

# GRAPE PRESS

Spring 2024

The Quarterly Newsletter of the VIRGINIA VINEYARDS ASSOCIATION

Vol. 40 No. 1

## GROWER OF THE YEAR



Chris Garsson

Tremain Hatch, recipient of the VVA Grower of the Year Award, gives a presentation at the VVA's Summer Technical Meeting in July 2023.

## Tremain Hatch Honored For Industry Contributions

By Bob Garsson  
*Grape Press*

The Virginia Vineyards Association on Wednesday honored Tremain Hatch, a respected viticulturist, educator and researcher, as its Grower of the Year. The award recognizes Tremain's work to advance the Commonwealth's wine grape industry as both viticulture research and extension associate at Virginia Tech and viticulturist at his family's Zephaniah Farm Vineyard.

"Congratulations to Tremain Hatch on being named the Virginia Vineyards Association's Grower of the Year," said Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Matthew Lohr, who presented the award at the VVA's annual Winter Technical Meeting on Feb. 21 at the Charlottesville Omni. "He has been involved in the industry since he was a teenager

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"Tremain knows how to grow high-quality grapes, and he is more than willing to share that knowledge with others."

— Dr. Tony Wolf

VVA President's Corner

## Preparing for New Challenges In 2024

By AJ Greely  
*Hark Vineyards*

First, I'd like to take a moment to thank outgoing President Skip Causey for his dedication and hard work over the past eight years, first as an at-large board member, then treasurer, and, finally, president. Skip has worked tirelessly for the betterment of growers across the state, and I'm glad to have his support in the upcoming year in the advisory role of past president. The VVA is lucky to have such a champion for our industry.

Skip leaves some big shoes to step into, but I am excited and energized to have this opportunity to represent our membership and to work alongside the fantastic folks on the VVA Board of Directors to strengthen our industry — from the large growers with over 100 acres under vines to the new vineyard managers and workers just starting out.

Recently, the board met in person, preparing not only for our 2024 Winter and Summer Technical meetings, but also to review our 10-Year Strategic Plan, which had been put into place a decade ago, in 2014.

A lot has changed and shifted in these past 10 years. Looking back on the 2014 plan, we see goals not only reached but exceeded.

One primary goal, increasing vineyard acreage in Virginia by 200 acres annually, was not only achieved but surpassed, with annual growth averaging 250 acres per annum. At the same time, we attained a sharp rise

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**VVA Welcomes New Officers Following Board Elections**

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**Exploring Terroir and Wine Regions on a Tour of Sicily**

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## VVA BOARD 2024

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## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

*PRESIDENT, from page 1*

in the quality of grapes grown in Virginia, as evidenced by the fact that the Monticello AVA was recently named wine region of the year by Wine Enthusiast Magazine.

Both of these goals — growth in acreage and growth in quality — were met during a decade of challenging extreme weather events, ranging from the historic rains of 2018, earlier and earlier bud breaks, wildfires, late frosts, and freezes.

Our ability to work through these difficulties, to learn from them, and to work together to improve is a testament to the strength of the Virginia vineyard industry.

At January's board meeting, the Board completed a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis, and we began the process of reassessing the 2014 Strategic Plan and setting new goals for the future of the VVA.

Challenges we look forward to addressing include the current grape glut, ongoing extreme weather patterns, invasive species, profitability in the vineyard and the current limited supply of trained labor.

As we develop our new strategic plan, we will communicate and reach out to our members, asking for your input and ideas.

### Consider Volunteering For a VVA Committee

If you're interested in serving on our Communications or Research committees, please reach out to any board member or our Business Manager, Tracy Kirkman, for more information (emails at left). Remember, your active support makes Virginia viticulture stronger!

— AJ Greely

At the same time, I have a big ask.

Please remember, we are only as strong as our members. You do not have to be on the Board of Directors to have your voice heard.

I invite you to consider joining us as a committee member. We are currently looking for someone to head our Research Committee, as well as Communications. There are always opportunities to participate in committees without being the chair (see above). We would love to see some new faces!

I look forward to working with, and for you, in the upcoming year.

## A FAREWELL TO THE VVA

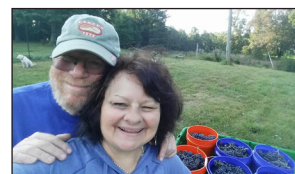
In early 2013, we took over as chairs of the VVA Communications Committee. Our motivation was simple — we wanted to give back to the organization and the many individuals who'd made two hobby growers feel welcome and supported.

Since then, we've overhauled and managed the VVA website, handled dozens of press releases, fielded calls from reporters, and, with the newsletter you're reading now, edited and published 45 issues of Grape Press.

Along the way, we've made great friends and been impressed time and time again by Virginia wine grape growers and their commitment to excellence. We're also grateful for the many dedicated writers who contributed to Grape Press, particularly the regional reporters.

