

Some Brandywine Valley vintages getting close to 'A'

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A wine region grows in stages. It begins with its starter wines, usually more of a historical curiosity than a drinkable tribute to Dionysus. Then it begins to make drinkable wines, for which high praise from consumers and critics is, "Not too bad!"

Gradually, a region builds a reputation for making good-to-very-good wines that can survive blind tastings with good-to-very-good wines from other regions of the world. At this point, many regions begin pumping out huge volumes of quite nice, inexpensive, everyday table wine -- the cash cows.

The Brandywine region has reached this stage of development where it can survive these blind-taste challenges with ease. But it will never have the production economics to grow good grapes at high volumes to compete economically. Stated differently, it costs too much to make large amounts of good, cheap wine locally.

So what does the local wine industry do to move up from a very respectable "B" status to the "A" category, something no East Coast region has done, except, possibly, the East End of Long Island (red wines) and the Niagara Peninsula of Canada (ice wines)?

Simply said, it needs to produce a few "sought-after" wines that people who love wine are ready to buy at ultra-premium prices, wines they will talk about among themselves, wines for which they will hang around a winery to get a bottle, wines for which "there's none left" is not an acceptable answer. Simply said, but not simply done.

But some Brandywine Valley winemakers are trying to get there and are pretty close. Jim Kirkpatrick, of Kreutz Creek, has produced two or three vintages of delicious, genuine, frozen-on-the-vine ice wines that sell out for around \$45 for a half bottle.

Anthony Vietri, at Va La, set aside some barrels when he started making wine and has just released two blends from them -- the 2000 Va La Parchment (equal cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc) and the 2000 Va La Rococo (corvina, petite verdot, cabernet, barbera). Both are in the old Northern Italy tradition of letting oxygen and oak do their magic with as little interference as possible. Parchment (\$30) is amber in color with beautiful dried fruit and leathery flavors and a citrus tang in the finish. Rococo (\$35) is minerally and earthy, but also full of flavors of candied fruit and watermelon rind. Unless you're on the sign-up list at the winery, you may not be able to easily get either. But what's life without a challenge?

And we can't forget that Eric Miller at Chaddsford continues to improve his flagship meritage, Merican (about \$40), and his new Italian blend, Due (\$25), both becoming part of the sought-after category.

The girl next door continues to get a lot prettier.

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