

Oz Clarke dazzles Virginia Wine Summit crowd

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Oz Clarke, left, one of the most prominent wine writers in the world, joined Gov. Bob McDonnell, first lady Maureen McDonnell and Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Todd Haymore, right, at the Virginia Wine Summit in Richmond Oct. 28. Photo Courtesy/Jay Paul and The Virginia Wine Board Marketing Office

Virginians often hear Gov. Bob McDonnell and first lady Maureen speaking about the allures of the commonwealth's wine industry, and the fine folks at the state's wine marketing office tout award after award bestowed on Old Dominion vin.

Here in Loudoun, we've familiarized ourselves with the "D.C. Wine Country" designation, celebrated it, and we're eager to see what the newly-arrived Epicurience food and wine festival will bring in the future.

Yet hearing Oz Clarke, one of the most revered wine writers in the world, gush over Virginia's aromatic viogniers, pepper-smoke cabernet francs and expressive, eclectic blends brings about a new plane of prestige; it's extra rousing coming from a man who became the youngest British Wine Taster of the Year in 1973 and won the last World Wine Tasting Championship in 1985.

To Clarke's words, the wine world listens.

"You mustn't try to be California. You can't win that battle," Clarke told a wine-centric crowd in Richmond for the 2nd Annual Virginia Wine Summit on Oct. 28. "You mustn't try to be French. You can't win that battle. The only way to show the brilliance of Virginia is to do what Californians can't do, to do what the French and the Chileans can't do, to do what the Australians and the Argentinians can't do ..."

"Because Virginia isn't like any of those places. They can't produce your sort of wine – you shouldn't try to copy theirs."

Clarke continued, raving about Virginia's unique soils suited exquisitely for various rebel grapes.

"Nebbiolo, the heartbreak grape, no one knows how to do that ... you guys do," Clarke said. "Petit manseng, no one's bothered ... you guys have. And each year, out pops an albariño, a vermentino, some tannat, some corvina, sangiovese, touriga nacional. These are great grapes that the mainstream of the new world dismisses ..."

“They're the grapes that make Virginia unique and will make Virginia famous,” declared Clarke.

The famed Brit was joined at the sold-out summit by dozens of the nation's most respected wine aficionados, including Andrew Hoover of Wine Enthusiast; Dave McIntyre of The Washington Post; Neal Wavra, sommelier for the Ashby Inn and Restaurant; and Charlie Berg, a renowned sommelier who grew up in Virginia and now works at Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Pocantico Hills, N.Y.

The more than 250 attendees began the event with a comparative tasting of cabernet francs from Virginia, France (Chinon, specifically) and California. Participants then split off for morning and afternoon seminars separated by lunch and Clarke's keynote address. Seminar topics ranged from new Virginia wineries, the age-ability of the state's wines, local food and wine pairings and a comprehensive tasting of viogniers from the commonwealth and outside wine regions.

Both Gov. McDonnell and the first lady, outspoken cheerleaders for the state's agricultural triumphs, addressed the crowd at points during the summit. In business-friendly fashion, the governor focused on the economic benefits of the commonwealth's wine industry.

More than 4,700 Virginia jobs are tied to a wine industry that contributed \$750 million to the commonwealth's economy, McDonnell noted.

“You may see sparkling wines or cab franc or viognier – I see jobs and tax revenue,” he said. “ ... It's not just the product. It's the wine tourism, it's the history, it's the unique grapes we can grow here.”

While the exhibition's intent wasn't to declare any specific “winners,” many sippers during the morning tasting were delighted with cabernet francs from Fabboli Cellars in Leesburg and the boutique Cedar Creek Winery (near Strasburg).

Showing well during the new arrivals session were a well-rounded meritage blend, Architettura, from Moss Vineyards in Nortonsville; a serious rosé of 100 percent mourvèdre from Stinson Vineyards near Charlottesville; and an estate viognier from one of Loudoun's newest operations, Stone Tower Winery.

Later in the evening, at a post-summit dinner, a Breaux Vineyards nebbiolo and Linden Vineyards' Hardscrabble Red blend earned praise from an array of esteemed wine tasters.



Jen Breaux, left, stands with famed wine writer Oz Clarke at Breaux Vineyards in Purcellville Nov. 1, several days after Clarke gave the keynote address at the second annual Virginia Wine Summit.
Photo by/Pamela Lepold