



Photo by Susie Audibert

The gift shop at Horton Cellars contributes to the relaxed and informal atmosphere of the tasting room.

"everything from pencils all the way up to high-security shredders." He continues to own and operate that Northern Virginia business to this day.

But his heart and, most importantly, his head has always resided with that "hobby gone mad." He bought the farm in Aroda in 1977, and started planting grape varieties in 1983. In 1988, he and Joan Bieda, established Horton Vineyards with 55 acres. Dennis' wife, Sharon, who coined the term "a hobby gone mad," did the physical work of planting and running the vineyard. Horton made its first wine at Montdomaine Cellars in Albemarle County.

Construction on the current winery in Barboursville started in 1992. Currently the vines planted on a north/south axis, in the "frost pocket" out front, are a cold resistant variety called Rkatskelli. The distinctive lyre shaped trellising allows the sun to hit all sides of each vine's interior and exterior canopy during the day. Another 60 acres at Berry Hill outside of Orange and 17 acres in Aroda round out Horton's current plantings.

Horton employs some 20 workers in the vineyards and another 25 full and part-time in the winery. His winemaker, Mike Heny has been with him for 12—or is it 13 years now? "People stay with me. I think if you treat people right and they treat you right, I think you'll stay here." He points out that he hasn't had to lay anybody off despite these perilous economic times. Speaking of which, he scoffs at the bailout saying that small business employs 80 percent of the workforce but is collecting not a dime in stimulus money.

He also claims an excellent working relationship with his neighbors across Rt. 33, Barboursville Winery, adding it's a good thing that they, Burnley and Keswick are so close to each

other. He likens them to the proverbial multiple antique stores all doing well on the same corner. "It's great; proximity means a lot," he beams. Right now Dennis Horton, at age 63, is wrestling with the idea of expanding.

Out behind the building, at the entrance to the underground 16-foot tall winemaking and storage cellar, Horton shows off his wine press. He can process 20 tons of white grapes in a day; 40 to 60 tons of red. A ton produces between 150 and 160 cases. Today, Horton is maxed out at about 30,000 cases a year.

Horton is also the state's largest producer of bulk wine, and they also

vals, which he terms "a really nice way to promote your product." He keeps a crew out on the road from April through August going to 46 of these events in a season. Virtually all of them are in Virginia. "Our main wine market is Virginia," he continues. "I don't try to make all my money in the tasting room. I personally don't think that's possible...So, my goal is to get into distribution, to get into grocery stores, to get into wine shops, to get into restaurants and go through distributors."

In the tasting room, a price sheet describes these 40 wines in amusing, sometimes hokey, terms like "Cheesecake in a bottle," or "Horseshoe Wine," which goes for seven bucks a pop, or "Hot Tub Wine," which goes for \$10, or "Big Barolo Baby," which sells for \$20, which is the high end of his price line.

There are also numerous humorous T-shirts for sale at the gift shop at Horton Cellars. One pictures the silhouette of a nude lass with the words, "zero to naked in 1.5 bottles." It's a gag gift that a frat boy might buy for his girlfriend...certainly not expected at one of the most prestigious wineries in the state.

But there is a method to Dennis Horton's madness, because as soon as you see that T-shirt and the other moderately priced gifts offered for sale, you realize that this is a winery for the people, and not the pinky pointing wine snob set. A young couple can drive up here from Richmond on a Saturday, enjoy tasting some wine, maybe buy a three-pack of their favorites, plus the T-shirt on impulse, and go home and prove it right!



Photo by Susie Audibert

Horton Cellars offers an incredible 40 choices in red and white wine, port, fruit wine, even commemorative editions such as this red honoring the settling of Jamestown.

custom bottle for some clients. Although he does not use concentrate to make wine, he will use it to enhance the sugar percentage. "You can also use Chateau Domino," he winks.

As it is, he offers 40 different choices including multiple reds, whites, a trio of Ports, and nine fruit wines.

