

# PRESIDENTIAL HARVEST

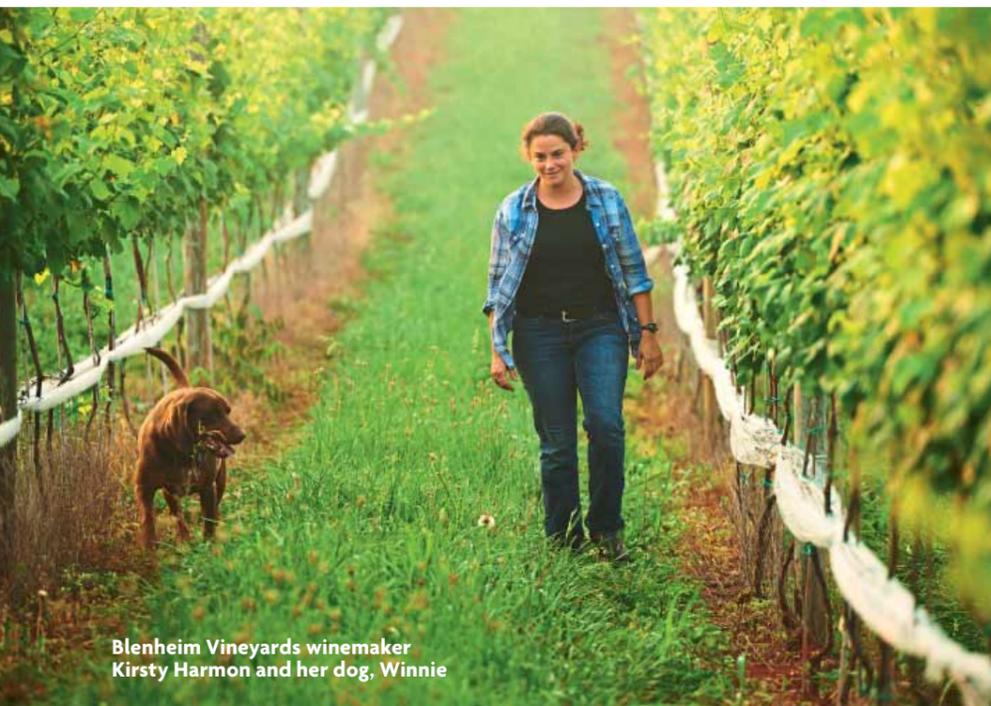
Site of the first permanent English colony in the New World, birthplace of eight US presidents and once a major tobacco producer, Virginia is now one of the country's largest wine-producing states. **MARK JOHANSON** salutes a new player.

PHOTOGRAPHY **STEVEN MORRIS**



Knight's Chapel,  
Barboursville,  
Virginia





Blenheim Vineyards winemaker Kirsty Harmon and her dog, Winnie



**G**ABRIELE RAUSSE never meant to become the Yoda of Virginia wine. A native of Vicenza, Italy, he had his mind firmly set on South Australia until a shift in immigration policy sent him across the Atlantic instead. Rausse settled on a friend's farm, two hours south of Washington DC, in April 1976, a month before the so-called Judgment of Paris catapulted California chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon onto the global radar. The young Italian realised he was on the wrong side of the continent in a state that hadn't seen vines in two centuries, but that didn't stop him testing the soil.

"The Department of Agriculture told me to go home," the 68-year-old winemaker recalls. "They said the future of Virginia was tobacco, and that if I wanted to grow grapes, I should start making jelly."

Virginia wine had been a lost cause for four centuries, dating back to America's first English settlers, who planted vines at Jamestown in the early 1600s only to watch them wither courtesy of the sap-sucking root pest *phylloxera*. The state hadn't seen an interminable dreamer such as Rausse since Thomas Jefferson, America's dandiest

Founding Father, Francophile and wine lover. Jefferson crafted the Declaration of Independence and doubled the size of the United States during his time as third president, but failed in his vision to turn his native Virginia into America's Bordeaux.

Fast-forward 200 years and *phylloxera* is under control, vines are sprouting like weeds and Thomas Jefferson's former stomping ground is blossoming into one of the most promising wine regions in the US. This is thanks in no small part to a wayward Italian who helped open 14 wineries and propagate more than a million plants. Rausse has dedicated his later years to restoring Jefferson's failed vineyard as the director of gardens and grounds at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.

**Monticello** (931 Thomas Jefferson Parkway, Charlottesville, monticello.org) is the only US presidential home on UNESCO's World Heritage List. Daily 30-minute guided tours – day-pass and

house tours from \$US18 (\$21) – begin in a Native American-themed entrance hall and continue through octagonal lounges, walls dotted with miniature silhouettes, and a kitchen fitted with dumb waiters to carry wine bottles up from the cellar below (the Jefferson household went through 400 bottles a year).

