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Virginia vintages: Fine wines are close at hand

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By Jim Raper *The Humble Steward*

A few weeks ago, I was with Peter Coe, the founder of Taste Unlimited gourmet shops, at a blind tasting of top-flight Virginia red wines. When the labels were revealed, we found that we both had rated very highly the Potomac Point Winery 2007 Richland Reserve Heritage (\$29 retail), a blend of Bordeaux varieties.

"Rich, intense, with integrated black fruit. A true marriage of the three grapes: malbec, petit verdot and cabernet franc," Coe had written in his notes. He got in touch with the folks at Potomac Point, and

the winery's much-traveled, Italian-born winemaker, Simone Bergese, was more than happy to ship some Richland Reserve to stock the shelves of Taste Unlimited.

So goes the age of discovery we're in on the Old Dominion wine trail. During October, the official Virginia Wine Month, it seems only fitting that I share some of these discoveries with you.

Early in October, I was a judge for the 18th annual Town Point Virginia Wine Competition, which is supervised by local wine educator and retired Old Dominion University chemistry professor Roy Williams. The best-in-show award went to a delicious viognier, the 2008 vintage from Keswick Vineyards. This Charlottesville-area winery, which won three gold medals in the competition, has a fine reputation and is no longer eligible to be a "discovery."

Not so for Cross Keys Vineyards, which is relatively new and located near Harrisonburg. This winery won golds for its 2008 chardonnay and 2008 petit verdot, as well as a silver for its 2007 chardonnelle dessert wine and a bronze for its 2006 Meritage red. What an impressive showing for this upstart winery, and for its young South African winemaker Stephan Heyns, formerly of the now-defunct Oakencroft Vineyard.

Another discovery came at Vintage Kitchen in Norfolk, where restaurateur Phillip Craig Thomason has a well-chosen "10 for \$30" Virginia wine list. During a recent meal, friends and I chose a Rockbridge Vineyard DeChiel 2005 pinot noir (\$15 retail). I remember tasting a Virginia pinot noir a decade ago that

reminded me of turnip-green pot liquor. But in the hands of Rockbridge's owner and winemaker, Shep Rouse, this pinot is a delicate, cherry-tinged delight.

Finally, I was pleased to come across another delicious red while visiting friends on the Eastern Shore. The wine was the Shore's own Chatham Vineyards Church Creek 2006 Vintner's Blend (\$22 retail), another Bordeaux-style blend. We poured it with a Labor Day dinner of Portuguese-style pork and clams. The winery is not far above the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel - close enough for readers to discover it for themselves.

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