As we step down from the committee to pursue other ventures, a final word: When we were first learning about viticulture, we were fortunate enough to take several classes with Chris Hill. "If you're serious about viticulture," he said, "you have to join the VVA." He was right. The VVA is an essential resource for viticulturists, and it's responsible for much of the growth and success of the Virginia wine industry. We're proud to have been even a small part of it.

*We'll always be two of your biggest champions — Bob & Chris Garsson*



**Celebrating one of our early harvests in Afton.**

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## ► SOUTHERN VIRGINIA

“The quality across the board in 2023 was excellent.”

By Kevin Sutherland

Nicewonder Farm & Vineyards

Here we are at the end of January, and we are experiencing some of the coldest weather we have had in several years. Temperatures are well below freezing, with lows in the single digits to a few degrees below zero for the next eight days. This is a good time to do anything inside and to reflect on the 2023 growing season a little more in-depth.

All the 2023 wines are sleeping in tanks or barrels. The quality across the board in 2023 was excellent. Rainfall through the growing season was about average, with around 27 inches of rain from April through August. Then, the rain stopped, and September and October were the fourth driest we have had since 2013, with around 3 inches of total rain.

We struggled a bit trying to decide whether to irrigate or not for the first- and second-year replacement vines. We chose the latter. Total 2023 Growing Degree Days base 50 degrees (which is just an indicator of your growing season) came in at 3,403, about average for us. However, September and October were our third warmest since 2013. That was just behind 2018 and 2019.

Vineyard activities during the warmer days include trellis repair, irrigation repair, and removing dead plants. We are also replacing a portion of our Viognier block. It was planted in an area that is prone to late spring frost and freeze events. We will plant a more cold-hardy variety in that block.

Rough pruning is underway. Final pruning will start in April. We will be applying lime early in the spring. Just when we think we are ahead,



Kevin Sutherland

**Rough pruning of Chardonnay at Nicewonder Farm & Vineyards.**

the June push will happen. I know that 2024 will be no less surprising!

**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.

## ► EASTERN VIRGINIA

“... Because of our coarse, light-yet-deep soils, nutrient management is more of a consideration...”

By Gonzalo Ortiz

Rustic Vintage

Here in the beautiful Northern Neck of Virginia, November through the first half of February has been wet and thankfully cold. The functioning canopies on our site got hit with their first fall frost between the second and third week of November. Rainfall totaled 2.5 inches in November, 7 inches in December, 5 inches in January and 2 inches in the first two weeks of February.

On Feb. 5 we opened our vineyard to the Small Farm Outreach Program, which is a part of Cooperative Extension at Virginia State University. I shared information with new growers on how to set up a VSP trellis and explained how we are establishing our one- and two-year-old vines.

Here in the Coastal Plains, because of our coarse, light-yet-deep soils, nutrient management is more of a consideration than it would be with soils that have higher clay

content and higher organic matter, so we showed how to sample soils and other relevant nutrient management considerations. The feedback was positive.

For those who have concerns about Pierce's Disease, I want to remind you of the wealth of publications and resources that fruit entomologist **Douglas Pfeiffer** and grape pathologist **Mizuho Nita** of Virginia Tech provide in the state.

Because the eastern part of the state tends to be buffered by the Chesapeake, winters are warmer than in many other parts of Virginia. So, with interest in relevant warm area viticulture and resulting issues such as Pierce's Disease and acid management in the winery, we went to the annual North Carolina Winegrower's Association conference Feb. 8-10.

I took my father with me to take in the offerings as they were to be different than the cool climate viticulture conferences we have gone to in the past. The trip was well worth it as the conference was one of the best organized conferences that I have attended in my 30-plus

years of growing grapes in the mid-Atlantic.

Because our soils in the Northern Neck are deep, light and low in organic matter, my biggest take home came from presentations by Dr. John Havlin of NCSU. His presentations on soil fertility, fertilization and pH directed to a viticultural audience were among the best I have experienced.

I have read some of his papers before, and I would encourage Coastal Plain growers to seek out his publications.

Here on our farm, we are racing to get our line posts in before we start pruning. Hopefully, we'll get some wires up before the season starts. I suspect bud burst will come between the last week of March into the first week of April.

**Editor's Note:** Gonzalo Ortiz is a regional reporter for Grape Press, covering Eastern Virginia. Please contact Gonzalo at [eastvagrowers@gmail.com](mailto:eastvagrowers@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.

## ► NORTHERN VIRGINIA

“The vines went into the winter in very good shape. The drought stress that we experienced throughout the growing season didn’t seem to negatively affect their ability to harden off.”

By Dean Triplett  
Greenstone Vineyard

Our 2023-24 winter weather is displaying its normal ups and downs. As I write this report on Jan. 26, the temperature outside is 72 degrees. During the week of January 15th, we had two snow events which gave us a total of 8 inches, more snow than we’ve seen in two years. Daytime temperatures during this period were in the upper 20s to low 30s. The lowest temperature I’ve seen so far was 8 degrees for two consecutive nights.