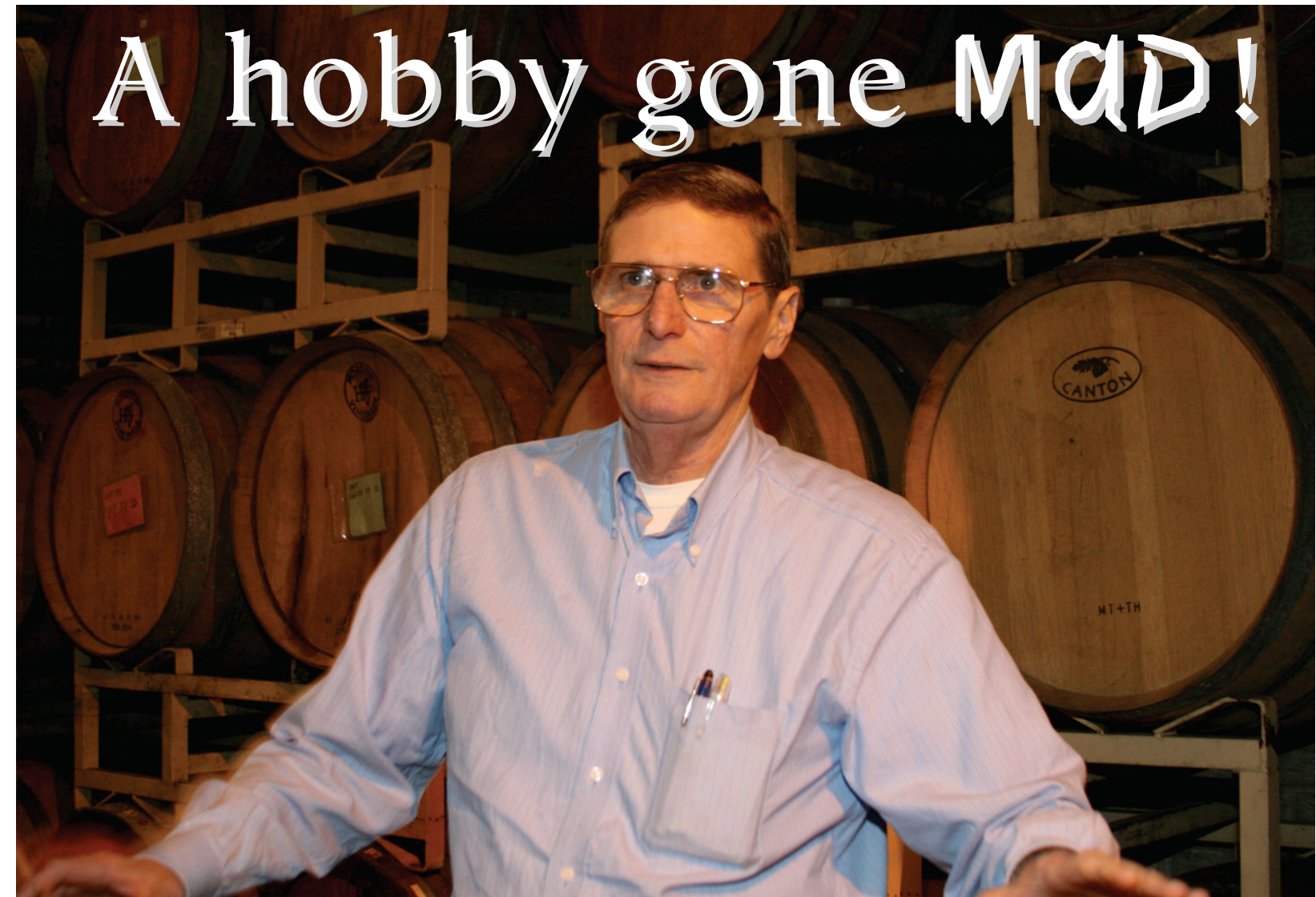
Why so many different wines? "People like sweet wine, people like dry wine, people like red wine, people like white wine, people like late harvest wines," shrugs Horton. "Eighty percent of the wine bought today will be consumed within 48 hours. People buy wine to drink today. That's why grocery stores sell as much wine as they do."

He's also a big fan of wine festi-



Photo by Susie Audibert

They know how to have fun at Horton. At a Mardi Gras party a year ago this past February, Janet Mauphin (right) of Madison got into the spirit of things with Horton employees, Gena Lloyd and Bob Downes.



