

# GRAPE PRESS

Summer 2023

The Quarterly Newsletter of the VIRGINIA VINEYARDS ASSOCIATION

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VVA President's Corner

## 2022 Grape Data Available; Farm Winery Licenses Updated

By Skip Causey

Potomac Point Vineyard & Winery

During the 2023 Winter Technical meeting in February, I was approached by several members with questions about two items. One was the Commercial Wine Grape Report, and the other was the new Farm Winery License legislation, which was signed into law by Gov. Youngkin after receiving unanimous approval in both houses of the Virginia General Assembly.

I'll start with the grape survey. We want to thank everyone for filling out the surveys for the 2022 Commercial Wine Grape Report.

These surveys help give us the most complete understanding of our industry. With more than 90 percent of vineyards reporting, we estimate that we cover more than 95 percent of the vineyard acreage in Virginia.

This report shows that we have had a healthy 6.5 percent growth in plantings over the past three years with more than 250 acres added each year. (*The full 2022 report can be found here.*)

Cabernet Franc leads the pack in total acres, as well as in the number of acres added in 2021 and 2022 (94 acres). This is followed by Petit Verdot (69), Merlot (65), Cabernet Sauvignon (40), Chardonnay (36), and Petit

Manseng (34). The two grape varietals with the highest percentage increase in acreage were Albariño, up by 26 acres or 67 percent, and Nebbiolo, up 16 acres or 47 percent.

This growth in the past few years has

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### VVA Serves As Vital Resource

As the VVA celebrates its 40th anniversary, we look back at how pioneers of the Va. wine industry recognized a need to increase the flow of information for growers.



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### Grower of the Year

Tom Kelly reflects on the challenges and rewards of his years in viticulture.

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Kevin Sutherland

### Around the State

Contending with unpredictable temperatures gave growers pause as they prepared for the 2023 season. Above, pruning of third-year Cabernet Franc was underway at Nicewonder Farm & Vineyards in Bristol; vineyard manager Kevin Sutherland provides a Regional Report along with fellow growers in Northern and Eastern Va. PAGES 4-6.



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## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

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increased the reported amount of wine grape acreage to 4,683 acres. When extrapolating the unreported acreage, we easily top the 5,000-acre mark.

The reported tonnage for 2022 was well over 10,000 tons with more than 80 percent of licensed wineries reporting. The missing 20 percent does not include the larger vineyard/wineries, and the top 11 largest wineries and producers reported more than 40 percent of this tonnage.

The price per ton ranged from \$1,600 to \$3,500 with hybrids averaging \$1,700 per ton and vinifera (and Norton!) averaging \$2,700 per ton. Four vinifera grapes achieved an average above \$3,000 per ton (Albariño, Sauvignon Blanc, Tannat and Reisling) with Sauv Blanc and Tannat doing so with strong yields at 3.4 and 4.1 tons per acre, respectively.

The surprising aspect of last year's and this year's report is the reported tonnage per acre by varietal. Both vinifera and hybrids averaged 2.5 tons per acre with some regions doing better than others. Norton was the only one of the American varieties to be reported in larger quantities and it came in at 1.9 tons per acre.

We have already started to research these numbers and will continue to review why this tonnage for the hybrids is not, on average, higher than the vinifera as normally assumed and believed. Stay tuned for updates.

### Farm Winery License Updates

The Virginia Wineries Association teamed up with the VVA to work on an update to the Farm Winery License. The two associations agreed to take this on with help and support from the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority (ABC), rather than having legislators and non-industry folks rewrite it for us. This was being done to close a loophole that was being abused by some non-winery businesses. You may have heard us talk about "Putting the Farm Back in Farm Winery," and this rewrite does just that.

Our proposal, which was passed by the state legislature and signed into law, will take effect on July 1, 2023. The good news is that every current farm winery owner will have up to five years to come into compliance. If you already hold a farm winery license of any type, there is no action needed unless you want to switch right away to one of the

**"The price per ton ranged from \$1,600 to \$3,500 with hybrids averaging \$1,700 per ton and vinifera (and Norton!) averaging \$2,700 per ton."**

new farm winery licenses listed below. When you next renew your license, you will choose which license class best suits your needs and business plan.

Let me spell out the new Farm Winery Classes, which are now labeled with Roman numerals, rather than letters. (The ABC asked for this change to avoid confusion.)

### Class I Farm Winery (New)

This license was created for the micro-wineries who start small and may never want to expand. They grow grapes on a minimum of 1.5 acres and make a minimum of 250 cases (2,250 liters) of wine with those grapes. All of the wine sold must be fermented on site and come from the fruit grown on-site. The annual fee for this license is \$275.

### Class II Farm Winery (Current Farm A Winery)

This license follows the same rules, restrictions and privileges of an existing Class A Farm Winery license, but adds a requirement for a minimum of 3 acres of grapes planted. A Class II Farm Winery still has to grow 51 percent of the fruit used in its wine on land the licensee either owns or leases, and the on-site vineyard has to be a minimum of 3 acres.