The weather is supposed to be closer to “normal” going into the last week of January and first week of February. As far as the weather for the winter as a whole goes, December was the fourth wettest month on record. We’ve had close to 10 inches of rain from Dec. 1 through Jan. 9, and that doesn’t include the latest snowfall. This follows the moderate drought that we had for most of the summer and fall of 2023.

The vines went into the winter in very good shape. The drought stress that we experienced throughout the growing season didn’t seem to negatively affect their ability to harden off. My first freeze was on Nov. 2, which was a few weeks earlier than last year.

I’m in the process now of counting the number of replacement vines that I’ll need to order for the coming spring. As always seems to be the case, my Merlot will need the greatest number of replacements. However, the total number of vines needing replacement has been steadily decreasing over the last few years. Is this a small silver lining to climate change?

Since I just grow the grapes, I wanted to get an opinion from a knowledgeable winemaker on how the 2023 vintage is looking in the cellar. I asked Jason Burrus of Sunset Hills and 50 West Vineyards to write up an assessment of the 2023 vintage. Here is his summary:

“Last year brought exceptional sugar

ripeness to all of our fruit, grown both in the Shenandoah Valley AVA as well as the Middleburg AVA. The most pronounced effect was with our Shenandoah Valley vineyards which experienced moderate to severe drought conditions from mid-August through harvest. Our vineyards are not irrigated.

“For the red grape harvest we pursued ripeness to the extent the vintage allowed, while the white varieties were harvested much closer to historical ripeness parameters. Cabernet Franc was the most reactive to weather and vineyard conditions, with the sugar at harvest on Oct. 11 at 25 Brix, whereas we would normally expect about 22 Brix. Merlot came in at 24 Brix (normally 22), Petit Verdot at 24.5 (normally 23.5) and Tannat at 26 Brix (normally 24).

“None of the fruit displayed dehydration. Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon attained most of their sugar early in veraison and plateaued for four weeks before harvest. The other red vinifera varieties experienced more linear sugar accumulation with longer hang time.

“Of particular note is that the fruit seemed to achieve sugar ripeness far in excess of other ripeness parameters. In fact, our Shenandoah Valley Cabernet Franc had berries that were still firm with hints of green in the seeds at harvest. Sangiovese was the only variety that didn’t achieve the desired sugar ripeness required for its wine program.

“None of our vines showed symptoms of drought stress, though the lower leaves on Viognier (in both Shenandoah and Middleburg AVAs) turned yellow, likely due to heat stress.

“In the cellar, the red wines are characterized by power and impact with noticeably more color concentration compared to other vintages. Cabernet Franc and Tannat exhibited this more than other varieties. Tannat is presenting darker than Norton. Alcohols are elevated not only because of the higher sugars in the fruit but also from higher sugar conversion levels during fermentation (due to lower-than-normal fermentation

temperatures).

“Merlot and Petit Verdot show relatively more moderate impact on the palate. Cabernet Sauvignon had the lowest Brix of any red variety intended for our red wine program (22.5) but is showing the impact, ripe character, and color to be a premium red wine varietal or blending component.

“The white wines are less reflective of the vintage simply because the fruit was picked at similar Brix numbers as previous years, though at earlier harvest dates with the idea to preserve adequate acidity. The exception was Viognier, which was allowed to ripen to 23.2 Brix to achieve ripeness goals.

“Elevage for the red wine program will require a different technique than with other vintages. I’m usually reluctant to apply a large amount of new oak to red wines for fear of overpowering the wine. But the 2023s are more robust and will require a greater proportion of new oak to properly balance the wine. While 2023 provided a rare and impactful vintage I wonder if this will come at the expense of refinement and elegance that a world class wine should possess. I intend to bottle these wines after the same 13-18 month aging as with other vintages.”

I want to thank Jason for his insight and observations of the 2023 vintage. I’ll be curious to hear from other winemakers from different regions of the state as to their view of the vintage.

But strictly as an independent grower, it’s a great feeling having to deal with fruit that has the issue of overripeness as opposed to the opposite conditions.

**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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# Winter Meeting Wrap-Up



Photos by Bob Garsson

Research enologist Joy Ting of the Winemakers Research Exchange and a number of other speakers provided information and updates during the VVA Winter Technical Meeting at the Omni Hotel in Charlottesville Feb. 21-22.

## *On the Agenda: Climate Change and the Market for Grapes*

By AJ Greely  
VVA President

One of the most important things we do as a board every year is coordinate and present our Winter and Summer Technical meetings. Each year, it's a challenge to pare down the information available while addressing the needs and questions of our members.

The 2024 Winter Technical Meeting (WTM) was no exception. Under the leadership of Jeanette Smith, who organized the program, we focused our attention on creating resiliency within our industry, addressing not only issues on the horizon, but those already on our doorstep, all while providing the necessary information for those needing to re-up their pesticide certification.

It was a challenge well met.

The first day of our meeting tackled the issue of climate change in the vineyard. The VVA welcomed Greg Jones, CEO of Abacela Winery, Roseburg, Oregon, who spoke to the issue of climate change and how it is already affecting our work in the vineyard and the quality of grapes going into the bottle.

