The Norton Grape
American Viticulture’s Native Son

Fireworks, apple pie, and baseball are all well and good, but the American experience may best be captured in the story of a grape—a grape born on American soil from seeds that grew wild across the country long before the colonists set sail from Europe. A grape, like those early settlers, that is tough and resilient, thriving seemingly on shear will in places where those of lesser ambition fail.

The Norton grape doesn’t grow in Napa Valley’s lush fields or under cool Pacific Northwest rains. It doesn’t have one of those fancy hybrid names like Cabernet Franc, Chambourcin, or Vidal Blanc. Its supporters, while passionate, are a small lot, a blip on the winemaking radar. But the story of Norton—an obscure, two-hundred-year-old grape grown almost exclusively in Virginia and Missouri—is a true American tale that chronicles the rise, fall, and rebirth not only of the grape but of the entire winemaking industry in two states not generally known for viticulture.

“I like to leave Norton for the end because if you taste it first, everything else will taste like Norton,” bellows winemaker Dennis Horton from under the vaulted ceiling of his vineyard’s tasting room and wine-storage facility in Gordonsville, Virginia.

Few wines look like Norton, and fewer taste like it. In a glass the wine’s aroma is akin to a Syrah—dark and fruity—but the color is a deep, brooding purple, almost black. Horton’s 2005 Norton Native Virginia Red carries the typically atypical notes of the varietal in its early years: dense and earthy with hints of fruit and a slightly spicy finish. Not overpowering, but distinct. Norton is rugged in a strangely wistful way that carries the taste of a bygone era.

Early Production

The men of the Virginia Company founded the first permanent British settlement at Jamestown in 1607. The land was wild and, in a way, so were the settlers sent by the crown to tame it. Epically ambitious, the pioneers’ zest for adventure and liberty was matched only by their thirst for strong drink.

The settlers began experimenting with winemaking shortly after arriving in the New World, using European grapes as well as those growing wild in their adopted country. The seventeenth century was largely one of trial and mostly error for the first American vintners. Virginia suffers from extreme weather, with gray, single-digit winter frosts accompanied by freezing rain and sleet that sometimes last into May. The summer’s skin-soaking humidity breeds mildew and rot.

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agreed that the father belonged to the *Vitis aestivalis* species, but because Dr. Norton grew several *aestivalis* varieties at his farm, the exact progenitor remains a mystery. The result of the doctor’s work is nevertheless clear. “Norton is as close as you can get to bulletproof,” says Horton.

The Norton grape requires a longer growing period—about three weeks more than most *vinifera* species—which allows it to survive lingering spring frosts. Its local genes provide natural resistance to the American-born plagues that still haunt European grapes like Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. (At both the Horton operation and at Stone Hill Vineyards, a long-time Norton crafter in Missouri, growers spray most of their grape varietals with pesticides as many as sixteen times a year; by contrast, they spray their Norton grapes three times a year, a process that Stone Hill general manager Jon Held jokingly calls “neglect farming.”)

Although the Norton grape was born and raised in Virginia, it came of age in Missouri. Like Virginia, the Show Me State isn’t exactly the first state that comes to mind when discussing American wine. But, like Virginia, Missouri was in the forefront of U.S. wine production in the republic’s early days. In 1848 German settlers founded Hermann, a village in the rolling hills eighty miles west of St. Louis. In the 1850s their countrymen arrived in huge waves to settle both sides of the Missouri River, drawn to the region by the writings of Gottfried Duden, who painted an enticing if not entirely accurate portrait of a temperate climate and land ripe for farming. Finding the rugged terrain unsuitable for farming staples like corn and wheat, many villagers turned to grape growing, and by 1870 Missouri was the nation’s leading wine producer, making over 320,000 gallons a year.

Much of that wine came from Hermann, where new vintners—many of whom hailed from northern Germany and had no prior winemaking experience—quickly gave up on European grapes in favor of native varieties: Norton, Catawba, and Concord. In 1873 Poeschel & Scherer, the town’s largest winery, took home a gold medal for its Norton at the Universal Exhibition in Austria. Poeschel & Scherer became Stone Hill Wine Company in 1883, when its founders retired and sold the winery to local entrepreneur George Stark, who had emigrated to Hermann from Germany in 1867. With the help of his sons Stark expanded

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Above: Cross J Norton Vineyard in Hermann, Missouri, not far from Stone Hill’s main winery.

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Thanks to its superior climate and increased accessibility, California rebounded quickly from the Prohibition era and went on to flourish as the nation’s new wine capital in the years following repeal. But it did so without Norton, focusing instead on popular European varietals well suited to northern California’s climate. While Norton has never been planted in significant quantity on the West Coast, Dennis Horton believes that the grape may soon make a splash in California, as he has recently been selling Norton grapes to renowned Sine Qua Non winemaker Manfred Krankl.