Just beyond the perimeter of the Monticello property is **Jefferson Vineyards** (1353 Thomas Jefferson Parkway, Charlottesville, jeffersonvineyards.com, tastings from \$US10) where you can partake in the kind of wine that could have been in Jefferson's cellar – if his *Vitis vinifera* had ever produced. Florentine viticulturist Philip Mazzei planted the first vines on this property at Jefferson's request in 1774, but the American War of Independence interrupted that venture indefinitely. It wasn't until the Woodward family took over in 1981 that the land finally produced grapes. Current owner Attila Woodward runs a breezy hilltop winery that's perhaps best-known for its award-winning viognier, Virginia's signature grape.

Jefferson Vineyards was one of just 64 wineries in Virginia at the turn of the 21st century, but that number has since ballooned to more

than 250. Many are small boutique operations, but they've nevertheless transformed Virginia into the fifth-largest wine-producing state in the US and enticed big names to gobble up grape-growing land. One of them is real-estate tycoon Donald Trump. **Trump Winery** (3550 Blenheim Road, Charlottesville, trumpwinery.com, tastings from \$US8) is run by The Donald's son Eric. It specialises in bubbly, but if you have visions of a gaudy Trump Tower dominating a pastoral patch you would be mistaken. The youngest of Donald's children with Ivana runs a surprisingly homey tasting room with a relaxed atmosphere and spectacular views of Virginia's largest vineyard.

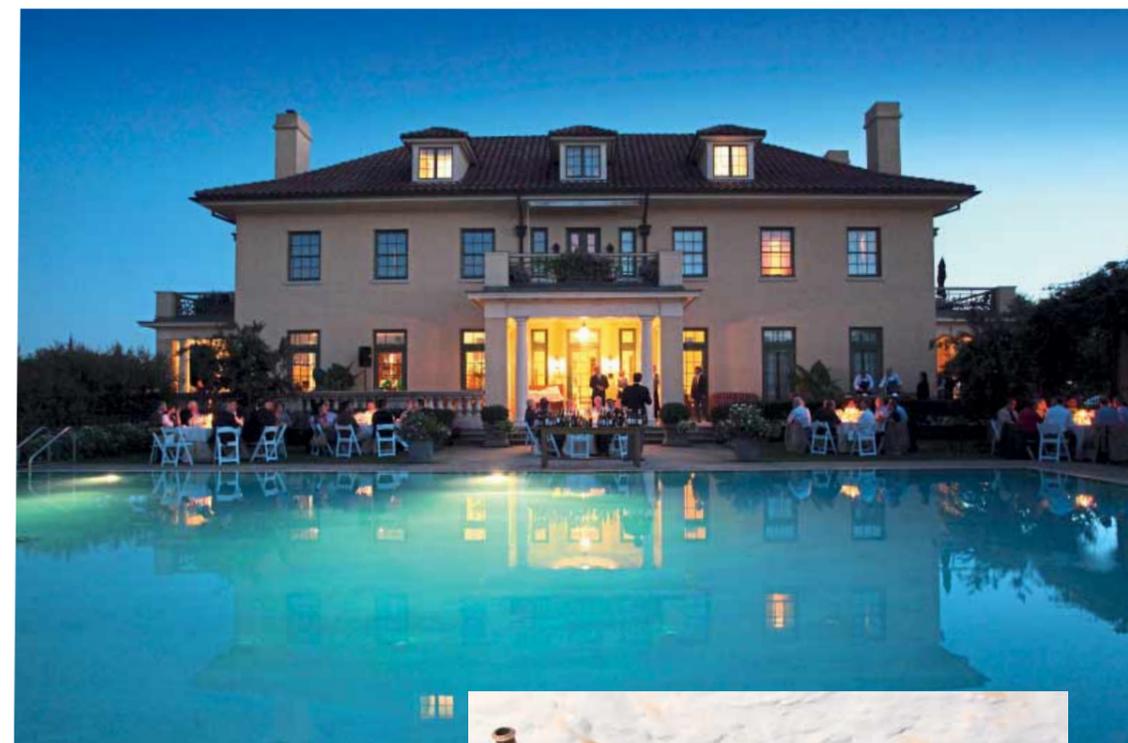
Trump has put Virginia wine on the global map in both name (*Wine Enthusiast* magazine named him 2013 Rising Star of the Year) and prestige (his vineyard boasts some of the state's highest-rated wines). The 2007 Trump Sparkling Reserve

