

Winemaking: Letting the Vineyard Speak

"A great wine.... will necessarily be uncommon and decidedly unique because it cannot be like any other."

— André Ostertag,
Domaine Ostertag,
Epfing, France (Alsace)

By Jim Law
Linden Vineyards

The history of winemaking dates back many millennia. Today, most wine produced is a continuation of the work and discovery of previous generations.

However, in Virginia we are in a unique position to unveil a virgin terroir. This has been an attraction to many of us in the industry. It's what brought me here in 1981. And it is what keeps me going.

When I started, I knew what Chardonnay should taste like, but had no idea as to what to expect from Hardscrabble's terroir. After 34 vintages, there are some clues. I'll use the example of Hardscrabble Chardonnay to reflect how changes and adaptations in the vineyard and cellar can lead to wines that become more terroir expressive. Two things have to be present: balanced grapes and deferential winemaking.

In the vineyard, all decisions revolve around

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PRESIDENT'S CORNER (cont.)

PRESIDENT, from page 1

please fill out the CGR survey. The drop in participation comes as our industry is growing, and the report should reflect that growth.

Many vineyards and wineries look forward to and use this CGR report to plan their businesses and growth. This information is also used by the state to show the size and strength of our industry. This helps promote Virginia wines and solidifies support, both political and financial, from all involved.

The VVA Board has committed to help the Virginia Wine Board (which pays for the report through grants) on the 2021 CGR survey. The first action is our plea for support from our members in filling out the survey.

Next, we will work to simplify the survey to make it quick and easy to fill out. The most important information is acreage and tonnage. The most sought information is market pricing.

We again will work with the Wine Board to collect data on what is currently planted in Virginia — how many acres and which varieties, producing and not yet producing. This information is not dependent on harvest and can be compiled sooner.

Just after harvest, we will then ask about tonnage produced, by varietal. We will be asking about contract or market pricing, but this question will be optional, and we will not include any price for fruit sold to their own entity. While we know this information is helpful, we also recognize that market forces as well as the laws of supply and demand drive grape prices more than any industry report.

Again, please help us with this information.

Our goal is to have more than 90 percent of known vineyards reporting. This would help solidify the Wine Board's continued support (and funding) for the CGR, as well as making the report's findings more impactful to our state and industry.

The VVA will work with whichever company is contracted to process the survey, focusing especially on outreach aimed at increasing member participation. We know we are growing and doing great things. Let's show the world how big we really are.



VVA President Skip Causey

Summer Technical Meeting

We are excited about our Summer Technical meeting coming up on July 28. This in-person meeting will be held at the Virginia Agricultural Research and Extension Center (AREC) in Winchester. We are holding this session much later than normal to allow more Virginians time to get

vaccinated against Covid.

With the delay, we will also be able to focus our technical sessions on canopy and vineyard floor management. We will have equipment demonstrations as well as regional and technical updates from around the state. We will also be able to learn about many of the programs and research efforts that Virginia Tech has been working with for the last several years. We will have several vendors, a sponsored lunch, and a comparative wine tasting.

Please sign up quickly since there will be limited space this year. I know most folks are most interested in swapping stories of last year as well as networking with our fellow vineyard managers after too much time apart.

See you in July!

Story Ideas and Writers Wanted for Grape Press

The VVA Communications Committee is always looking for wine grape growers, educators, and industry experts who can contribute to our newsletter, Grape Press, which is published quarterly for the benefit of our members. We need two things: story ideas and volunteers who can help us turn those ideas into articles.

We're especially interested in finding a VVA member who can write a regional report on events, conditions, and other observations of interest to growers in Eastern Virginia. We'll offer plenty of guidance and advice to get you started. To suggest story ideas or discuss becoming a regional reporter, please contact Bob Garsson (rgarsson@gmail.com).

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► NORTHERN VA.: “To have half an inch of slow, steady rain ... was manna from heaven.”

By Dean Triplett
Greenstone Vineyard

Normally a rainy day like May 24 would have filled a grape grower like me with unease. Nasty mildew infections are out there, lying in wait, ready to attack the newly forming leaves, shoots and flowers on the growing vines. My mood, however, was just the opposite.

It had been 15 days since we'd had any measurable rainfall. At that point, we were close to being down 2 inches for the month. I typically don't fret over the established vines in this kind of scenario, but I've expanded my vineyard this year, planting the last addition to my Albariño block back at the end of April.