Photos by Susie Audibert

Dennis Horton says establishing a vineyard and winery is an expensive proposition. Just the oak cooperage behind him can cost between \$500 and almost \$950 a barrel. And on any given year, he will use between 1,250 and 2,000 barrels. Above, Horton Cellars is now in its 20th year of production. It has turned a profit for the past seven years.

That's what Dennis Horton's wife Sharon calls it, "a hobby gone mad."

Some hobby! Now in its 20th year, Horton Cellars near Barboursville, with its \$5 million investment, its 45 employees, its 30,000 case yearly output, its 80+ acres of vines, its winery, its medals and its list of "firsts;" well... it would be an insult to call this a hobby.

Dennis Horton doesn't mind; he just smiles and puffs on a stogie as he looks out over his tasting room and gift shop from a second floor balcony. Gradually you get the idea that Dennis Horton's "hobby," is not just planting vineyards or making wine; it's making it a success. That's what turns him on.

Here are some of the mileposts: Today Horton Cellars is in its seventh year turning a profit and has repaid its investors (he and one partner) every penny of the \$5 million they put into it. He has successfully introduced at least

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The Horton Winery under construction in the early 1990s. The business of winemaking and wine storage takes place in a 16-foot deep cellar beneath this building.

a half dozen previously unknown or underappreciated grape varieties to the state of Virginia. And in so doing he has set the winemaking community, from Virginia to California, on its ear.

Never one to mince his words, he says, "There was one thing that I knew from making wine, and I've been making wine for a long time, is a winemaker is no more than a chef." He is responding to a question that asks if he is regarded as a renegade in this business. "If you give a chef a piece of prime filet mignon and the best vegetables he can get, then all he can do is screw it up... If it was just a matter of hiring the best winemaker to make the best bottle of wine, we'd all do that. I'd pay him \$100,000 a year just to make my wine."

Ingredients are the key, he continues. "If you don't start out with world-class fruit, you're going to have less than a world-class quality product. There's no doubt about it. Period. The balance of the fruit when it comes into harvest has got to be where it's supposed to be or it isn't going to be that world-class product."

And in this environment, this soil, this elevation, this climate, he has found that certain varieties consistently do better than others. "The preamble says 'all men are created equal.' We all know that's [expletive deleted]," says Horton who mischievously laces his speech with mild obscenities. "Neither are grapes. In different environments they

react differently to different things."

He learned this from careful experimentation at the farm he bought in Aroda in 1977. Referring to himself as a viticulturist first and a winemaker second, he says "I thought if we can't grow the grapes right, how are we going to make great wine?"

He planted quarter-acre plots of various varieties. "If it worked, I continued to grow them. And if it didn't work, I'd pull 'em up. It's very expensive because an acre of grapes costs you \$15,000 to put in the ground and get a crop, and that's not including the cost of the land; that's just the trellising, everything else to put it in."

He found the classic Cabernet Sauvignon "difficult to work with," particularly when it rains. But he also noticed that Cabernet Franc was "pretty well balanced." Other grapes such as Riesling and Pinot Noir he terms "a disaster."

He found the classic Cabernet Sauvignon "difficult to work with," particularly when it rains. But he also noticed that Cabernet Franc was "pretty well balanced." Other grapes such as Riesling and Pinot Noir he terms "a disaster." The other classic vinifera grape, Chardonnay, he found that if one berry is infected by botrytis, "eventually the whole cluster gets botrytis." But not so with an obscure grape called Viognier. Dennis found that not only would the cluster remain uninfected by botrytis, but the fruit came in consistently at 23 brix (percent sugar). Ideally, he says, "you want your sugars to rise, your acid to drop a little bit, but you want your pH not to get out of sight." Viognier was doing all this.



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You have to dig lots of holes to make a vineyard. Dennis Horton started in 1983 with two rows of Cabernet Franc, one row of Merlot and one of Cabernet Sauvignon. Currently he has about 80 acres under cultivation.

ing radar screens. It was a good thing that Viognier became popular in California "because California adds respect. So it was easier to sell Viognier after they got in the act." Today, in Virginia, "there's 60 different wineries now making Viognier and anybody who's planting anything new is growing Viognier." Just recently, *The Washington Post* published a favorable review of



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The open lyre trellising system with its 11 wires is expensive to install, but it allows even exposure to sunlight on the sides and interior of grapevines planted in north/south rows.

include the cost of the land. It costs heaven-knows-how-much more to build a winery, buy all the equipment from the oak barrels that go for as much as \$950 a pop to the glycol-jacketed stainless steel fermenting tanks. "If you borrow all the money I put into this thing, you're going to go broke," says Horton with a note of absolute finality. "We put \$5 million in this place."