Again, if you currently hold a Farm A Winery license and do not yet have 3 acres of grapes planted, you will have 5 years to plant to that level or declare your winery a Class I or a Class III.

This Class II is focused on the vineyard/farm and contract winemaking is allowed.

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The annual fee for this license is \$275.

**Class III Farm Winery (New)**

This class represents the most significant change to the licensing rules. There is no minimum on-site growing area requirement, but it provides a focus for producers that use fruit grown in Virginia by other growers. It was created to provide for the wineries and vineyards with significant off-site growing areas or multiple production facilities, as well as to promote a robust grape sales market in Virginia without the additional burden of leases.

Farm wineries in this category must produce a minimum of 500 cases (4,500 liters) of wine and 75 percent of all wine sold must be fermented on-site. Contract winemaking is available for this category but only for 25 percent of the total wine sold. Wine sold has to be produced with Virginia fruit. The annual fee for this license is \$500.

**Class IV Farm Winery (Current Farm Winery B)**

This license follows all the same rules,

“You may have heard us talk about ‘Putting the Farm Back in Farm Winery,’ and this rewrite does just that.”

restrictions, and privileges as the current Farm B winery license with the additional requirement of a minimum growing area of 10 acres. Seventy-five percent of the fruit needs to come from Virginia, and contract winemaking is allowed.

Applicants for this farm winery license must have been licensed as a farm winery for 7 prior years at the time of the license change in order to qualify. The annual fee for this license is \$4,000.

If you are applying for (or renewing) your Farm Winery license prior to July 1, 2023, you will follow the old categories and those applications must be processed and approved prior to Jan. 1, 2024. Again, there

is a five-year grace period for any existing farm winery to come into compliance with these new regulations. Any new farm winery applications filed after July 1, 2023, must follow the new classes (I-IV).

The Virginia ABC is currently working on an affidavit and inspection program that will help with the new applications as well as the conversion of existing farm wineries.

**Farm Event Structure Regulation**

There was also a change to the recently passed Farm Event Structure regulation. I serve on the committee that was put together by the state to help advise and direct any recommended changes or enforcement of the law, which was passed in 2021, and I feel that we have some great people working on this.

This revision removed certain requirements that the initial bill put in place, but established some more specific requirements for signage and emergency action plans.

The committee will meet again in June 2023 to discuss these changes and work up some templates for our farms to follow or implement.

See our next issue of Grape Press for updates and more details.

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## ► SOUTHERN VIRGINIA

“We were worried that when pruning began in March the buds would start to swell ... Lucky for us, March roared in like a lion, and the temperatures dropped.”

By Kevin Sutherland  
*Nicewonder Farm & Vineyards*

One of the things a grape grower doesn't like to see is a warm February, and this February was the warmest on record.

We chose not to rough prune due to busy times in the cellar. We were worried that when pruning began in March the buds would start to swell. This slows down pruning as we try to avoid damaging the swollen buds while pulling brush from the wire.

Lucky for us, March roared in like a lion, and the temperatures dropped. Good for the vines, but more difficult working conditions for us.

### Full Swell in April

As we pushed into April, the vineyard was in full swell to one leaf unfolded. Cold temperatures on April 3-4 gave us pause, but we did not have any damage. In mid-April, the vineyard ranged from budburst (Petit Verdot) to two-to-three leaves unfolded (Chardonnay).

We have applied our first spray to the Chardonnay, and the rest of the vineyard is catching up fast.

April 24th and 25th temperatures were expected to be below 32°F. We knew that our Chardonnay, with six leaves unfolded, was the most susceptible including the low areas of the vineyard. We decided to fly the helicopter. Fortunately, there was no damage on the 24th.

However, we did see damage to our Chardonnay on the 25th. The extent is still to be determined.

May started off cold. Temperatures for

the first week were in the 60s during the day and down into the 40s at night.

I heard from David Stanley, co-owner of Stanburn Winery in Stuart, who also was dealing with this year's unpredictable weather.

“We have had an interesting winter and spring,” he said. “We started in December having colder temperatures that were more like February than December. We followed that up with a normal to slightly warmer January and then had a very warm February that felt more like May.

“While we were pruning in February, the sap was already flowing like it was late March. This, of course, worried us, knowing how our spring temperatures have gone recently. On March 8, we had budbreak in the Chardonnay. That is a full two-and-a-half weeks earlier than we have ever had budbreak. Typically, we don't see budbreak until early to mid April.”

David said he wasn't worried about the early budbreak in the Chardonnay vines because those are being pulled out.

### Damaging Freezes Over Time

“The Chardonnay was decimated back in 2007 with the Easter freeze,” he said. “That year, we had been in the 70s through March and had budbreak at the end of March. Then for three days around Easter, our high temperatures only got into the teens, so not only did we lose that year's harvest, it began the process of the Chardonnay dying off. Some plants completely died that year and some would die over the course of the next five to 10 years.