The guys then put in replants throughout the vineyard. So, to have half an inch of slow, steady rain for that entire day was manna from heaven. After walking the vineyard prior to putting down another spray, however, I noticed the beginnings of black rot (BR) lesions throughout the vineyard. And in the Albariño, and to a lesser degree in the Muscat Ottonel, a small amount of downy mildew (DM) is popping up.

I don't see any DM in any of my reds, though. I had a tractor breakdown earlier in the month that forced me to stretch the time between Mancozeb/Sulfur sprays to 11 days. I was wondering if that was just enough time for BR and DM to raise their ugly heads.

A number of other growers, however, have told me they are seeing the same BR disease issues. So now I don't really know what to think. And on top of that, bloom is just now starting in the Albariño, about a week earlier than average.

I can already see that the next month or so is going to take extra diligence on my part to try to get everything under control. Maybe I should have felt a touch of unease after all?

I was very fortunate to attend a joint meeting of the Loudoun Wine Grape Growers Association and Loudoun Wineries Association held May 19 at Cana Vineyards & Winery of Middleburg. It was the first face-to-face meeting I've attended in over a year, and it felt great.

The mood of the growers in attendance was markedly different than last year. This year brought no major frost events for the vast majority of growers, which was a huge relief considering the hit so many folks took



Andrea Richter

Catoctin Ridge Chateau in Loudoun County has been using grow tubes in its second-year vineyard in hopes of protecting the young vines from cicadas. The tubes are topped with plant covers.

last year.

And the weather, despite the lack of rain, seemed close to perfect. (Or at least we thought so before the BR issues became apparent.) We had a short spell of temperatures in the 80s with one or two 90-degree days a while ago, and overall, we've had pretty low humidity. And up to that point no one was seeing any disease issues, including black rot.

I'll be scratching my head over this one for a while!

The cicadas are now in full swing, with the woods full of their alien-sounding calls of lust. Most growers know how to handle the damage that the females will do to the vines when they deposit their eggs. Second-year vines are very susceptible to damage and will have to be checked carefully for injury.

Catoctin Ridge Chateau has re-applied grow tubes to its second-year vineyard and placed small portions of non-woven plant covers over and in the tops of the tubes,

creating a barrier to the advance of the cicadas.

These are the white plant cover cloths used to protect gardens from frost damage. Cut to size and placed over the top and down into the tubes, they should help protect against possible cicada damage and, hopefully, Japanese beetles as well. The emerging vines shouldn't have any problem pushing past this fabric as they grow throughout the year.

If you're really concerned about insect damage to young vines, I suppose you could drape the covering over the entire plant. Not cheap but we spend plenty of money on bird netting.

Now that the Covid-19 vaccine is available to anyone, wineries around the region are seeing a very healthy rebound in visitation. People in our area are very tired of the routine that we've all been in for so long and are flocking to the country.

Unfortunately, as with many other businesses in the nation, labor shortages are an issue. Wineries which in the past had no problem hiring qualified people are now scrambling to attract any help.

As an independent grower, I'm blessed to work with a great team of vineyard workers. But growers without an established team are probably having the same issues as wineries.

Today, in early June, the vines are full of flowers, and I'm keeping my fingers crossed for bloom, which as I said is just now underway. The weather forecast for the early part of June looks good, with temperatures in the 80s and only moderate amounts of rainfall predicted. Since I'm a hopeless optimist, and a grudging realist, I'll hope for the best, but make sure to keep my spray program very tight from here on out.

June has always been the “Throw the kitchen sink at it” spray period when it comes to the chemicals we use. This bloom looks to be more of the same.

So, here's to happy spraying! With no more equipment breakdowns, thank you.

Editor's Note: Dean Triplett is a regional reporter for Grape Press, covering Northern Virginia. We hope to feature more news about Northern Virginia's vineyards and wineries in future columns. 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.

▶ **CENTRAL VA:** “Most encouraging was the uniform growth I was seeing ...”

By Grayson Poats
Valley Road Vineyards

The 2021 growing season is off to an encouraging start in Central Virginia. Temperatures in March and April that were near normal for the period led to a budbreak that was also within the normal range.

My Chardonnay began budbreak on April 3, followed closely by Cab Franc and Merlot. The fact that Cab Franc broke bud before the Merlot can be explained by the fact that they are grown on separate and very different sites. The Cab Franc is part of our Afton vineyard, which has proven to be a very-early site for all stages of development.

