



A Tale of Rutger: One Man's Quest for Fine Wine in Virginia

I can't even remember when I met Rutger, or why. It seems so long ago that this very passionate man began his search for the best place to grow wine in Virginia. All I know now is that his is a story of perseverance that is far from over but has given me great insight into exactly what goes into a bottle of wine, hopefully great wine. I have seen many, and even farmed, excellent vineyards, but I have never been part of the hunt. I worked with An-min Wu to develop the Pennsylvania Vineyard Site Selection System, a computer-based program that analyzes 13 climate and soil criteria in the enormous GIS data base at Penn State. But this is a totally cerebral and digitized process that supports the selection decision, it doesn't make the decision. Rutger's search was about merging an instinct for terroir with viticulture knowledge and technology of the first order.

Rutger began a conversation with me about four years ago when he started to look for a vineyard site to make wine. He had a problem. He wanted to do it in northern Virginia because that's where he and his wife want to live. If there was ever an obstacle to making good wine it is the gap between where you want your house to be and that place's suitability for wine growing. The logical approach is to decide what wine you want to make and go to the place that makes it best: Riesling-Finger Lakes. Pinot Noir-Willamette Valley, Cabernet Sauvignon-Napa, and so on. Northern Virginia-?? There is growing evidence, of course, that Virginia is, indeed, a fine place to grow wine, but it is still very much a work in progress. So what's a guy like Rutger to do?

To begin, look and think, think and look, about what makes great wine and does such a place exist in Northern Virginia? He looked. Everywhere. And for a long time. At one point, he scared all of us by going to California and looking there. But he came back here and continued his search. There were some close calls with some very promising properties but nothing happened. The search continued for over three years. I knew, with this kind of patience and doggedness that Rutger was eventually going to make some pretty nice wine.

Like most new grape growers coming into the industry, Rutger does not have an agricultural background. Most of the people I work with have had very successful professional careers and now, for a love of wine, have decided that they want to get closer to the earth. This is a real challenge for them. Most of them do not fully understand or respect agriculture and nature and the importance of the land in fine wine production. Having been successful elsewhere they assume that the sheer force of will, or money, will bring them their wishes. Rutger never had this attitude. He displayed a rare humility toward understanding the complexities of wine production and mysteries of the soil and climate. He set out to learn as much as he could from the people he was able to identify who shared his personal goals.

One of the smartest things he did was to hitch his fine wine wagon to Jim Law at Linden Vineyards. Jim is one of the smartest viticulturists in the land. You will not find a more thoughtful, deliberative, earnest, caring and compassionate individual, and that's speaks to the non-vinous virtues. On the wine side, there are few that I have met in the biz as intuitive and sensitive. He embodies my favorite attributes in a wine grower – empirical with knowledge. Jim has been growing wine at Linden for more than 25 years and he will be the first to tell you that he has made every mistake in the book. But he is very good at dissecting his errors and filing them for future reference. The evolution of his

vineyard and wines has been a reflection of his ongoing learning and now he has reached a point where he understands the nature of his land and its relationship with the vine. Unfortunately, this means wholesale changes according to variety and soil, but that is the accepted way to fine wine. Rutger spent much of his three years working for Jim while he looked for the ideal place for a vineyard, gaining experience in the vineyard and cellar that will serve him well later on.

The second thing he did was hire the best outside consultants that money can buy to help with the design and establishment of his vineyard. My job is all about filling a knowledge gap. You may be a crackerjack stock broker or lawyer but when it comes to creating a fine vineyard, what do you really know? Any vineyard, before it is vines, is really just a long list of questions. To the extent that any fine wine wannabe will attain that goal is directly correlated to their ability to successfully answer this laundry list of questions. For most, an educated guess may be about as close as you can get to a right answer, but even educated guesses with knowledge and critical information. Rutger knew the right questions to ask which meant he was closer to the solution than most. Then, he found the right people to give him the information he needed. It is information overload and there were times when I'm sure his brain was ready to pop. In viticulture there are a dozen ways to do anything and every grower will tell you his own method or idea. It is up to Rutger to sort it out, process, synthesize and make the final choice. He has done this very well. Key questions include grape varieties, clones and rootstocks, vine density and spacing, row direction, training and trellis systems, site preparation and much more. Rigorous viticulture-based soil analysis helps to forecast vine vigor in areas where growth potential is unknown. With this information in hand, a balanced vine can be achieved and the appropriate viticulture decisions made. Integrated Winegrowing uses its own set of soil evaluation criteria to determine total available water on a scale of 1-5. For fine wine, well-drained soils are needed and that is what Rutger was looking for and, to a large extent, found on his property. Climate is the other significant variable that is so complex. IW seeks to place varieties at the outer limits of where they can easily ripen. On Rutger's property, position on the hill will be of great importance. So many questions to answer! If you have ever built a house from scratch, you know what this is like and the insecure feeling of permanence of every decision.