Grape varieties that may stand up to these extremes in weather were discussed, and later sampled at our wine reception.

The second day shifted to market-based issues faced by Virginia grape growers and wineries. Marshall Graves of Silicon Vally Bank delivered the keynote address on the State of the Market, and Nate Walsh guided a great panel on dealing with our current grape glut and opportunities for sales

outside of our state to help ease that pain.

Also during our meeting, Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Matthew Lohr presented the VVA Grape Grower of the Year award to Tremain Hatch (see page 1). Add in the updates from Virginia Tech's Dr. Mizuho Nita and the Winemakers Research Exchange, and panels on Norton/Cynthiana and rosé, it was a jam-packed two days.

I'd like to thank everyone involved in coordinating the WTM, but especially Jeanette for the tremendous work she did in wrangling us all together, and Tracy Kirkman, whose dedicated work behind the scenes makes everything run seamlessly.

We'll look forward to seeing everyone for our late Spring/early Summer Technical meeting. Until then, happy pruning!

Thank You to  
Our Sponsors  
For Supporting  
The VVA 2024  
Winter Technical  
Meeting!



CORPORATE

WINE RECEPTION



BREAKFAST



# Honoring Tremain Hatch

*GROWER, from page 1*

and has become one of the most respected viticulturists in the state. His determination and drive have helped Virginia's wine industry to thrive and become a tremendous economic driver for the Commonwealth."

"Tremain has not only worked at and managed his family's vineyard at Zephaniah for more than a decade, but he is a reliable resource for so many of us who work in the vineyard," said AJ Greely, president of the VVA. "From his work at Virginia Tech to his participation as a member of the Sentinel data collection and analysis project to the assistance he provides the VVA at each of our technical meetings, Tremain has put his stamp on the Virginia viticulture industry."

"We've all come to know his smile and his engaging way," she added. "Not only is he a standout for his work at Zephaniah but having him in our industry is a benefit for all of us. He is more than deserving of this award."

Dr. Tony Wolf, a renowned viticulturist at Virginia Tech who was a driving force in the Virginia wine industry for over 35 years, recalled hiring Tremain twice: once as a field and lab assistant prior to his acceptance in the graduate program at Tech, and again as a viticulture research and extension associate after he completed the master's program.

"Tremain has the perfect combination of excellent work ethic, viticultural knowledge, and personal demeanor that makes him an excellent extension educator," Tony said. "Tremain knows how to grow high-quality grapes, and he is more than willing to share that knowledge with others. He is entirely deserving of the prestigious Grower of the Year Award."

Dr. Mizuho Nita, who heads the Grape Pathology Department where Tremain works, said, "I've known Tremain since I joined Virginia Tech in 2009, and his expertise in viticulture and vineyard operations has been incredibly helpful in many extension-related projects," including evaluations of protective materials for vines.

Last year, Mizuho said, Tremain accompanied him on a trip to Japan where they held seminars, workshops, a Virginia wine-tasting session and a dozen in-field consultations. "We had the opportunity to interact with over 200 growers in three weeks," he said. "As a result, Tremain is now a well-known viticulturist in Japan, too."

In 2002, Tremain was a senior in high school when he helped plant the first acre of vines on his family's 400-acre farm in Loudoun



Bob Garsson

**Tremain Hatch, left, accepts the VVA Grower of the Year Award from Matthew Lohr, Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry, at the VVA's annual meeting in Charlottesville on Feb. 21.**

County. Zephaniah's vineyard has since grown to 10 acres with 18 grape varieties, and Tremain continues to participate as consulting winemaker and viticulturist. More recently, he has also begun consulting for several area vineyards.

Tremain earned a master's degree at Virginia Tech in 2010. His master's research dealt with assessing the response of Cabernet Sauvignon to various means of restricting vegetative development and included an assessment of the impact of those practices on wine quality.

That year, he also became a viticulture extension associate at Virginia Tech's Alston H. Smith Jr. Agricultural Research and Extension Center at Winchester, where his responsibilities have included vineyard troubleshooting, site evaluation, and responding to requests from growers and aspiring growers for viticultural assistance. Currently, his research focuses on evaluating protective culture in vineyards and seedless table grape evaluations.

Prior to joining Virginia Tech, he spent seven months working at Barboursville Vineyards, Barboursville, where he said he learned to appreciate the work required to sustain a large wine operation producing high-quality wines. He also gained viticulture experience working in Marlborough, New Zealand, in 2009, and in Alto Adige, Italy, in 2006.

He lives in Winchester with his wife, Gretchen, and his two children.

## GROWER'S DATEBOOK

*Highlighting events that may be of interest to members of the Virginia wine industry. For more info and registration details, click on the text.*

### Climate Change Webinar

A webinar on "Addressing Climate Change Challenges through Vineyard Management Strategies" will be held from 12 to 1:30 p.m. March 20 as part of the Eastern Viticulture and Enology Forum webinar series. The presentation is free to attend but pre-registration is required.