“We tried replacing vines over the years, but they finally got to the point that it wasn't worth the work. Our Cabernet Franc was

also damaged in 2007, so we are pulling it out, too.”

David said the Stanburn vineyard was planted in 1999, and it wasn't until 2007 that they experienced frost or freeze damage. “We went another five years without any, but we have not been able to go that long between losses since,” he said.

“In 2020, we had eight frosts and freezes between budbreak and Mother's Day weekend that wiped out over 90 percent of our vineyard. In 2021, we lost over 50 percent of the harvest. Last year was great, but we have had significant damage in two out of the last three years. This early bud break and warmer February has made us feel pessimistic. So far, we have not had any damage, but we also have another three weeks to go.”

David noted that he has seen a lot of growth at this point, and Stanburn has begun thinning the Petit Verdot, with the Vidal Blanc, Traminette and Chambourcin to follow.

“We are behind in the mowing already, but it always feels like we are behind,” he added. “And we usually are. Hopefully, the weather cooperates for all of us, but we know Mother Nature doesn't really care what we want. We are all just along for the ride.”

*Editor's Note: Kevin Sutherland is secretary of the VVA Board and a regional reporter for Grape Press, covering Southern Virginia. Please contact Kevin at [ksutherland1@live.com](mailto:ksutherland1@live.com) if you'd like to provide information for upcoming columns about growing conditions, new plantings or any topic that would be of interest to other growers.*

## SAVE THE DATE!

The VVA Summer Technical Meeting will be held  
July 19 at Early Mountain Vineyards in Madison. Check  
your email and our website for details and registration  
information as they become available.

## ► NORTHERN VIRGINIA

“The one beauty of the warmer/drier weather was that humidity was pretty much non-existent.”

By Dean Triplett  
Greenstone Vineyard

The mild winter weather we experienced at the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023 has continued into this spring. The first four months of the year were all warmer than normal. So much so that 2023 is the warmest start to a year, ever!

The period was also much drier than normal. Mid-way through April, we were down 5 inches of rain for the year.

And then Mother Nature, as she likes to do, switched up on us. The last 10 days of April and at least the first week of May were cooler than normal. We had a freeze warning on April 25th. And on the weekend of April 29-30, we got close to 3.5 inches of rain here in central Loudoun County.

The one beauty of the warmer/drier weather

was that humidity was pretty much non-existent. So even though we all experienced earlier than normal budbreak, disease pressure has been very low. As I write this report the first week of May, I've put down three sprays so far.

I asked Ben Sedlins of Walsh Family Wine to give me his observations so far this season. On April 26, he wrote me the following:

“Hey, Dean. Hope you didn't get too cold last night. The lowest I've seen at any of our sites is 32.1 degrees F, so I think we hopefully dodged the bullet.”

### ‘We Are Trending Very Early’

“My main observation is we are trending very early across all our sites. Our main site in Waterford is 10-12 days ahead of where it was last year, and 5-7 days ahead of where it was in 2021. We definitely have some uneven budbreak, with shoots a mix of 1 inch all the

way up to 6 inches.

“Very low cutworm incidence this year, which is nice. We also have a couple of blocks of second-year hybrids that I'm excited about, and they all seem to be tracking a little slower than the vinifera,” he added. “They're young, so it's hard to say why; maybe because they're low to the ground and a little colder?”

Tremain Hatch emailed these observations:

“It was hot and cold this spring. We saw an early budbreak, then it cooled down for the past couple of weeks. I didn't see much shoot growth over the last week of April and first week of May. Unfortunately, I have seen a couple of vineyards in Northern Virginia with frost damage. We were quite dry in late April, but recent rains have had me feeling like a duck. I suspect that when we warm up the shoots are going to grow rapidly.”

Ben and Tremain's comments pretty much match my observations, with the exception that my budbreak has been fairly even. I was fortunate enough that it dropped only to 38 degrees F on April 25. My vineyard crew has me in good shape with everything pruned and tied up.

As I write this on Cinco de Mayo, the guys are out suckering and I'm sure will be shoot positioning and thinning very soon. The long-range weather forecast for our area is looking good, with temperatures in the upper 70s and low 80s and moderate rainfall through most of May.

### Spotted Lanternfly?

Many of the growers here in Loudoun are waiting to see if we'll get hit with an infestation of spotted lanternfly this year. The insect was seen in the county last year and most of us are doing what we can to get rid of the Tree of Heaven plants on our properties. I'm sure this is only a band-aid effort, but it feels good to do something proactive.

With the earlier than normal budbreak this year, I'm wondering if bloom will start in May instead of June. It seems that with global warming the beginning of our season is starting to look more like the Charlottesville area. I'm wondering what the Charlottesville area seasons will be like in the future. Florida?