By April 10, all of the varieties we grow in Afton and Lovington were unfurled.

Most encouraging was the uniform growth I was seeing along the cordon with very few bud positions being blanks. Early growth of

primary buds was vigorous. Both of these observations were echoed by other growers I spoke with.

Cooler temperature starting in mid-April somewhat slowed that early spurt of growth, and the frost events of April 22 and 23 brought back unwanted memories of last year’s devastating freeze. While several vineyards did suffer losses from this year’s frost (I estimate that we lost approximately 20-25 percent of the primary shoots in our Chardonnay block in Lovington), the event of this April was nowhere near as widespread or as severe as that of May 2020.

Our low temperature in Afton was 32 degrees on the morning of April 22, but that low lasted for only five to ten minutes, and we had no damage to the shoots. And while our Chardonnay losses in Lovington were disappointing, it was nothing like last year’s loss of 50-60 percent in the same block.

Robbie Corpora at Grace Estate Winery

saw some light frost damage only “in typical spots,” those spots being a block of Chardonnay. He regularly sprays copper before potential frost events, which he feels gives him the equivalent of an extra degree or two of temperature. The timing of budbreak was uneven, he reported, with older blocks opening later. He said growth has since evened out, and he’s generally quite happy with how things are currently looking in the vineyard.

The first three weeks of May were cooler than average, but the real story has been the lack of rain. From the period of April 24-May 24 we had received only 7/10 of an inch of rainfall. Some areas had even less.

John Saunders at Silver Creek Orchards reported that they had received only 3/10 of an inch of rain for the first three weeks of May. Hoped-for rains predicted on May

See CENTRAL on page 5



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▶ CENTRAL VA. (cont.)

CENTRAL, from page 4

4 weren't enough, although we did receive just over 4/10th of an inch, more than half of what we would get in that month-long stretch through May 24. Hit-or-miss showers on the 24th were helpful if you were in the "hit zone." Some rain, although less than predicted, did arrive on the 28th and 29th. The half-inch we received on those two days brought our total for the month of May to 1.88 inches.

All this wishing for rain (but not too

much!) and frost worries along with concerns about getting the timing right on putting the crew into the vineyard had got me to thinking about the relative value of luck vs. timing in vineyard management. Which is more important? Can you get by with one without the other? And if so, which would you choose to be on your side?

Before I entered into the Virginia grape industry, I earned a large percentage of my income by training dogs. It was hard but rewarding work. I loved working with dogs. As I learned from my introduction to that

field and later had reinforced, both at the training school I attended and then time and time again working with my furry clients, timing played a critical role in the success or failure of dog training.

As you teach a dog a new skill or behavior, that skill must be broken down into a series of small steps that when put together constitute that new skill or behavior. At each of these points a command must be given, either verbal or nonverbal, with a reward for success in the form of food or praise.

Dogs live in the moment, so the timing of both the command and the reward must be given at precisely the right moment. A delay of even a couple of seconds will make all the difference.

Much the same with grapevines. The timing of sprays and other vineyard tasks is critical. Grapevines also live in their moment. Maybe the parameters are a bit wider with vines, but they still exist.

Each vineyard task needs to be done when the time is right. Miss the window on any of these along the way, and it will make that job not only harder and more expensive when you get around to it, but it may actually do your crop more harm than good (as anyone who has done leaf pulling in July in Virginia will attest).

I posed this question to several colleagues, and I think the best response came from Robbie Corpora of Grace Estate, who said, "If you don't have your timing right, you better be lucky." True enough, but my own thinking is that luck alone won't do it. You must time the important canopy work correctly. Mother Nature doesn't give second chances.

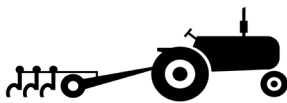
At Valley Road Vineyards, we did a round of thinning and suckering on May 5 and did the same at Mountain Glen, our Lovingson vineyards, on the 12th. Soon thereafter we did our first round of shoot positioning, so we're all ready to pull leaves once fruit set is complete in early June.

We are at the tail end of bloom and into fruit set at our sites as I write this at the end of May. Fruit set to this point looks very good. We're definitely off to an encouraging start.

Editor's Note: Grayson Poats is a regional reporter for Grape Press, covering Central Virginia. We hope to feature more news about Central Virginia's vineyards and wineries in future columns. 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.: “... Some growers ... contended with late frosts this spring ...”