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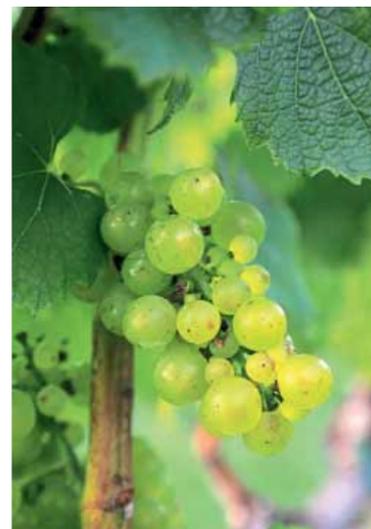


## ONLINE GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

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Clockwise from above left: vineyards at Trump Winery; The Trump Winery Barn; the grounds of Ashby Inn; sealed foie gras, Keswick Hall; Monticello; chardonnay grapes at Trump Winery; pool and outdoor dining at Keswick Hall



KIRSTY HARMON PHOTOGRAPHY: CAMERON DAVIDSON

## GRAPEVINE VIRGINIA

is an unusually creamy brut made with chardonnay from the estate's "most-expressive" block. It's a great addition to a patio lunch of crab cakes sourced from nearby Chesapeake Bay. With a jazz singer warbling in the corner and tables brimming with charcuterie, it's far too easy to while away an afternoon here. But why would you do that when Virginia's other rock-star winery is just across the road?

**Blenheim Vineyards** (31 Blenheim Farm, Charlottesville, blenheimvineyards.com, tastings \$US5) is the brainchild of the musical *wunderkind* and hometown hero Dave Matthews. The singer-songwriter may be somewhat of an absent owner, but his artistic touch stretches from the hand-drawn labels for each vintage of Painted Red and Painted White to the tasting room's dramatic A-frame ceilings, glass floors and artist's-loft vibe.

For a more refined aesthetic, check in for the night at **Keswick Hall** (701 Club Drive, Keswick, keswick.com, from \$US239/\$280), a sprawling Italianate-style estate converted into a 48-room luxury resort. It sits on a 240ha property dominated by a golf course newly redesigned by Pete Dye. Winding paths lead to a tennis complex, three pools and a garden that supplies ingredients for degustations at Fossett's Restaurant, whose floor-to-ceiling windows deliver a spectacular panorama of the distant Blue Ridge Mountains.

Nurse any hangovers the next day in the infinity pool before driving 30 minutes north to **Barboursville Vineyards** (17655 Winery Road, Barboursville, barboursvillewine.net/winery, tastings \$US7). Owned by the Zonin family, proprietors of the largest wine company in Italy, this 365ha estate is where Rausse originally learned his chops and his successor, Luca Paschina, transported Virginia winemaking to new heights. "I look at Virginia as this wide-open canvas ready to be painted," Paschina says. "Throughout the years, we have identified what grows best and most consistently, we have experimented with different fermentation techniques, and now we are beginning to see some really great wines take shape."

Paschina's Jefferson-inspired Octagon is widely regarded as Virginia's flagship red. Queen Elizabeth loved it when she visited in 2007, and the British embassy in Washington chose it for the Royal Wedding reception in 2011.

Savour Barboursville's nearly 40-year history in the new wine library then continue north towards Washington through quilted fields of corn, tobacco and grapes.

White hybrids such as seyval blanc, vidal blanc and traminette grow exceptionally well in these parts, and their flavours can be discovered at wineries along the way such as **Rappahannock Cellars** (14437 Hume Road, Huntly, rappahannockcellars.com, tastings \$US8) and **Linden Vineyards** (3708 Harrels Corner Road, Linden, lindenvineyards.com, tasting \$US7).

**The Inn at Little Washington** (309 Middle Street, Washington, theinnatlittlewashington.com, from \$US522/\$612); **Ashby Inn** (692 Federal Street, Paris, ashbyinn.com, from \$US160/\$188); and **Salamander Resort** (500 North Pendleton Street, Middleburg, salamanderresort.com, from \$US275/\$322) all boast award-winning restaurants and make great bases to explore the nearly 100 wineries dotted across the Appalachian foothills. About an hour north of Monticello and an hour west of Washington, it's another oasis of wine and fine dining nestled between some of America's earliest towns. Be sure to book ahead or avoid weekends in summer, when frazzled politicos pop a reverse-commute to let off steam in the countryside.

Jefferson's dream of turning his native soil into America's Bordeaux may still be decades away, but the chock-a-block wineries lining the Washington *exurbs* provide further proof that a shift in that direction is afoot. With both quality and interest at an all-time high, Virginia now faces a problem unthinkable in Jefferson's time: it can't produce enough wine grapes to keep up with the demand. 🐦

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Barboursville Vineyards