*Editor's Note: Dean Triplett is a regional reporter for Grape Press, covering Northern Virginia. Please contact Dean at [gsvineyard13@gmail.com](mailto:gsvineyard13@gmail.com) if you'd like to provide information for upcoming columns about growing conditions, new plantings or any topic that would be of interest to other growers.*

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## ▶ EASTERN VIRGINIA

“The Petit Verdot as a second-year vine has two to three inflorescences on most primary buds. A common sight on established vines but an unexpected, yet beautiful, sight to see on second-year vines.”



Gonzalo Ortiz

In early April, a new Cabernet Franc planting can be seen just beyond two-year-old Chardonnay at Rustic Vintage vineyard in the Northern Neck.

By Gonzalo Ortiz  
*Rustic Vintage*

Here in the beautiful Northern Neck of Virginia, the spring of 2023 turned from warm and dry to mild with needed rainfall. In all of March we had just slightly over an inch of rainfall, and temperatures reaching highs in the 70s on three days and in the 80s on one day.

Laterals on unpruned second-year Chardonnay started to push around March 20, but bud burst of primary Chardonnay buds did not happen until April 1. April had seven days with highs over 80 and much-needed soaking rains in the latter part of the month, giving us over five inches of rain total for the month.

The morning of April 10 brought a light ground frost to my farm and the area. The latter part of April into the first part of May have been mild with welcoming spring days in the 60s slowing down growth.

On April 3-5, we brought in a precision vineyard planting service that planted quickly, efficiently, and professionally on our farm using

their GPS-guided planter. Because of the field prep needed to plant I believe that the radiant heat from the warm soil spared all damage from the April 10 ground frost to the growing planted vines planted the week prior to the frost event.

Our second-year Chardonnay vines were almost all pruned to two feet to establish trunks this year, so only the lowest part of the site had major bud loss in our Chardonnay. I believe if we were already producing and at the three-foot fruiting wire height the frost would have not been impactful on our site. Thankfully, on the affected Chardonnay vines, secondary shoots have grown out evenly.

The second-year Petit Verdot vines were much less affected by the April 10 frost event while being lower than the Chardonnay due to being slightly behind in budbreak.

The Merlot we planted in the first week of April this year started to grow out of the two-foot grow tubes we are using by the first week of May.

We still have a couple acres of tubes to put on our newly planted Cabernet Franc and then we will refocus on putting up our trellis onto last

year's plantings.

The Petit Verdot as a second-year vine has two to three inflorescences on most primary buds. A common sight on established vines but an unexpected, yet beautiful, sight to see on second-year vines even though it means dedicating time to drop fruit.

Here on our farm, we have been very grateful to our welcoming neighbors and kind community. Stopping by and showing interest, welcoming us to their homes, and even feeding us during planting.

Seeing our second-year vines come out lush in color, healthy and evenly after a stressful first year, is a beautiful sight that brings much hope to us on our long path to reach our full potential on this farm.

**Editor's Note:** *Gonzalo Ortiz is a regional reporter for Grape Press, covering Eastern Virginia. Please contact Gonzalo at [eastvagrrowers@gmail.com](mailto:eastvagrrowers@gmail.com) if you'd like to provide information for upcoming columns about growing conditions, new plantings or any topic that would be of interest to other growers.*





# The VVA: Bringing Growers Together



**The VVA was begun, in part, to provide a means for growers to communicate with each other and learn more about successful viticulture in Virginia. Like this 2021 Summer Technical meeting held at the Virginia Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Winchester, our events continue to provide those opportunities.**

*Editor's Note: Jeanette Smith, vice president of the Virginia Vineyards Association and owner of Vinesmith Vineyard Services, began working in Virginia viticulture in 1981 while studying horticulture at Virginia Tech. For this article, she drew from VVA records and her own recollections and also talked to a number of the other pioneers who helped get Virginia viticulture – and the VVA – off the ground.*

**By Jeanette Smith**  
*VVA Vice President*  
 [Part 2 in our 40th Anniversary series]

**T**his year, we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of the incorporation of the Virginia Vineyards Association. The State Corporation Commission certified our Articles of Incorporation on March 1, 1983. However, the organization actually had its start four years earlier. In the late 1970s, Virginia Tech began offering grape growing short courses for established and prospective commercial and hobby growers. At one of these meetings in

November 1979, John Gerba, the owner of a small vineyard in Luray — Guilford Ridge Vineyard — proposed the idea of creating a statewide organization for grape growers.

The following June, John sent a letter to the attendees of the short course, inviting them to attend an organizational meeting of what he had named the Virginia Grape Growers Association (VGGA). Thirty growers expressed interest in joining the association.

When recently asked whether he could have imagined that his brainchild, which would later be renamed the Virginia Vineyards Association, would still be a thriving organization 43 years later, John, who is now 91, replied, “Yes, vineyards were popping up like mushrooms after a rain.”

The organizing committee for the VGGA included two influential viticulturists who are still active in the Virginia wine industry: Lucie Morton and Gabriele Rausse. At that time, Lucie had been growing grapes at her family’s Morland Farm in King George County for seven years. Gabriele had four growing seasons under his belt at Barboursville Vineyards.