By Rachel Lagergren
Stanburn Winery

We had hoped that with the 2020 vintage behind us, Mother Nature would begin to show a kinder side. But at least some growers in Southern Virginia contended with late frosts this spring that were as bad or worse than those of the previous year.

Kevin Sutherland, of Nicewonder Farm & Vineyards, Bristol, told me that he has both good news and bad news about the first months of the 2021 growing season.

First, the bad news: “We got hit again this spring,” he said in an email, recalling the late frosts of 2020. On April 22, morning temperatures dropped to the mid and low 20s, which led to “a total loss on the first buds. Even the tight buds just coming out of dormancy were damaged,” he added.

As a result, “we will have quite a bit of cordon renewal (mostly on the 3rd and 4th year replacement plants) and some spur renewal.”

From April 22 to May 5, temperatures were in the 60s during the day and in the 40s overnight, with cloudy skies and plenty of rain, he said.

But things change quickly. Temperatures turned hot (upper 80s) and dry, with no rain from May 5 to June 7, when .82 inches dropped in 30 minutes.

On a positive note, he added, “we planted our two-acre addition of Cabernet Franc. We have completed irrigation installation and have pulled all the trellis wires for the new block. Now we have started selectively shoot thinning on the cordon to replace our spurs and fill gaps and selecting shoots on the trunk for replacement cordons if needed.”

To get another view of how the 2021 growing season is shaping up, I visited Chateau Morrisette and spent some time driving through the vineyard with manager Steve Van Sutphin. Steve pointed out how well the Niagara is growing and filling out the canopy.

“We are catching up on suckering and thinning,” he said. “The recent dry spell has suppressed the growth of weeds under the vines but as always there is grass to mow.”

We discussed how the vines fared after yet another spring cold snap. “I was worried after a couple of nights with calm winds and temperatures dipping down into the 30s,” he said. “In the following days I noticed some damage to leaves on shoot tips but nothing like last year. We were lucky, and I think the

fruit looks promising.”

At Stanburn Winery, the weather into early March remained cool and wet. These were hopeful signs that budbreak would begin as expected around the 2nd week of April. Final pruning and trellis work continued as rare dry days allowed.

We worked as two crews, one crew pruning and the other pulling wire. The goal was to keep the pruning crew well ahead of the pulling crew so that we could prune each block, mulch the clippings and be out of the way of wire and equipment. We started in the Cabernet Franc block and then continued through the Traminette and Chardonnay vines and finished in the new blocks of Petit Verdot and Barbera.

As each block was ready, the pulling crew would lay out a set of wires, attach them to posts and pull them tight. This system worked well because even with rainy day interruptions, we finished before budbreak.

Temperatures into mid-April at Stanburn remained steady, with highs in the 60s and lows in the upper 40s. Budbreak began slowly on the week of April 5th. This gave me hope that, even if we had a frost, not all the buds would be exposed.

However, starting on April 17, nightly temperatures began dipping into the upper 30s. On April 22, we recorded a low of 26 degrees and on April 23, a low of 28.

At this point Chardonnay, Chambourcin, Barbera, Cabernet Franc and Traminette were more than 75 percent through budbreak and sustained damage ranging from shoot tips only to entire shoots down to the cordon. Petit Verdot was just starting budbreak and suffered little to no damage.

Vidal Blanc was at 25 percent budbreak and I observed damage to leaves on shoot tips that were 2 to 3 leaves out. With the varying degree of damage, we will wait until we make crop estimates later this summer to look at each variety.

Virginia Hamlet of Hamlet Vineyards said



Rachel Lagergren

Petit Verdot after freeze event showing good growth at Stanburn Winery.

they were also affected by the two nights of freezing temperatures, but said it's too soon to estimate any damage. “We will know more about the frost damage when clusters are counted in July,” she said.

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.

Becoming a Differential Winemaker

WINEMAKING, from page 1

delivering balanced grapes to the winery. The grapes need to be harvested fully ripe with fresh acidity so that there is no need to make additions or manipulations to the juice or wine.

Most of these decisions were made during the establishment phase. Even with a high elevation (1,300 feet), Hardscrabble is on the warm side for Chardonnay, so we do everything we can to push ripening into the equinox sweet spot (mid to late September) when the nights are cool. This is critical to retain acidity and freshness.

