

Virginia is making a name for itself as a wine destination, with hundreds of new vineyards

There are wine trails and nine distinct wine regions with companies like New Kent, Saude Creek, Dog and Oyster, and Philip Carter

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New Kent Winery is one of dozens of quality vineyards to put down roots in Virginia over the last few years.

Virginia is well-known for its wealth of U.S. history, but the reds and whites attracting travelers to the state these days have nothing to do with the American flag.

After years of failed efforts to make the area a wine destination, the industry is now flourishing there.

In just the last five years, Virginia has seen an explosion in new vineyards. There are now more than 230 wineries in nine distinct regions in an area where there were only a few dozen. They boast prominent names from Dave Matthews to Donald Trump buying their own operations.

Visitors to the state can create a packed schedule of vineyard tours and topnotch restaurants at which to pair the drinks with local food.

This is all good news for New York City oenophiles, who have a new destination to consider when looking for a getaway around wine drinking.



It's clear to visitors that they are entering wine country when arriving at the Dog and Oyster Vineyard.

And just because these wineries are only a few years old doesn't mean they lack history or expertise. Take New Kent Winery, just east of Richmond. Though they only launched in 2008, the winery itself is constructed from 80% reclaimed antique building material, including pre-Civil War brick and handmade nails. The tasting room even houses a 160-year-old scale used for measuring wine.

New Kent also draws on the 27 years of winemaking experience of Tom Payette, who oversees production and can host tours and group blending sessions — and who helped guide the vineyard to a Governor's Cup award for its 2009 Reserve Chardonnay. Payette and other independent wine consultants like him offer their knowledge and training to numerous wineries in the region and have helped move Virginia winemaking from the activity of hobbyists to a fully matured industry.

A short drive east lies Saudé Creek Vineyards, offering expansive terraces that overlook the Pamunkey River. Opened in July 2011, it has already earned a number of awards for its blends and hosts wine-tasting events throughout the year. Along with the James River Cellars and more established Williamsburg Winery — one of the few pre-2005 wineries in the state, having done its first planting in 1985 — New Kent and Saudé Creek form the Colonial Virginia Wine Trail (colonialvirginiawinetrail.com).



Wine consultant Tom Payette offers tours of the New Kent Winery, with demonstrations of how the liquid settles in the barrel.

The success of these newcomers is hardly beginner's luck — the winemakers are filling their barrels using hard-won knowledge learned over centuries of failed experiments in the state, beginning with Thomas Jefferson himself.

The Founding Father who accomplished so much in his lifetime fell far short of his goal of bringing winemaking to the U.S. Trying to imitate the French approach to grape growing in the humid temperatures and rough landscape of his Monticello estate in Charlottesville, Va., the few vintages he managed to produce were all but undrinkable.

Interest in winemaking soured after that, and it was not until the 1970s and '80s that a handful of wineries began to sprout up in the wake of California's ascendance as a wine region. The efforts of these vineyards (including Barboursville Vineyards and Shenandoah Vineyards, which remain among the most respected in the state) were aided by European experts, particularly Gabriele Rausse — the Italian “father of Virginia wine,” who has since opened his own popular vineyard that is part of the Monticello Wine Trail (monticellowinetrail.com).



Owner Philip Carter Strother and winemaker Jeremy Ligon of Philip Carter Winery have made the state's rich history central to the brand.

These experts helped to determine that instead of Pinot Noir and Riesling, the soil and climate are better suited for growing varieties like Norton, Viognier and Cabernet Franc. Located at the same latitude as Northern Italy, Virginia's grapes ripen slower, and can handle the region's hurricanes and temperate weather, gaining more tropical, fruitier notes than might be found on the West Coast of the U.S.

Visitors to the Dog and Oyster Vineyard in Irvington will be greeted by a pair of massive sculptures of corkscrews at the front of the 6-acre expanse. It grows Vidal Blanc, Chardonnay, Merlot and Chambourcin, but its name comes partly from the many vineyard dogs the owners have adopted, and who keep deer and other wildlife from disturbing the crops.

Like its wine, Virginia's oyster industry has been growing at an enormous rate in the past decade. After years of overfishing and polluting, the state embraced more sustainable aquaculture in the early 2000s and the results have been huge. In 2005, Virginia produced less than 1 million oysters; last year it produced 28.1 million.



The Dog and Oyster Vineyard gets its name in part from the loyal vineyard dogs who guard its crops from deer and other wildlife.

Among those at the forefront of this turnaround is Rappahannock River Oyster Company, founded by cousins Ryan and Travis Croxton. They overhauled their grandfather's vacated oyster farm and set to work raising local oysters using methods aimed at ensuring the stocks could grow exponentially over each subsequent year. Visitors can stop by their new riverfront tasting house Merroir in Topping, Va., to enjoy some of the best oysters the Chesapeake Bay has to offer — paired, of course, with fine Virginia wines.

Dudley and Peggy Patterson, who own the Dog and Oyster Vineyard, are also behind the nearby Hope and Glory Inn, a converted 1890s schoolhouse, which now offers six rooms and 10 cottages on the Chesapeake Bay's western shore. Visitors eager to get on the water can hop aboard the property's 42-foot oyster boat, the Faded Glory, which takes passengers on sunset cocktail cruises and can be booked for special occasions.

Guests staying at or visiting the Tides Inn, located off the Chesapeake Bay, can enjoy "Angry Oysters," served in the hotel's East Room restaurant. The oysters are fried in Buffalo sauce, and served with hot and sour cabbage and pickled watermelon-rind relish.



Virginia's oyster farmers have made a comeback, as these briny offerings from Rappahannock Oyster Company demonstrate.

While the state has a checkered history with winemaking, many Virginia vintners have come to embrace the past. The Philip Carter Winery of Virginia prides itself as having started growing grapes in 1762 — before Jefferson even tried — and gives its wines historical names like Nomini Hall and Governor Fauquier.

The Heart of Appalachia region, in which Monticello itself sits, now includes some of the highest concentrations of vineyards in the state, with names like Jefferson, First Colony and Democracy.

Considering how far Jefferson's home state has come in an art that eluded even his sharp understanding, the country's third President would be proud.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Delta, American and US Airways run many direct flights between New York City and Richmond, Va. For travelers with access to a car, the drive is about five and a half hours.

Stay: Two nice hotels in Irvington, Va., are: the Hope and Glory Inn (hopeandglory.com) and the Tides Inn (tidesinn.com), though the latter is closed in January and February.

Winery info: For details on the Colonial Virginia Wine Trail and 25 other trails across the state, as well as a user-friendly map of Virginia's hundreds of vineyards, visit virginiawine.org. The Virginia Tourism Corporation also lists upcoming wine events and activities at virginia.org/wine.