He plays out a scenario if you borrowed \$5 million from the bank: "year one; revenue, zero. Year two, you still don't have a crop. You've got to have more men to take care of more acreage and you're still planting more vines. Zero revenue. So this whole time, this \$5 million at 5 percent is \$250,000 a year...so now you're down a half a million. Year three, you still don't have a crop. Now you owe the bank \$5.75 million. So now you're down \$5,750,000 bucks and haven't brought in a dollar's worth of revenue yet."

Virginia Viognier wines, quoting Dennis Horton extensively.

Horton, the renegade, concludes, "I think what we contributed to the wine industry is that there's been a transition in the grapes being grown in the state, which I think is good." And he adds, "Now Cabernet Franc is pretty much a staple. I don't know anybody in the state who's not making a Cab Franc."

Is Virginia wine finally getting respect? "Yes," says Horton. "The level of the quality of wine in Virginia since the early 90's has risen drastically. I mean we can hold up our wine against anybody." But, he cautions, that of 155 wineries in the state, only a handful make the most wine. "There's about maybe 10 of us who are in the real wine production capability."

The rest are, well, for lack of a better word, into a hobby gone mad. "A lot of people get into the wine business with their heart and not their head," says Horton sagely. "I always wanted to be in the wine business; the problem is the amount of money it takes to do it."

Take a look at these numbers. You've already learned that it costs \$15,000 an acre to plant a crop, and that doesn't

He catches his breath. "Year five, you actually get to the point where you have a crop, but it takes you a year to make white wine, and it'll take you a couple of years to make red. So you're



Photo by Susie Audibert

During the week, Dennis Horton tends to his office equipment and supply business in Northern Virginia. He comes to Barboursville on weekends to check up on his "hobby gone mad."

seven years now.

Where there's a will, there's a way and like the man said, he always wanted to be in the wine business. That was probably sparked by the fact that he grew up a block away from what used to be the second largest winery in the whole country. Located about 80 miles southwest of St. Louis, Stone Hill

Winery was producing 150,000 cases a year until it was shut down by Prohibition.

Fast forward to 1963. Dennis Horton was 17 and just entering college at the University of Missouri when that winery reopened. During a break from college to raise enough money to continue to attend, he was drafted into the Air Force, where he served for three years and six months, spending part of his time in Thailand. Dennis Horton took an early out to finish his college education at the University of Maryland. "After Maryland I stayed in the area and never left."

After working his way up in several calculator and office systems companies, he eventually formed his own firm selling office equipment and supplies to the federal government,



Photo by Susie Audibert

Jenny Erickson is one of the 45 full and part-time employees at Horton Cellars and Vineyards. Dennis Horton says he hasn't had to lay anyone off despite the economic downturn.

Firsts

Dennis Horton is understandably proudest of the year "we cleaned everybody's clock," with his Viognier in 1993. He helped introduce that grape variety to this side of the world, and now it's grown from Virginia to California. But that's not the only first that Dennis Horton can claim.

He was also the first to produce a red Cabernet Franc in Virginia, as well as Marsanne, Mouverde, Malbec, Touriga Nacional, and a Harvest Viognier. He introduced Rkatsikelli in 1994, a cold-resistant variety popular in Russia and China, but with only 20 acres planted to date in the United States. That's what's growing out in front of the winery on Rt. 33 today.

Since then he's introduced Tannat, and in 2000, Petit Manseng which he refers to as "a sugar factory." On the horizon? A South African grape called Pinotage. "It's another one that won't rot, sugar's up and the fruit comes in balance."

And then there's the story about Norton. Developed in Virginia by a Richmond doctor in 1835, this hybrid between a native Virginia grape and something, no one's exactly sure, all but disappeared during Prohibition. It was Dennis Horton who brought the grape from a winery at his boyhood home in Missouri to his adopted home in Barboursville...back to the state from which it first came.