Soils with moderate water holding capacity and fertility work best. (Lower capacity soils are reserved for the red grapes.) A healthy canopy and avoidance of

extreme hydric stress allows for slow, even, uninterrupted ripening.

East slopes are the coolest and help delay ripening. We would plant on north slopes if we had them. The Wente clones (#4 and #72) comprise the majority of Hardscrabble's Chardonnay plantings as they ripen later than the Dijon clones and retain more acidity.

As our climate warms, we are adapting by doing less leaf removal in the cluster zone and allowing for a larger canopy (less hedging). Less direct sun on the clusters gives more acidity and freshness to the wine.

Terror winemakers have a long-term and intimate relationship to the vines. They are vigneron, or deferential winemakers. There is no separation of duties. There is no revolving door. There are no egos. Winemaking decisions center around

balance and texture. Aromas and flavors are entirely vineyard driven and the winemaker gets out of the way.

When to pick is the most important winemaking decision. It is rarely an easy one. Ripe with acidity is the mantra. We monitor acidity by taste and analysis. Ripeness is determined by juice mouthfeel, aromatic profile and skin astringency (phenolics). Grape integrity and weather forecast can also have a significant influence.

Brix plays a very minor role. The sugar content will tell us what to expect as far as potential alcohol and that's all. We've made balanced Chardonnay under 12 percent ABV and above 14 percent ABV.

Guiding the relationship of juice and skins is perhaps the second most critical winemaking decision. How one transforms the grape to juice has a significant bearing on the texture and finish of the wine. There are many influences: grape temperature, crush or whole cluster, pressing cycles, and most importantly when to make the press cuts.

At Linden, three of us are involved with the critical decision of press cuts. During a typical crush day, Shari Avenius runs the presses (we have two antique Willmes bladder presses). Jonathan Weber, Linden's winemaker, can be found buried deep in the cellar surrounded by barrels, pumps and hoses, and I'm in the vineyard. But we are all involved at the critical stage of pressing.

At about the fourth or fifth cycle the juice starts to lose acidity and takes on more phenolic astringency from the skins. We taste at each squeeze and decide at which point to make the cut. In cool vintages where the grapes are harvested with high acidity, we might consider pressing longer to have more lower-acid juice. The same might be the case if the astringency is of high quality, but if bitterness creeps in early, then the cut is made early.

There are three decisions to be made during the juice stage. Sulfur additions, oxygen, and turbidity. Several years ago, we stopped adding any sulfur to Chardonnay juice. We have found the resulting wines to show better textural harmony. We may oxygenate the juice if we find that the phenolic load is on the high side. We prefer to ferment fairly cloudy Chardonnay juice depending on the quality of the juice lees. The wines will age on their gross lees for about 16 months, so consideration needs to be given to the balance between textural weight, reduction, and overt lees flavor influence.

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Focusing on Critical Time for Clusters

By Mizuho Nita

Grape Pathologist, Virginia Tech

The critical period when grape clusters are susceptible to powdery mildew, downy mildew, and black rot starts from bloom and lasts about four to six weeks. The length depends on the cultivar, but in general, it is shorter with American grapes (*Vitis labrusca*) and more prolonged with *V. vinifera*.

Therefore, the risk of cluster infection risk by these three diseases will be low after mid-July. With relatively arid weather observed in many parts of the state, I think our focus is mainly on powdery mildew.

Powdery mildew is probably one of the most common diseases among our vineyards. Protective application is probably the best approach against powdery mildew. Once you pass the critical period, you may not need spray as frequently as you did, especially if you grow cultivars that are less prone to powdery mildew.

As the temperature goes up, the risk of powdery mildew decreases because the activity of the powdery mildew pathogen slows down as the temperature approaches the 90s. We often do not experience the days where the temperature stays above the 90s all day long; therefore, the risk won't be zero. However, in general, powdery mildew slows down in late July to early August.

Downy mildew is a tricky one for many reasons. The downy mildew pathogen spreads and infects quickly after rain events. Therefore, we associate this disease with rain, and we often observe late-season downy mildew after late-evening thunderstorms. However, when the nighttime temperature goes down, and relative humidity hits 90 percent or above in mid-August, downy mildew may appear without rain.

The dark and humid conditions help the downy mildew pathogen produce spores. Thus, humid nights followed by morning dew or an evening thunderstorm are ideal

for downy mildew activities.