Norton Today

Outside the Horton Vineyard tasting room a tree-lined road drifts past rows of Rkatsiteli and Petit Manseng to U.S. Route 33, Spotswood Trail. The highway’s namesake—Governor Alexander Spotswood—had explored the nearby valley in 1716. He had also sponsored a German settlement, the “Germana Colony,” which consisted largely of indentured workers brought over to work Spotswood’s mines. These colonists soon began making wine for themselves. Just a few miles to the north lies James Madison’s Montpelier home, where the Father of the Constitution and nation’s fourth president tried his hand at making wine in the early 1770s. The trail then blazes east toward the Blue Ridge Mountains,
which rise and fall in lush green waves against the sky. In Stanardsville the road passes fields where General Custer and his men crossed frost-covered farmlands en route to Charlottesville in the spring of 1864. Today, Custer is best known for his “last stand,” a bloody final charge in which the general and over two hundred of his cavalrmen fell at the hands of Sioux warriors.

At Horton Vineyards and a smattering of other wine estates the Norton grape is making a stand of its own. Fifty-six years after the repeal of Prohibition Norton returned to Virginia, reintroduced to the Old Dominion by Dennis Horton, a Missourian. As a child Horton had played in the underground tunnels that once stored Stone Hill wine near his family’s home in Hermann. In 1965 Stone Hill owner Jim Held—Jon’s father—had discovered Norton grapes growing wild on a bootlegger’s property west of Hermann; he planted cuttings for commercial production the next year.

Meanwhile, Dennis Horton had left his Missouri home to serve in the Air Force and earn a college degree before moving to Virginia, where he started an office-supply company in 1977. A wine enthusiast who grew grapes in his front yard, Horton decided to go into the commercial winemaking business in 1989, when he purchased the land on which his winery now sits. The first thing he planted was eight acres of Norton. “It was a gamble to plant Norton, mostly because people here had never heard of the grape, but I knew it had worked here before,” Horton explains. He now sells about 2,500 cases of Norton wine each year, a respectable haul for the man responsible for resurrecting the grape in its native land. But the Horton plantings are tiny compared to the vast fields dedicated to the grape some sixty miles to the north in Middleburg, Virginia.

Middleburg is a silver-spoon equestrian retreat in the Blue Ridge foothills. There, new money has injected life into the centuries-old grape. In 1998 Jenni McCloud, having just sold her Florida-based software company, moved to Middleburg, where she established Chrysalis Vineyards at the 209-acre Locksley Estate just beyond the east end of town. One hundred and forty-seven wineries now span the state’s five wine regions, with total acreage planted in grapes greater than at any other time in Virginia’s history. Most vintners, however, have opted for European vinifera—Bordeaux, Merlot, Chardonnay, and the increasingly popular Viognier—rather than Norton and other native grapes. Even the state wine industry’s Web site boasts of Virginia as “a new world area, producing old world style wines.” But with an adventurous palate and a desire to differentiate herself from the local vintners, McCloud decided early on to focus her efforts on Norton. Given the grape’s history in the state, the decision seemed natural. “This is our wine. Why the hell wouldn’t I grow it?” she asks bluntly. With sixty-nine acres of the grape growing at Locksley and in nearby Delaplane, Chrysalis is now the world’s largest Norton grower. The winery has won medals for both its Nortons and Viogniers and has emerged as a major player in the local wine industry.

Missouri wine country has also enjoyed a rebound of late, although one that is slower and less pronounced. Today, about one hundred wineries operate in the state, with Norton playing a much more central role in the industry’s renaissance than in Virginia. The varietal is the official state grape and accounts for almost 20 percent of the wine-growing acreage statewide, most of which is consumed within Missouri. Yet beyond this Midwest fame Norton remains largely unknown, in part because winemakers are wary of introducing new wines, especially one with an uncommon taste and harsh-sounding name. But the main reason for Norton’s slow revival may be the amount of effort it takes to make the wine properly. Chrysalis’s prolific production notwithstanding, the process of growing the “bulletproof” grape is not simply a matter of clearing land, planting vines, and waiting for them to sprout into hearty, wine-ready grapes.

A Norton vine produces a large number of water sprouts—upwards of fifteen—the majority of which must be thinned in a careful and time-consuming process to allow sufficient sunlight to reach the grapes. Norton grapes are also uniquely high in both acidity and pH levels, which must be delicately balanced. For this reason many Norton makers also offer blends, most commonly with Chambourcin.

If Norton is so resilient, able to thrive in an unpredictable, harsh, and immoderate climate, why isn’t it grown elsewhere in any quantity, especially on the West Coast? According to McCloud the answer is simple: the modern Norton grape reflects the character and identity of the region where it originated and has grown for almost two hundred years—a band stretching from the Atlantic west into Missouri. As such, Norton displays the distinctive imprint of the region’s terrain, climate, and rainfall: “It’s what makes Norton, Norton. It has a certain personality that it wouldn’t have if you grew it somewhere else,” McCloud notes.

It also takes a certain personality—what Dennis Horton calls “testicular fortitude”—to decide to grow an obscure grape far off the radar of American viticulture. In many ways Norton’s purveyors are a lot like the immigrant pioneers who sought adventure in a wild, uncharted land halfway across the globe. They are ambitious and bold, and wild in their own way. But unlike their forebears, these modern pioneers at least have something decent to drink.