



VIRGINIA WINE LOSES A LEGEND



Virginia's wine community is celebrating the life and achievements of one of its giants, Dennis Horton, the Maverick vintner who defied conventional wisdom by planting grapes few people had heard of, and in so doing convinced many skeptical oenophiles that Virginia could make great wines. Horton died on June 19.

Dennis Horton was a tinkerer, determined to grow as many grape varieties as he could to figure out which ones would succeed in Virginia. He believed familiar varieties such as chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon were ill-suited to Virginia's wet climate, and he looked for grapes with thick skins and loose clusters that might help them cope with rain and humidity. Not everything worked.

Horton's successes still resonate and help shape the public's image of Virginia wine. He was the first commercial vintner to plant Viognier, syrah, touriga, marsanne, roussanne, nebbiolo, tannat, pinotage, rkatsiteli and other grape varieties found across the state today. He achieved his breakthrough when his 1993 Horton Vineyards Viognier — only his second vintage — achieved critical acclaim and impressed California winemakers in a Judgment of Paris-style blind tasting. More Viognier was soon planted throughout the state, and today it is considered Virginia's signature grape.

He also reintroduced the Norton grape to Virginia, where it had been developed in the 1820s. Norton was a mainstay of American wine in the late 1800s, especially in Missouri, but it had languished after Prohibition. With vine cuttings from Missouri's Stone Hill Winery, which had restored its vineyards in the 1960s, Horton brought Norton home and soon championed it as Virginia's red grape, impervious to the climate. "It will grow through sidewalks!" he liked to say.

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"He turned underdog grapes into Virginia's star wines."