Probably because of this, I heard from several growers last month that they saw downy mildew in their vineyards where they did not receive rain but saw dew formation several mornings. Make sure to keep your vines protected against downy mildew so that you won't be surprised.

The following key stages are around bunch closure and veraison. Bunch closure is often the last opportunity for us to spray inside grape clusters and important timing for Botrytis and ripe rot management. For both, make sure to mix materials because of the fungicide resistance concerns.

Veraison is another spray timing for both diseases. If you are concerned about bitter rot, we often recommend a fungicide application around veraison.

For more details on spray materials, please visit my blog (grapepathology.blogspot.com). I have uploaded slides from my past presentations, and will post a list of materials with short-PHI at the end of July.

Learning How to Be a Differential Winemaker

WINEMAKING, from page 7

After over a decade of uninoculated fermentations, we have now reverted back to adding cultured yeast. Counterintuitively, we have found that adding cultured yeasts allows for a better terroir expression. With uninoculated fermentations, we ran into too many problems with stuck fermentations, stinky reduction, and volatile acidity (VA). These are cellar issues and certainly take away from any terroir expression.

We also found that trying to get those last few grams of sugar to ferment required perfect conditions for malolactic fermentation (MLF). Our wines often became flabby as Hardscrabble does not usually have enough natural acidity to support MLF. We could have decided to add tartaric acid and yeast nutrients to address these problems, but that would be detrimental to our goal of minimal intervention. The wines did not need any additions if we used a reliable cultured yeast (we use CY3079).

Terroir winemaking shouldn't be dogmatic, it needs to be pragmatic and flexible.

In 2013, Jonathan and I traveled to Burgundy. We took barrel samples of our

“Winemaking decisions center around balance and texture. Aromas and flavors are entirely vineyard driven and the winemaker gets out of the way.”

2012 Chardonnay. On many visits we asked the winemakers to taste our wine and comment. Just in smelling the wine, they would inquire as to our fermentation temperatures. They were quickly able to isolate the cause of our concern that our white wines were too fruity too estery and too varietal. Terroir expression was muted. Our fermentations were too cool. We needed to relax and let them warm naturally. Now our ferments typically peak in the 70s F

(low-to-mid 20 degrees C).

Long élevage is the key to avoiding many additions and manipulations. Time and lees take care of most of wine's stability problems. Twelve months in barrel and then four months in tank, all on lees also gives Chardonnay more textural harmony.

Hardscrabble Chardonnay is 100 percent Chardonnay from the same vineyard, but it is a blended wine. We have seven distinct blocks, each harvested, fermented and aged separately. They don't all make it into Hardscrabble Chardonnay. Blending is our final tool to harmonize the wine.

The foundation of terroir winemaking is the long-term relationship of the decision-makers with the vineyard. We've learned through experience and mistakes how far we can push the envelope of non-interventionist winemaking in order to let the vineyard speak.

We still add sulfites and yeast as tools to make better wine, but we have eliminated all other additions. We have a deep understanding and expectation of the personality of our vines and how that is expressed in our wine. That gives us great satisfaction that we can pass on to the next generation.

GROWER OF THE YEAR

A Life Among the Vines

Respecting the Past, Dealing With the Present, Looking to the Future

Carrington King, the Virginia Vineyards Association's Grower of the Year, is co-owner and vineyard manager of King Family Vineyards, Crozet. He's overseen its expansion from an initial eight acres to more than 50, including 20 leased acres on an adjacent property that he manages full-time. Earlier this year, Carrington sat down — via Zoom — with Bob Garsson, editor of Grape Press, to talk about the challenges of growing wine grapes in Virginia.

Q: Congratulations on being named the VVA's Grower of the Year! Between the Covid pandemic, which disrupted tasting room sales, and the spring frost that was so devastating for so many vineyards, it's hard to imagine a more unusual year in which to be honored.

Carrington: I kind of chuckle — to win this award this year and to reflect on what it means to be a vineyard manager in Virginia. It means juggling the unknown a lot of the time, stomping out fires when they pop up, and being able to pivot and be flexible. Obviously, 2020 was a funny year, not only in the vineyard with the challenges we had in the spring, but trying to be a vineyard manager and a delivery driver, when that's the only way to sell wine — your farm truck becomes a delivery vehicle, and you find yourself packing wine for two months just to keep everything going.

It was probably hard to imagine a year like 2020 when you were starting out. Tell me about how and when you got started in viticulture.