Finally, Rutger is easily one of the most personable young men I have ever met. He meets people and information begins to spew out of them. He is likeable and you naturally want to help him succeed. But he has been very selective in who he seeks that knowledge from. He has spent a week in Bordeaux, specifically to learn about their pruning and training practices and talking with the likes of Kees van Leeuwen at Chateau Cheval Blanc and visiting the great first growth vineyards. He has traveled up and down the west coast, learning from growers there in the best vineyards. It has been an amazing educational process. The trick now is to translate all of that knowledge to Northern Virginia, not a simple exercise at all.

It is quite an experience to stand on a piece of land and to try to feel its viticultural and wine potential. Analysis, no matter how thorough, only gets you part way to the answers that will be revealed once the vines are planted and wine is made. That's all part of the mystique of wine growing. Rutger found a piece of property near Delaplaine that has all the correct attributes of a good vineyard, hopefully a great one - east to southeast slopes, granite and greenstone soils, moderate to steep slopes varying in elevation from 650 to 850 feet. Standing on it, it just looks and feels right. And the views from the top of the hill are breathtaking. If this all works, he is clearly sitting on a gold mine and will instantly establish himself as the benchmark for Eastern wine growing.

Benchmarks are important. Another exercise Rutger does to contribute to his wine education is to taste a lot of wines, not just during his travels but at home so he can educate and exercise his palate. Wine growers who do not taste wines can never gain the necessary perspective to allow them to improve and progress. It's like making any widget: there's always a better widget somewhere so why not try to meet and surpass that standard. Rutger gets together with Jim and other knowledgeable wine imbibers once a week to critically taste wines from all over the world. He will not necessarily try to

duplicate these wines because ultimately, he will be made Virginia XXX, but it provides a context and definition for specific examples from a variety and region.

The evaluation of the property is particularly interesting. For that he has worked with a variety of experts, include Alex Blackburn, the soil scientist from Loudon County that helped to map the property by digging over 200 soil cores. Integrated Winegrowing, a consortium of viticulture and soils consultants from Sonoma were also engaged. Each member of this team has a specialty –soil analysis, climate, viticulture, vineyard establishment, irrigation, etc. Alfred Cass and Daniel Roberts have spent a lot of time with Rutger assessing and developing recommendations for his property. After a year of digging soil pits, collecting climate data and walking over the ground, a real plan has been formulated that includes 11 distinct blocks of vines, each planned according to variety, clone and rootstock. The land has been cleared and cultivated and now it stands ready to be transformed into a vineyard. It can hardly be explained how difficult it is to prepare a virgin property to be a vineyard, and how expensive it can be if you want to do it properly. Just ask Rutger and he will tell you. I admire the way he has performed the grueling work of grubbing trees, roots, and rocks from the land. Everything you can do before the vines are planted to make the land suitable for cultivation and vineyard is well worth the effort. This spring, soil amendments will be added, the vineyard blocks will be laid out and marked, trellis and drip irrigation will be installed and everything will be made ready for the vines next spring.

It is an exciting time for Rutger. The question mark is still lingers and hangs over the vineyard, but it much smaller than it was a year ago. The passion and enthusiasm for the hunt, and now the development, has not diminished one bit. In fact, if anything, it has increased with the anticipation of that first crop. A winery site has been selected and the mere thought of sitting on the top of the hill, gazing at the beautiful surrounding hills with a glass of deep, dark, rich, flavorful and delicious red wine in hand is enough to fuel this dream. I know I'll be among the first in line to get a bottle of his wine.

It has been my privilege and pleasure to watch Rutger progress through the vineyard development process. He has been the most polite, generous, thoughtful, introspective and passionate person I have encountered in almost 30 years in the wine industry. He is just what the Mid-Atlantic region needs to prove its wine potential. When he succeeds, he will be the reference point for others to follow and from there, who knows where we can take this regional wine industry.

<http://rdvvineyards.com/>

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May, 2005