### Viticulture Classes

Piedmont Virginia Community College in Charlottesville is offering several courses in viticulture this spring, including soil prep and planning, vineyard spraying and canopy management. The courses include in-class instruction and hands-on learning in local vineyards and wineries. Registration is open.

*Eastern Winery*  
EXPOSITION • CONFERENCE

Registration is open for the 2024 Eastern Winery Exposition and Conference to be held March 12-14 at the Oncenter Convention Center in Syracuse, N.Y. Before they register, VVA members can contact our VVA office for a code entitling our members to a discount.

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



# VVA Elects New Officers

## AJ Greely Begins Term as New President; VP, Secretary, Treasurer Also Chosen

By Bob Garsson  
Grape Press

**A**J Greely, winemaker at Hark Vineyards, Earlysville, is the new president of the Virginia Vineyards Association. AJ, who served as treasurer on the VVA Board of Directors for the past three years, succeeds Skip Causey, owner of Potomac Point Vineyard & Winery, Stafford, who will now serve as immediate past president.

During elections held in January, the VVA membership also voted in Aury Holtslag of Sunset Hills Vineyard as vice president. Kevin Sutherland of Nicewonder Farm & Vineyards was re-elected secretary and David Cearley of Cincinnatus Vineyards was elected to serve as an at-large member of the board.

In a separate vote in February, the VVA elected Connie Reynolds-Shine-Hurt of Micajah Vineyard to succeed AJ as treasurer.

### AJ

At Hark, AJ now oversees both winemaking and vineyard management. She has been involved in the Virginia wine industry for over a decade, working at a number of vineyards and wineries, including, most recently, Michael Shaps Wineworks and Blenheim Vineyards, both in Charlottesville. Starting in the vineyard, she also worked in the tasting room and in wine club management before finding her way into the cellar and winemaking.

"It is my firm belief that the quality of our wines is only as solid as the quality of the fruit we grow and use," she said. "I look forward to working with the VVA Board and our membership to continue strengthening our organization and industry."

As VVA president, she said, "I'd like to see a growth in outreach and education to vineyard workers. These workers represent the next leaders in our industry. By actively engaging vineyard owners, managers, and workers, we strengthen our industry and its future."

AJ thanked Skip for his eight years of service in various capacities on the VVA Board and also for stepping in to serve an additional year as president after his term ended. "His dedication and hard work for our industry is evident and much appreciated," she said. "I look forward to having him in the advisory position of past president as I step into the role

of president. He leaves big shoes to fill."

Skip congratulated AJ on her election and wished the new board members good luck. He also thanked outgoing board members Jeanette Smith, who served as vice president, and Nate Walsh, who was immediate past president.

### Aury

Aury, who just completed a two-year term as an at-large board member, graduated from Virginia Tech with a B.S. degree in Agriculture and Applied Economics and a minor in Horticulture. He interned with E&J Gallo Winery, Modesto, Calif., in the Viticulture, Chemistry and Enology Department. Returning to Virginia, he worked in several vineyards, including Brown Bear Vineyards, Woodstock. In 2023, he became vineyard manager for Sunset Hills Vineyard, Purcellville, and 50 West Vineyards, Middleburg.

"I would love to see the Virginia wine industry head into a more sustainable future through variety selection, better (and less) use of pesticides, and more technological innovations," he said. "I'm excited to have the opportunity to serve on the VVA Board at a time when Virginia wines continue to distinguish themselves."

### Kevin

Kevin, vineyard/winemaking manager at Nicewonder in Bristol, has been involved in Virginia viticulture since 1998 when he began working part-time during harvest and planting seasons at Abingdon Vineyards, Abingdon. In 2005, he joined Abingdon full time, moving to Nicewonder in 2019. He was first elected VVA secretary in 2022.

"I have actively worked with regional and statewide viticulture organizations on several spray studies and other research programs," he said. "We are currently part of the vineyard Sentinel project and are always open to any studies that our vineyard or winery can help with."

### David

David is beginning his first board term. In 2015, while living and working in Norfolk, he bought an abandoned farm in Roseland and planted four acres of vinifera grapes. He was a weekend grower until he retired in 2022 and moved to the Roseland farm, where he is



Courtesy of Hark Vineyards

**"I'd like to see a growth in outreach and education to vineyard workers," says newly elected VVA President AJ Greely.**

building a winery and tasting room.

"Since then, I have become a full-time vineyard manager, farmer, and builder as I grow infrastructure and capability to make wine a bigger part of the operation," he said. "The VVA has provided me with guidance and support since I began, and now, in return, I would like to be of more assistance to the association."

### Connie

Connie was a career federal financial manager with 35 years of civil service before retiring. She had served as Chief of the Audit Oversight Branch for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, where she coordinated the audit of the agency's annual financial statements and produced the agency's annual Performance and Accountability Report.

"As the Chief Operating Officer for Micajah Vineyard, LLC, I am a one-third owner of a small farm vineyard and start-up bonded winery in Nottoway County, Virginia," she said, adding that she shares the VVA Board's objectives of promoting appreciation for Virginia wines and the growing of even small parcels of grapes for Virginia wine production.