All of the growers involved with the VGGA were anxious to share their experiences and to learn from the experiences of others, so this new organization was the perfect vehicle for exchanging ideas and information.

Three other growers on the committee — Bob Harper of Naked Mountain Winery & Vineyards, Carl Hilscher of Hilscher Estate Vineyard, and Debbie Dellinger of Shenandoah Vineyards — are no longer active in the industry, but they were some of the individuals who were also instrumental in its establishment.

Doug Flemer of Ingleside Vineyards and the late Archie Smith III of Meredyth Vineyards were also key players in the organization’s startup. “I remember a group of us getting together at Archie’s house to discuss the goals for the association,” Doug said.

## **Finding Focus**

During its first few years, the VGGA took some time to find its focus. At some point in late 1980 or early 1981, the organization changed its name to the Virginia Vineyards

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and Winery Association (VVWA). Its membership was made up of commercial vineyards, farm wineries, wine marketing businesses and home winemakers. It actively sponsored educational meetings addressing vine management, winemaking and wine marketing.

During this time, the Virginia Wineries Association (VVA) had also formed with the dual purpose of helping wineries get established and promoting Virginia wine. In January 1982, several VVWA officers proposed that the organization narrow its focus to viticultural issues only, allowing the VVA to be the sole organization addressing winemaking and wine marketing issues.

In March 1982, a referendum was put before the VVWA general membership, then numbering 157, and a majority voted in favor of the change. The organization changed its name for the last time. It was now the Virginia Vineyards Association.

### Making Education a Priority

Under its new structure, the VVA immediately elected Patt Reeder of Burnley Vineyards as its first president. Patt, who recently celebrated her 90th birthday, served as president for three years, and she recalled the regular educational meetings held during the growing season.

“We would meet at vineyards around the state and someone like Lucie Morton, Gabriele Rausse or Doug Flemer would speak,” she said. “It was always educational.”

While he never held an office on the VVA Board, Doug worked tirelessly before and during Patt’s administration to help organize educational meetings.

Debbie Dellinger, who worked at Shenandoah Vineyards, Ingleside Vineyards and Tarara Winery in the 1970s and early 1980s, remembers the early VVA “as a growers cooperative for information and group purchasing of chemicals, lugs and other vineyard supplies.”



Page 7 photo by Skip Causey; above, Tracy Kirkman

**VVA meetings have often featured receptions that offer attendees a chance to socialize and sample each other's wines.**

### The Value of Technical Meetings

Everyone interviewed for this article expressed gratitude for the wealth of educational information that the VVA has provided through two main vehicles: grower meetings and the Grape Press newsletter. Both proved particularly valuable in the days before internet and email.

Vineyard consultant and grower Chris Hill, who was involved with the VVA from the beginning and served as president in 1991-92, recalled the VVA meetings as a vital source of information in those early days.

“The conferences that we had every year, even before Tony [Wolf], were the only educational program” available for Virginia winegrape growers, he said. “When we had the annual VVA meetings, everyone was there. Let’s say there were 30 wineries and maybe an additional 30 grape growers. And

almost everybody would show up. It was foundational to grape growing in Virginia.”

Chris recalled appearances at VVA meetings by Patrick Michaels, a University of Virginia climatologist. “He explained thermoclines, frost, conventional freezes and radiational freezes. Man, nobody knew about that back then. This guy explained how weather really affects fruit growers.”

Tony Wolf, now retired after serving as Virginia’s viticulturist for over 30 years, played a major role in advancing our wine industry. He was also key to the development of numerous conferences and workshops, including many for the VVA.

“Somewhere in the late 80s or early 90s I became more involved (as *ex officio* board member) with the VVA, principally in the role of technical program development,” Tony said. “There was a lot going on with meetings in the 80s and 90s. Both the VVA and the Virginia Wineries Association had technical programs, with myself and Bruce Zoecklein involved with topic and speaker selection. Bruce and I also organized stand-alone ‘Virginia Tech’ programs, often billed as regional meetings of the Eastern Section of the American Society for Enology and Viticulture.”

One VVA session that Tony found particularly informative from a technical standpoint involved “the first time we had Richard Smart [co-author of the highly regarded “Sunlight Into Wine; A Handbook for Wine Grape Canopy Arrangements”] speak to our membership. That was at Ingleside ... around 1990 or 1991. ... He and Joy Dick, who assisted him, put on a great workshop.”

### Emphasizing a Grape Grower's Role

Professor Emeritus Bruce Zoecklein recalls the annual VVA meetings with fondness. “As the head of the Enology-Grape Chemistry Group (at Virginia Tech), I and members of our team gave numerous presentations at this event over the many years. Often our goal was to highlight specific aspects regarding the important role grape growers play in creating wine quality.”

The meetings “were always a highlight due to fellowship, camaraderie, and technical exchange,” he added. “What I particularly enjoyed was that the audience was receptive and did not seem to suffer from a hardening of the attitudes. The VVA in general and the annual winter meeting in particular helped to significantly advance the Virginia grape and wine industry.”