We started the vineyard when I was 18 years old and still in high school. We started with Merlot and Viognier and planted our first eight acres in 1998.

So, you had to leave for college soon after that?

Yes, I chose the University of Maryland, mainly to play lacrosse. But when I was looking at higher division lacrosse schools, it was the availability of a horticulture degree that drew me to Maryland. I didn't have many demands from lacrosse in the fall, so I would come home on the weekends and work in the vineyard. In the summer, I would work in our own vineyard, and I would also drive (vineyard consultant) Chris Hill around Central Virginia. He was consulting at Jefferson at the time, so I spent a lot of time in the vineyards at Jefferson and just driving around. Chris has always been a mentor to me, and that was very educational — driving around with a guy with that much life experience and that much experience in the vineyard.

It sounds as if you liked viticulture right from the start.

At the time, I think the attraction to me was that every day



Wine & Country Life

Carrington King: "That's really what we're doing in Virginia ... we're trying to harvest sunlight and build a foliar solar panel."

was different. I didn't need to put on a coat and tie, and there is something about a new challenge every day, and not knowing what a new day would bring you. It does have its stressful times as well. I had a point in my career where running a vineyard caused sleepless nights. But I've learned over the years — and this is the advice I give most growers — to only worry about things you can control.

How did you decide what to plant first?

We planted Merlot and Viognier on the advice of Chris. We didn't

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A Life Among the Vines in Virginia

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really know what Viognier was. We had a little over 300 acres of land and we were looking at the time just to try to pay the taxes on the farm.

What grapes have done well for you here in Virginia?

You have grapes that are versatile in the winery, that are great to grow, and then you have varieties that seem to fight you tooth and nail. For me, I really like working with the reds, Cab Franc and Merlot. I know Merlot got a bad rap for years after that godforsaken movie, but it's just a versatile wine for us. It goes into our Meritage — it's the backbone of that wine, which is our flagship red wine — and it also goes into our rosé, which is our number-one selling wine. We produce three to four thousand cases of rosé a year.

Petit Verdot is one of the varieties that I lose a little sleep over at the end of the year, that and Malbec. They are my biggest challenges. We use Malbec strictly as a blender. We do have a small batch in the works as a varietal, which is one avenue we experiment with in the winery and tasting room. But Malbec skins just don't

hold up in our heat and our humidity. I love Petit Verdot in the winery for the complexity and the color of the tannin structure, but the vine really fights you. I call it a flopper. Merlot just kind of runs up and says, "whatever system you put me in, I'm going to go with it and work with you," but Petit Verdot is something that just doesn't want to work with you.

What changes have you made in the vineyard?

The biggest change I've implemented in the past several years is going away from a divided canopy and going to a low cordon. I found that a lot of folks in our industry and in our area have placed their cordon where it's convenient for people. And a 42-inch cordon is nice to harvest. But one day Matthieu [King Family's winemaker, Matthieu Finot] and I were walking in the vineyard, and he said, "Where I grew up in France, I would pick grapes where the bottom of the cluster was in the gravel." And yes, it's not very much fun to harvest being bent over, literally on your knees, but it allows for a bigger solar panel.

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And that's really what we're doing in Virginia and really all over the world — we're trying to harvest sunlight and build a foliar solar panel, if you will. So, what we've gone to is a 30-inch-high cordon. Instead of going up and trying to extend my post and trellis wire and looking for employees who are seven-and-a-half feet tall, I just lower my cordon height and still stick with a six-foot post. And I hedge everything as tall as I can before it lays over. I try not to mohawk my vineyard. I want a big bushy top that, once you hedge one time, will harden up and grow laterals. It becomes its own architecture if you will.

You've also done a lot of different things to deal with the late frosts that seem to be more routine here in Virginia.

I just installed two new wind machines. Bird netting is a big investment that we are putting in right now, but if you have no grapes to keep birds off of, the netting isn't worth a lick. We flew helicopters over one 22-acre block six different nights last spring (of 2020), and we lost only one low-spot of Chardonnay. So, overall, we did pretty well flying that vineyard. Some of the outer-lying blocks were left to their own devices, and we probably lost 50 percent of the Viognier in one of them. We did okay in the Petit Verdot because it wasn't as far along. In the 16 acres to the west of us that are part of a lease arrangement, we lost 100 percent of the Chardonnay. Overall, we probably lost 30 percent of our total, but those were blocks that were 100 percent wiped out because we got down to 26 degrees for up to an hour and with no flying and no additional heat.