## Travel

# Experiencing the High Altitudes & Varieties of Sicily

‘One of our goals was to explore some of the many unique cultivars’

By Dr. Bruce Zoecklein

Enology Professor Emeritus, Virginia Tech

*Our 2023 Study Tour was to the Italian island of Sicily. Twenty-two winegrowers from Virginia, Pennsylvania, California, and Iowa joined us. The tour, organized by myself and French colleague Pascal Duran, was the 13th in a series that began in 2002. Participants have visited a host of regions in France, Italy, Spain, Greece, and Germany. Details of several previous expeditions are posted at [www.vtwines.info](http://www.vtwines.info) under Enology Notes.*

Sicily is the largest wine-producing region in Italy. The island has a long history of winemaking, with more than 2,500 years of tradition. Sicily is a multicultural curiosity with the legacy of the past reflecting the impact of successive occupiers. Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Arabs, Spanish, Greeks, etc. all have laid claim to the island at one time or another.

We observed several examples of Greece's influence. Straddling a low ridge near the town of Agrigento in the south is the Valley of the Temples, where we wandered among the most impressive complex of ancient Greek buildings outside of Greece. Some of these Doric shrines are still standing and date from the 5th century BC.

In 1985 I was fortunate to be asked to speak at Midivine, the Mediterranean Wine Conference, held in Palermo, Sicily. In that era, the Sicilian wine industry consisted mainly of Marsala (generally a sweet, fortified wine) and vin ordinaire from large cooperative wineries. These wines remain important, but the wine industry has dramatically evolved since 1985.

Our interest was in exploring the new Sicily, its indigenous varieties, and its high-altitude viticulture. We traveled from Palermo in the west to the northern tip, then south to Mount Etna, and then back along the southern coast visiting an array of winegrowers.

In the north, we journeyed near Cape Peloro and the strait of Messina (separating the island from mainland Italy) where, according to Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus encountered the sirens, mythical creatures that lured sailors to their doom. To navigate this perilous passage Odysseus ordered his crew to plug their ears with beeswax so they would not be seduced by the siren's song. Odysseus had himself tied to the mast to allow him and his crew to pass safely.

Such references to the past, both mythical and real, were everywhere. Each of the Sicilians we met followed the ancient Grecian practice of *Xenia* also depicted in the *Odyssey*. The term refers to the generosity of the host to his guests, not based on friendship but obligation to treat guests with overt kindness, a violation of which would offend Zeus.

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Bruce Zoecklein

A view of Nerello Mascalese in Sicily's Etna DOC.

‘Sicily is truly a gem of agricultural splendor’

By Andrew Hodson

Veritas Vineyards

Dr. Bruce Zoecklein, professor emeritus at Virginia Tech, and Professor Pascal Durand, University of Burgundy, have organized study tours for growers and winemakers over the last two decades. When Bruce announced he was organizing a trip to Sicily, Patricia and I were probably the first to sign up. As with all these trips, we had a wonderful time.

At the risk of being too nerdy after 30 years in academic medicine and 25 years in the wine industry, I have come to realize that knowledge and understanding are my most precious values. Philosophy is the love of knowledge. Epistemology is that branch of philosophy that specifically deals with the theory of knowledge. It is the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion.

Bruce's report on our visit to Sicily, is epistemic, combining the four pillars of epistemology: knowledge, truth, critical thinking, and culture. The success of this tour, as in all the ones I have been on with Bruce and Pascal, stems from a combination of factors, including the group, the knowledge acquired, the enjoyment of sharing in critical thinking, and the experience of the foreign (in this case Sicilian) culture.

**The group.** When you get a bunch of wine growers and winemakers together, none of whom would claim to be an expert, you have what in essence is a community of like-minded individuals (an epistemic community) who have combined a high capacity for risk-taking, an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, and an unquenchable thirst and love of wine.

**Knowledge.** The knowledge we acquired was far and away the best feature of the tour. Growing wine grapes is a risky business and one of the best ways of reducing risk is by increasing one's knowledge, whether it be about vine spacing, pesticide sprays, or other aspects of viticulture. What was so

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# Exploring Sicily's High Altitudes and Varieties

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Blessed with consistently bright sunshine and reliably moderate rainfall, Sicily's classic Mediterranean climate appears ideally suited to the production of wine grapes, olives, and citrus. The majority of grapes are white, with red varieties accounting for approximately 33 percent of Sicily's total vineyard plantings. The mountainous, volcanic nature of the island allows for a significant variation in microclimates. The annual rainfall for the island averages about 16-24 inches but varies widely depending upon the region. Most rain occurs in the fall and winter.

The warm, dry climate means that fungal diseases are usually kept under control, particularly in well-ventilated areas that benefit from coastal breezes. Temperature ranges throughout the year can span 32-104 degrees F depending upon the region.