Today, the VVA usually conducts two technical meetings a year — a two-day winter

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## CONTINUING EDUCATION

**H**ave a question about growing wine grapes? Informational sessions at VVA meetings are intended to concentrate on a wide range of topics related to Virginia viticulture. In recent years, subjects covered by researchers, educators and growers have included: nutritional needs, pest and grape disease management, frost protection and winter injuries, sustainable vineyard practices, grape varieties, vineyard floor and canopy management, climate, and the H-2A labor program.



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conference and a one-day summer gathering. In consultation with Virginia Tech educators and researchers, VVA Board members review relevant and timely topics and develop agendas. They also focus on the logistics of hosting growers, educators, speakers and vendors (this February, there were 225 attendees at our meeting in Charlottesville, which featured 25 industry exhibitors).

Current VVA President Skip Causey sees the board's charge as providing growers with information they can use to be successful, and that includes organizing "the best meetings that we can have."

It's important, Skip said, to offer a good balance between research and applied applications. The VVA's aim is to include up-to-date research findings from Virginia Tech, guidance presented by viticulture experts from Virginia and around the country, and panels that feature "real-world discussions from local folks."

The meetings also give growers a chance to share experiences and discuss challenges face to face. Skip, owner of Potomac Point Winery, actually joined the VVA "before we even had a farm." He emphasized the overall importance of networking within the VVA, explaining that many members are eager to share information and serve as mentors for new growers.

## Keeping in Touch

In between technical meetings, the Grape Press newsletter is one of the ways the VVA continues to inform growers.

In the early years, the VVA didn't publish its own newsletter. Dr. C. Leslie McCombs, professor of horticulture at Virginia Tech,

began writing and distributing the monthly "Virginia Farm Vine-to-Wine" newsletter in 1980. He was very involved in the VVA, and the organization used his newsletter to disseminate board meeting minutes, announcements, and educational articles.

Sharon Rodriguez (then Sharon Livingston), who was elected the second VVA president in 1985, recalled discussions being held to increase the reach to its target audience. Paul Asciola and his wife, Virginia Cassiano, who had a vineyard and were also wine festival promoters, "volunteered to be the editors of a newsletter that would be by and for VVA members," Sharon said. "They were the editors for several years ... and when they resigned, I took on the responsibility."

Stephen Rigby, now winemaker at Boxwood Winery, became editor of Grape Press in 1991 while working with Bruce Zoecklein at Virginia Tech. He was succeeded by a number of other individuals.

Today, Grape Press is a quarterly online publication with a circulation of over 1,000. Devoted to Virginia viticulture, its articles are written and contributed by growers, enologists, researchers and educators. The newsletter, for instance, regularly runs regional reports from growers who provide updates on weather and growing conditions.

Contributions from influential growers have always been a vital part of Grape Press. In those early years, Jim and Peggy Law of Linden Vineyards wrote a series of articles on vineyard establishment and vine training, and I, personally, always looked forward to their articles.

Jim, in fact, became one of the most prolific and informative writers for Grape Press, along with Dean Triplett, of Greenstone Vineyard, who is probably our longest tenured regional

**"The VVA in general and the annual winter meeting in particular helped to significantly advance the Virginia grape and wine industry."**

**— Bruce Zoecklein**

reporter as well as a former VVA president.

The list of those who have contributed their knowledge and expertise to Grape Press includes, but is certainly not limited to: Bruce Zoecklein; Lucie Morton; Virginia Tech grape pathologist Mizuho Nita; Andrew Hodson of Veritas; Joy Ting of the Winemakers Research Exchange in Virginia; and Christine Vrooman of Ankida Ridge Vineyards.

We have many folks to thank for building and supporting the VVA over the years. In addition to its founders, we have had 15 presidents and numerous other volunteers who served and are still serving in a variety of roles, including vice president, secretary, treasurer, at-large board members, committee chairs and Grape Press editors.

"When the time is right, think about serving as a VVA officer," Chris Hill suggests. "I can confidently say, that if you serve on the VVA board, you will naturally become a better grape grower. And, if you don't care about growing better wine grapes, why are you here?"



A sampling of Grape Press (left to right):  
2008, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2021  
**Find more Grape Press issues here**

Q&amp;A With the VVA Grower of the Year

# Viticulture's Challenges & Rewards



Campbell Sproul

Tom Kelly — vineyard manager, consultant, and a former VVA president — is our Grower of the Year. He's been involved in viticulture for 25 years, and is vineyard manager at Rappahannock Cellars in Huntly, an award-winning winery growing 30 acres of grapes.

Recently, Tom talked to Bob Garsson of Grape Press about his years in viticulture.

**Q: How did you get involved in viticulture?**

**A:** I kind of fell into it. I was in my mid-20s, between jobs, and I wanted to do something different, something with my hands. I saw an ad for a vineyard in Pennsylvania (Sand Castle Winery in Erwinna), and I thought, well that sounds different enough. I had no agricultural background whatsoever. I was just a kid from the city, but I applied for it and got it. They put me out in the field as a grunt laborer, and there was something about it that captured my interest.