The east block, which is next to our production facility, is eight acres. It did have a wind machine and it did fine.

What other changes are you making?

My next chore is getting away from herbicide use and using the under row to compete for available water. In years past, we used glyphosate and then gluphosinate. I have never been into tilling, but that is something I am going to start looking at. The other thing we have is an under-row mower, so we are going to look at using different cover crops under row and doing more mowing and less burndown. And I'm still experimenting with cordon height.

Are you actually lowering the cordon wire? That sounds like a big job.

The 16 acres in their fifth or sixth leaf now, those are all low-cordon. And it's a lot easier, I will say, to start out with lower cordons. It's really difficult, almost impossible to convert something going down — let's say down from 42 inches to a 30-inch cordon — if you've stripped (the trunks of) that vine for any real amount of time because eventually you stop getting really great shoots to work with.

What I've found is that if you have a young enough vineyard that you're still having to vigorously strip in the spring, then it's possible, then you just add another staple and run a wire. So now I have 12 more inches of canopy, that's what I've really gained here. You turn your old cordon wire, add a wire on the other side, turn

it into a fourth set of catch wires, and you run an extra wire a foot lower and you have to hope you can lay something down.

Typically, it's a two-year process. You first wait for a shoot that's pretty low, because you don't want to have the spurs you're going to cane from at the 30 inch mark. You have to have that nice soft bend so that as you're laying down off that spur every year, you have some good angles. So, I don't want a spur at 30 inches off the ground, I want it closer to 22 inches. So, it's a two-year process, where you first wait for that shoot at 22, 23, 24 inches. So, it is a challenge. It is much better to start when they're young.

What are your go-to resources?

I'm pretty old school. I think local is always best. I devour the viticulture notes that Tony (Wolf) and Tremain (Hatch) send out. We are in this unique spot in the mid-Atlantic where looking too far away can get you in trouble, so I rely heavily on other local growers. I think that's something unique about our industry, that we don't see each other as competitors. There is a very open and free flowing exchange of ideas. It's a community that has always felt very

welcoming and very open. So I rely very heavily on the people around me for the information.

I have a few growers and a few vineyards that I consult for, so it goes both ways. So relying on each other and then devouring everything that Mizuho (Nita), and Tony and Tremain put out, and attending the VVA's winter and summer technical meetings, because they are really laser focused on what we do here in Virginia.

Your father, David, was very well known and did a lot for the Virginia wine industry. What was it like to work with him?

He was very humble, but oftentimes he seemed like one of the smartest guys in the room. He was just a selfless advocate for the industry. One of his favorite mantras was, a rising tide lifts all boats. I have certainly bought

into that, and think it's been a guiding light for the Virginia wine marketing office. And all the work he did on the legislative side, whether you're a grower, a winery trying to buy fruit, or everything in-between — he wanted to make sure that everybody had an opportunity to get in the game and do the best they could with what they have.

Most people in the industry saw Dad as the guy who gave legislative updates, but he loved being outside and working on the farm, too. He pounded every single post out here until I took it over, and he taught me how to not lose my arm on the post pounder. He was willing to do the work.

And that's another one of the things he said a lot — "somebody's got to do the work." This is one of those industries — we're not to the point where anybody can say, "that's not my job." He was always about doing the work and getting out there and being a leader. Whether you have 50 employees or five, getting out there and working with them and leading by example — that's how you have the best team.

The vineyards and wineries that are the most successful in the state, the owner's shadow is always there. Don't go sitting in the house and direct people from there. Get out there, and do the work with them, and they'll be inspired to treat the ground and the vineyard like it's their own.

“You have grapes that are versatile in the winery, that are great to grow, and then you have varieties that seem to fight you tooth and nail.”

VVA & Virginia Tech Present the 2021

SUMMER TECHNICAL MEETING at AREC

JUL 28

JULY 28, 2021
8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Our annual Summer Technical Meeting, to be held at AREC in Winchester, will feature informative sessions, lunch, and a social. Scheduled topics include research focused on:

- ▶ Viticulture
- ▶ Grape entomology
- ▶ Disease management

Also planned is an under trellis mower demo and a hands-on canopy assessment exercise at the AREC research vineyard.

Registration closes on July 18. For more info and to register, click here.



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