Sicilian wines stem from quite heterogeneous soils that can be divided into four general macro-zones: the north-eastern area is dominated by Mount Etna with soils of volcanic origin widespread. The volcanic soils in the northeast also come from Mount Etna and contain pumice, basalt, black ash and silica. In the very northern coastal part of the island, the soils are calcareous with mixed sediments of silt and sand. The western, southern and central parts of the island contain sandy loam, calcareous clay, sandstone and limestone. This mix adds to the significant viticultural diversity.

The DOC concept has come slowly to Sicily where most wines are non-DOC, although this is not necessarily a reflection of quality. Etna was the first DOC on the island, created in 1968, followed nine months later by that of Sicily's most famous wine region, Marsala. One of our goals was to explore some of the many unique cultivars. These are frequently given proprietary names and bottled as single varietals, blended with other indigenous grapes, or mixed with international varieties.

The following are just a few of the many cultivars we evaluated. For each, the importance of vine age was stressed as well as yields. The maximum plant load suggested was 2 Kg, with many retaining much less fruit. Realizing the uniqueness of some of their varieties, the researchers have identified clones and have extensively mapped everything from phenology to detailed grape chemistry

including aromatics and phenolic profiles.

►Nero d'Avola wines are deep, intensely ruby-red to purple with notes of dark fruits such as black cherry, plum, and blackberry often with hints of spiced pepper. Flavors can have notes of cocoa, licorice, and herbal elements. The tannin levels are usually high but are supple and provide a mouthfeel quite different than traditional vinifera.

►Catarratto is a white variety that represents over 40 percent of the island's grapes. Wines have a crisp acidity, and citrus notes with a touch of floral and herbal aromas. The flavor profile depends on production, but

red fruit along with earthy, sometimes smoky tones. The tannins are usually understated but well-integrated. Generally high acid adds to the brightness of these wines along with their aging potential

## High-Altitude Viticulture

The cachet of high-altitude viticulture is growing, in part, due to increased temperatures caused by climate change. Mount Etna, the towering stratovolcano, dominates the island's eastern skyline and is responsible for the mineral-rich, dark soils that characterize the unique Etna DOC vineyards. Mount Etna is a 3,330-meter (10,920 ft) active volcano. Vines are being planted higher and higher up on the volcanic slopes, to capitalize on the cooler air and richer soils. High-altitude viticulture offers several possible advantages which include the following:

►Temperature variation. High altitudes often experience greater temperature variation between day and night. The diurnal temperature difference can enhance grape aroma and flavor development and complexity.

►Sunlight intensity. At high altitudes, sunlight intensity and the proportion of UV light increases, leading to improved grape color development and the enhancement of phenolic compounds, in general, which contribute to wine structure and mouthfeel.

►Acid retention. Grapes grown at high altitudes tend to retain a higher level of acidity, possibly contributing to enhanced overall balance and freshness.

►Lower disease pressure. Elevated locations often have better air circulation and reduced humidity, lowering the risk of fungal diseases.

►Terroir effect. High-altitude vineyards may add a uniqueness concerning flavor profile and complexity, often referred to by some producers as "mountain terroir".

Despite these features, the challenges of harsh winters and shorter growing seasons are also associated with high altitudes and thus limit planting elevations. The Etna wine-producing zone arcs around the eastern side of the volcano. The graduated topography creates a smooth spread of meso-climates, as the land climbs up from near-sea-level to more than



Bruce Zoecklein

**Nerello Mascalese planted on volcanic rock in the Etna DOC.**

includes green apple, lemon, and a hint of almonds. The wine has a unique mineral tone and the potential for significant aging. Several producers aged these wines in large chestnut ovals sur lie. This is a common blender and is used extensively in Marsala production.

►Grillo is a white variety generally straw yellow to golden in color depending on production techniques. Known for the aroma intensity, wines often have a bouquet of citrus, including lemon and grapefruit, and some have hits of jasmine and herbs. The wines have a crisp flavor profile with zesty acidity of sometimes tropical flavors with high minerality. We tasted some exceptional examples of this cultivar, including aged wines.

►Nerello Mascalese is the red grape prominent in the Etna DOC. The wine is pale to medium ruby red, particularly when young. The aromatic profile is often that of cherry and raspberry with hints of herbs. The flavors are elegant with finesse and consist of

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# Traveling in ‘a Gem of Agricultural Splendor’

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special was that we learned about Sicily and the Sicilian wine industry firsthand from the growers and the winemakers themselves.

**Truth.** I won't get into “in vino veritas” (in wine there is truth), but for me that firsthand knowledge — to be there in the rows amongst the vines, witnessing the same threats and pitfalls to wine growing as we experience back home, and to be in the dank cellars — affirms almost indelibly the truth.

**Critical thinking.** As I see it, if you are a wine grape grower and/or a winemaker, every harvest is a test of critical thinking. That's what made every day so much fun learning from each other how we thought about the vast amount of information that we were presented.

**Culture.** We are all human, and probably the very best way to understand other cultures and traditions is to have direct experience of those cultures in their unique locales. Exchanging the experience of like-minded individuals in a foreign setting is the most gratifying gateway to knowledge, truth, critical thinking, and culture.