The more I did, the more interested I got. I went from being a grunt laborer to operating tractors and eventually supervising seasonal crews and doing some work in the cellar. It snowballed

from there. Somehow, I ended up making a career out of it.

**When you were VVA president, you spent some time promoting hybrid varieties. Why did you think that was important?**

Two things. First, vineyard profitability. Even though they command a lower price point, the yields, the tons per acre, make them far more profitable to grow. Second, generally speaking, they require less spraying, which makes them a more sustainable option, especially for those interested in low-impact viticulture. Varieties like Chambourcin and especially Norton require less spraying. They are cheaper to grow and better yielding, so the profitability is much greater.

Also, hybrids make very fine wine and, in some cases, wonderful wine. Take Vidal Blanc — there are so many things you can do with it. It makes a beautiful wine if you handle it right. We used to sell a 375ml bottle of Vidal Blanc for \$16. If you put that at the equivalent of a 750ml bottle, that's \$32 a bottle, which compares very favorably with a lot of the vinifera varieties we sell. So, considering lower inputs, greater yields and as good if not better price points, the profitability of a bottle of Vidal over Cab Franc or Chardonnay is exponential.

**What's your favorite grape to grow?**

It's hard for me to say I have a

*See KELLY on page 11*



# Viticulture's Challenges & Rewards

*KELLY, from page 10*

favorite. I enjoy working with grapes that are easy to manage and yield well. Nothing is more frustrating than working your tail off in a block of grapes that doesn't yield well. Norton is one that I always say I like to grow, because it requires very little maintenance and almost a no-spray program. If you grow on a high-wire system, it doesn't require nearly the level of canopy management that other grape varieties do.

But Norton is a fickle grape. Some years it can yield very well and some years you can get nothing. Winemakers turn their noses up at it and everybody complains about it, so it's hard to get that same level of satisfaction as you do with Vidal, where you get six, seven, eight tons an acre, and you can make a beautiful wine.

## What's your least favorite?

The one that historically has frustrated me the most is Viognier. In the past, my experience has been that it requires every bit as much management as Chardonnay or Cab Franc, but it just doesn't yield well. But now that I'm consulting and getting into more vineyards, I find that it is very site specific as to whether it is a successful variety or not because I do see Viognier blocks that yield very well. But Viognier is the one I've been more frustrated with over time.

## What varieties don't work well in Va.?

Cab Sauv, although if you believe the climate is generally warming, it should do better here in time. Cab Sauv has always had two knocks against it. One is its lack of cold hardiness, although that is less and less of a problem. The other is the growing season is too short for it to properly ripen. I don't know if that is going to change with global warming or climate change, but it might be a more viable variety as time goes on.

There are other varieties that people seem to like to plant that just don't work. Riesling is just not viable in Virginia. Neither is Pinot Noir. People love Tannat, and it makes a great wine, but it is very cold tender. Even Merlot is on the cold tender side for most sites in Virginia. They are either too tight bunched, thin skinned or whatever.

We are speaking though in very generalized terms. A diligent grower who

wants to work hard enough, or who has the right site, or both, can make almost anything work. But that doesn't mean that it's the right thing to do. If you're willing to work hard enough, you can probably fit a square peg in a round hole.

There are varieties on the horizon that once we get them established will be more appropriate. I've heard enough about these breeding programs to know that there are some options coming. We just need to get them in the ground and get them into commercial production.

## What's been your biggest challenge over the years in vineyard management?

Attracting and retaining good help, whether it's skilled labor or someone to manage or operate equipment, and being able to pay them a wage that entices them to stay on, so you don't have a revolving door of employees. That's a big problem. Also, sourcing the seasonal or temporary labor for your field work, your canopy management and so forth.

“Hybrids make very fine wine and, in some cases, wonderful wine.”

Now H-2A provides a great benefit in that regard, but it definitely comes with its challenges, so it's not a cure-all for everybody. But it sure does beat the heck out of relying on the transient labor crews to be there on time when you need them and with the volume of people you need to get the job done.

Being able to attract talented people and retain them goes back to vineyard profitability. Since grape growing is not a particularly profitable endeavor in and of itself, it is hard for growers to be able to pay a living wage for a skilled person and provide them a full-time job.

All of the problems we have with labor in Virginia come back to vineyard profitability. The bulk of vineyards in Virginia are either at the hobby level, a couple of acres or less, or they're the more successful ones — very large operations with people behind them who have very deep pockets and are better

able to absorb some losses.

So I guess that's a three-fold answer: attracting and retaining talented skilled labor; sourcing enough part-time transient or unskilled labor — I don't like the term unskilled labor, but I don't know what else to call it — and then addressing vineyard profitability. How do we make grape-growing a real viable agricultural industry? Those are the three greatest challenges I see.

