

QUARTERLY EXTRA

# EXTRA POUR

*Virginia Wine Time*

## Meritage Blends Bring Success to Local Winemakers

by Warren Richard



Local oenophiles can recall the days when red wines from Virginia were simply not drinkable. Descriptors from these less than remarkable vintages may include “thin”, “green”, and “astringent”. Over the past decade or so, though, winemakers have figured out what works for Virginia’s hot, humid, and often wet climate, and the result has been excellent vintages for Virginia red wines. In particular, area winemakers now know that blending red varieties grown in small lots and from prime vineyards yield premium wines. The final product from these blends may be called

Meritage, and for Virginia winemakers Meritage blends have produced numerous awards as well as accolades from critics and satisfied customers.

What exactly is a Meritage wine? The term was coined by California winemakers to designate wines crafted in the Bordeaux style, but they needed a classification that did not infringe upon the Bordeaux region’s legally protected appellation. Also, these American wines tended not to meet minimal labeling requirements for varietals. In order to be classified as a Meritage wine, the final product must be a blend of at least two Bordeaux varieties, and these include cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot, petit verdot, and malbec; it may also include lesser known varieties such as gros verdot and carmenere. The trick for the winemaker, then, is to figure out which varietals and in what proportions will comprise the ultimate blend.

With this in mind, we wanted to know how at area winemakers go about crafting Meritage wines. We consulted with award-winning winemaker for King Family Vineyards, Matthieu Finot to get the answers. Finot’s 2007 Meritage won the prized Governors’ Cup in Virginia this year, and he graciously chatted with us about the process of creating an award winning blend.

**Virginia Wine Time:** How do you decide which varietals will be included in the Meritage, and which ones did you include in the 2007 vintage?

**Matthieu Finot:** I choose the grapes based on what we've got in the vineyards and what I think will create a good blend. The 2007 vintage includes 56% merlot, 20% petit verdot, 16% cabernet franc, 8% malbec. Merlot always grows well here at King Family Vineyards, and it makes sense to have it as the main part of the Meritage. Petit Verdot adds depth, color and structure, and it also brings a "left bank" side to my blend that I like a lot. Cabernet Franc grows well in Virginia and it brings spice and fruitiness. Malbec is hard to grow in Virginia, and it does give me more complexity in my wine; however, I do not add too much to the blend.

The 2007 vintage was my first Meritage that I've done at King Family Vineyards, and I came up with the optimal blend after lots of barrel tastings and blending trials. Only the best wines will be used in the Meritage, and I think we're producing a quality red wine.

**VWT:** How do you make a final decision regarding percentages that make up the ultimate blend? Do these percentages change from year to year?

**Finot:** My final decision is based on a style of wine that I want to produce with a focus on balance, fullness, and richness. Blending trials and tasting helps me to fine tune the final blend. Percentages change from year to year because each year produces different results in the vineyard. Following a set "recipe" to make a Meritage is a recipe for disaster. This is not an exact science, and winemakers need to taste and follow instincts.

**VWT:** Why should Virginia winemakers blend wines, especially red wines, rather than focus strictly on single varietal wines?

**Finot:** Blending brings more complexity and more layers into the wine---at least that is what I am doing. I learned to make wine in the Hermitage (100% syrah) and Burgundy (100% pinot noir and 100% chardonnay) regions, so I've got no problem with single varietal wine. However, blending different grapes helps the winemaker to express his skills and artistic talents!

**VWT:** How will your 2008 Meritage compare with the 2007 vintage, and when will it be released?

**Finot:** The 2008 Meritage has already been released, and it won't last long in the tasting room. It's selling very fast! The 2008 vintage has a little more petit verdot (25%) but is still driven by merlot (52%). Cabernet Franc (15%) and malbec (8%) completes the blend. I think that the '08 vintage is even better than the '07 because it's riper with a fuller body and has lots of depth. I really like it!