It would be impossible to describe every

experience we had. Every visit was unique, and the Sicilian sense of welcome was undeniable. Sicily is truly a gem of agricultural splendor, and we witnessed acres of orange and lemon groves, interspersed by olive groves, vineyards, and palm trees that braided the slopes of the ever-present, still active volcanic Mount Etna. All our visits were superb but the two that stood out for me were:

Abbazia Santa Anastasia. It just happened to be a five-star resort, and it was our first stop, which is probably what thrilled me the most. Dominic, the winemaker, gave us a brief tour of the beautifully equipped winery. I popped at the quality of the wines, even the rosé — and I am not a rosé person. It had levels of complexity that I marveled at. I had tasted Nero D'Avola in the States, but nothing compared to the balance, complexity, and concentration of our first experience of the wine in Sicily. I could say that was my first taste of real Nero D'Avola, as well as my favorite white wine, consistent throughout Sicily, Grillo.

Tenuta Valle delle Ferle - Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG. When I studied Italy for my WSET Diploma, the only winery that I remembered in

Sicily was this winery, primarily for its DOCG status. That was when most Sicilian wines were not even DOC wines, but as Bruce emphasizes, a lot has happened to the Sicilian wine industry since then.

Talk about a welcome. Both husband and wife owners along with their general manager poured a panoply of the most beautifully cultured wines, the whole spectrum from Nero D'Avola, Frappato, Nero Mascalese, and Grillo to Catarratto.

We got a PowerPoint presentation on the history, the viticulture, the winemaking, of the winery, and the region as we indulged in seemingly endless pours of wine that accompanied an exquisite Sicilian, seemingly endless meal — an unforgettable experience.

*“The tragedy in the lives of most of us is that we go through life walking down a high-walled lane with people of our kind, the same economic situation, the same national background and education, and religious outlook. And beyond those walls, all humanity lies, unknown and unseen, and untouched by our restricted and impoverished lives.” —*

*— Florence Luscomb, architect and suffragist*

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1,200 meters (3,940 ft). The highest of Etna's vineyards now ranks among the highest in the world, exceeding 3,000 feet.

A major component of the Etna terroir is the volcanic soil. Numerous eruptions have created several types of soil at different ages that are nutrient-rich in minerals such as magnesium, copper, phosphorus, and iron, amongst others.

Etna's eastern slopes reveal how much light is reflected from the Mediterranean, similar to what is reported around Lake Geneva and along the Mosel. The added sunshine hours are reported to help ripen the grapes more completely, even at these cooler higher altitudes.

Virtually all producers suggested the importance of the diurnal temperature differences during the growing season to wine quality which can be as much as 20 degrees F. Ripeness is rarely a concern in Sicily. However, Etna's higher slopes are almost the only place on the island where temperatures fall sufficiently low to cause concern for maturation.

The cooler temperatures provide a longer growing season. Etna's wine producers are experimenting with vineyard sites up the volcano's slopes, to gauge the effects of the richer, blacker lava flow soils and increased

altitudes.

The rainfall depends on the slope and is much higher in the eastern part of the volcano than in the north and south. The rains are mostly distributed in the autumn-winter period and, not infrequently, in conjunction with harvest. In some vintages and for certain areas, rain can be a limiting factor in the ripening and health of the grapes. Additionally, in some cases, hail can be a limiting feature.

## Natural, Organic and Biodynamic Wines

The relatively low disease pressure means that most Sicilian wines can be produced from organically grown grapes. The combination of warm temperatures, abundant sunlight and the dry and ventilating Scirocco winds blowing up from North Africa means that it is often easy to attain adequate maturity on much of the island.

Most winegrowers professed to be making natural wines, a rather interesting expression. The term natural wine can mean whatever is desired (after all, the natural evolution of wine is to vinegar) but often includes the following:

Grapes grown and wines made without chemical additions (except sulfur, copper, and sulfur dioxide) including no irrigation. Natural wine production generally involves no commercial yeast addition or nutrients, no enzymes, bacteria, tannins, acid, or sugar adds, no alcohol manipulation and no textural

modification including micro-oxygenation or reverse osmosis.

It is interesting to note that one producer advocating natural wine production did use post-fermentation thermal treatment designed to increase red wine phenolic polymerization.

Several producers employed biodynamic (BD) viticultural practices. BD seems to stretch the limits of rationalism but has certainly caught on to a degree in both the old and new wine world. This back-to-nature appeal, described by the Gaia hypothesis, states that earth is influenced by life to sustain life and that the planet is the living core of a unified living system. Interestingly, one producer operated an entire 210-acre vineyard biodynamically but did not produce all their wines under BD protocol. That producer suggested that BD wines should not be fermented in stainless steel tanks due to the static electricity from such vessels.

The movement to reverse the past reputation of Sicilian wines is well underway with the island now one of Italy's most promising and interesting wine regions.

*Technical study tours are conducted once a year and are open to commercial winemakers and growers in the US. The dates and location of the next tour will be posted at [www.vtwines.info](http://www.vtwines.info).*