## Have you seen an impact from climate change?

I have seen a shift in certain weather trends over the years. And I have seen severe or erratic weather patterns. There's been a greater number of spring frost occurrences, but killer cold temperatures in the winter are not as common. When I started growing vinifera grapes in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, nobody else was growing vinifera, it was just considered too cold. We were growing Pinot Noir and Merlot and Cab Sauv and Riesling and Chardonnay, but we literally had to bury the entire vine in the ground to keep it protected from the cold. We bent the entire vine down to the ground, tied it down and buried it. In those days, that's what you had to do to grow those varieties.

Now, we are a little further south here in Virginia, but when I came down here, winter injuries on Cab Sauv and Merlot were a normal occurrence. That's not to say it doesn't happen, now, but those episodes are fewer and farther between. It is very site specific. But from a general sense, we are seeing milder winters, more severe and more erratic spring weather conditions, and we still seem to have our routine very dry periods and very wet periods. That's always been the case.

Last year, we didn't actually have a frost event, but I had no less than seven alarms where I put on the fans and waited for the frost to occur. None of them ever transpired, but I would say that for the past three years, we have probably been averaging anywhere from three to five frost events a season. It used to be one every five or six years. I definitely think the weather is getting more erratic or less predictable.

## So we're not losing the vines during the winter, we're just losing the crop during the spring.

Yes, but a couple of years of crop-killing  
*See KELLY on page 12*



# GROWER'S DATEBOOK

*Highlighting events that may be of interest to members of the Virginia wine industry. For more info as well as registration details, click on the link or event. For more happenings, check out the VVA website.*

## Be on the Lookout for Next Vineyard Survey

► The vineyard survey for the 2023 Virginia Commercial Grape Report is expected to be sent to growers in June or July. Please look for it in your email and respond as soon as possible. Your participation helps us provide as complete a picture of the Va. wine industry as possible.

## GiESCO Professional Day on July 20

► The 2023 GiESCO (Group of International Experts for Cooperation on Vitivinicultural Systems) Professional Day will be held July 20 both in-person at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., and virtually. Practical and commercially relevant information for vineyard owners/managers and extension professionals will include: the vineyard of the future, remote sensing for disease detection, and spotted lanternfly research. Registration and a fee is required.

## Virginia Tech Hosting Virtual Viticulture Meetings

Virginia Cooperative Extension is hosting a Virtual Viticulture Meeting series this year, with sessions being held at 1 p.m. the second Thursday of every month through September. Included are updates on viticulture, disease management, and enology, as well as updates from Sentinel Vineyard collaborators.

The meetings are free but registration is required at <https://forms.gle/4w8ztKKXk7923VbZ7> in order to obtain the Zoom link..

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*Information listed in Grower's Datebook is current at the time of publication, but for all events, be sure to check directly with each organizer for the latest on any changes or cancellations.*

*KELLY, from page 11*

frosts will put you out of business just the same.

### What do you remember most from your time as VVA president?

What I got out of the VVA more than anything else — it was the people I got to work with. We had this project and that project, and we put on some really great meetings. Those are all things to be proud of. But what I got out of it more than anything else was relationships with people. When I was getting started in the consulting business, the VVA gave me the ability to network and interact with people, and that was very helpful.

But it was really the ability to work with the likes of you and Jim and Kay and Tony. And then getting to know the members and interacting with them during the meetings. That's what the VVA really meant to me. The wonderful people.

### What does the future look like for

### viticulture in Virginia?

I don't see any radical changes. We are going to have to adapt to climate change, we are going to have to adapt to what the market demands in terms of sustainability, we are going to have to adapt to whatever the regulators decide they are going to allow us to do with respect to energy resources.

If we can't afford to buy diesel fuel for our tractors, it's going to make it very difficult to spray our vineyards. If we can't spray our vineyards, what does that mean? It's not just about whether the public perceives pesticides being good, bad or otherwise, but if we can't spray and have crops that are dependent upon pesticide applications in order for them to be successful, then what are we going to do?

The current political and social environment is trending away from being friendly toward high-input agriculture and that is going to be a problem for us if we don't figure out how to reduce our inputs, especially chemical inputs.

I think the future for Virginia grapes needs to be in low-input, high-yielding varieties and that tends to be hybrid varieties. Now maybe some

of these breeding programs will come up with alternative varieties that make a quote-unquote more palatable wine that the winemakers will be more accepting of. But hybrids are the most readily obtainable solution to all of the spraying we have to do and all of the management that we have to do. They produce quality wines with sustainable yields.

### Vineyard manager vs consultant — which do you like better?

That's a difficult question to answer. Consulting is a lot easier from a physical standpoint. When I consult, my primary function is to give advice and use my knowledge and experience to look for problems and advise people on how to correct them. When you are vineyard manager, you're the one who has to execute those solutions. There is a lot more gratification to be garnered from your efforts, although it is harder work.

There are a lot of differences between them, and I can't say I like one over the other. Although the older I get, the more I like consulting.