

QUARTERLY EXTRA

EXTRA POUR*Virginia Wine Time***Food, Wine, and Luxury: The Inn at Meander Plantation**

by Warren Richard



Paul and I planned to revisit California wine country this summer; however, with the uncertainties of the economy, we decided to create a similar wine country vacation in Virginia. Travelers to the wine-centered communities of Napa or Sonoma know that inns, bed & breakfasts, and resorts are intermingled between vineyards and wineries to present postcard perfect sceneries. However, the same romantic settings can be found in our own backyard. Our travel plans took us to the Monticello Wine Trail where history and wine meld to produce a harmonious blend, and it was no coincidence that we chose to stay at the Inn at Meander Plantation where history, wine and romance also create a special blend.

The Inn at Meander Plantation has its roots in the colonial times. Colonel Joshua Fry, a

member of the House of Burgesses, established the plantation

in 1726; the manor was then enlarged in 1766 by Fry's son, Henry. At that time, though, the plantation was called Elim, and it was frequented by Henry Fry's friend, Thomas Jefferson. Of course, Virginia wine drinkers know that not only was Thomas Jefferson the author of the Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States, but he was also the father of winemaking in Virginia! Anyway, in the early 1900s, the owner of the Elim property was George Shearer, and it was he who changed the name to Meander as that was the name of the river located to the east of the property.

At one point, the property was slated for development, but those plans never materialized and the property was restored to private ownership in the early 1970s. Current owners Suzie Blanchard and Suzanne Thomas purchased the Meander property in 1991, and here is when the restoration and a renewed purpose began. Blanchard and Thomas met while working in Chicago; the native southerners shared passions for food, history and hospitality, and they decided to buy the Meander property while in the pursuit of a dream---to own and operate a country inn that captured the charm and history of colonial and post-colonial America.

In addition to operating the inn, Suzie and Suzanne are also chefs, and the Inn includes an award-winning restaurant that is open to the public as well as Inn guests. Menus include several courses that are each paired with Virginia wine. Of course, we had to ask the question---given the opportunity to pour wines from anywhere in the world, why Virginia wines? According to Suzanne, a decision to include only local wines on the menu was made at the very beginning, and long before eat/drink local mania was in vogue. To them, supporting local industries was the right thing to do; like many other Virginia wine tasters, they also saw the potential of Virginia wine and have marveled at

the industry's growth in size and quality over the past two decades. Suzie and Suzanne proudly pour Virginia wines and use their Inn to conduct a monthly Country Inn Cooking School and a semi-monthly Virginia Wine Academy. In seeking out accommodations for our trip, then, the Inn at Meander Plantation was a natural choice. Weary travelers can request that a cheese platter and a bottle of Virginia wine be served to them in their rooms. For our stay, we reserved the lovely Madison cottage, and our cheese platter was accompanied by a bottle of the 2009 Gray Ghost Chardonnay. Upon request, Suzanne will also prepare a picnic lunch for lodgers who wish to bring along food while on the wine trail. Our trek along the Monticello trail began in earnest the next day, so we placed our order for a picnic basket. And what a treat! Chicken sandwiches prepared with slices of well-seasoned, juicy chicken breasts and white cheese, pasta salad tossed with summer veggies, and freshly baked cookies awaited us when we dove into our lunch boxes. The chicken sandwiches and pasta salads made for perfect partners with the award-winning Sweely Estate Viognier 2007, and this was enjoyed after our tasting at the Sweely Estate Winery. A cloudier summer day made for cooler temperatures, and we were able to sip and savor while out on the patio which allowed us to appreciate breath-taking mountain landscapes. Oh---the cookies. Those were enjoyed without wine and were still quite warm from the oven!

For us, though, the ultimate experience at the Inn had to be the food and wine dinner. These four-course affairs are offered each Thursday, Friday and Saturday and are served in the Inn's restaurant. Two meal choices per course were made available to diners, but each selection was paired with the same Virginia wine. For example, for the first course, we could select either the locally grown heirloom tomato salad with fresh basil and mozzarella or the sautéed foie gras with locally grown damson plum chutney on bioche. Either would have been paired with the Thibaut-Janisson "Fizz" Virginia Sparking. The foie gras was tempting, but I cannot resist tomato salads this time of year; so, tomato salad was indeed my food of choice and was thoroughly enjoyed alongside the bubbly! For round two, I ordered the crab and corn fritters with spicy tomato jam paired with the creamy Rappahanock Cellars Chardonnay 2007. Three entrée options were available to diners but each option was paired with a different wine. My entrée of choice? I selected the succulent seared duck breast with blackberry gastrique, wilted spinach and sweet potato cakes with the Del Fosse Vineyards Merlot 2006. In fact, this Del Fosse offering was Paul's gold-star favorite when we visited the winery in April, 2009. Yet another year of aging allowed for a better integration of extracted dark fruit flavors and nuances of cedar and spice that married perfectly with the duck. Paul dined on the seared Black Angus flat iron steak served with roasted Retreat Farm rose gold potatoes, and this he enjoyed with the full-bodied Old House Vineyards Bacchanalia, a blend of red varieties that include Chambourcin. Yes, with dessert looming, we were indeed quite stuffed; however, we did reserve room for the corncake and blueberry bread pudding with Horton Vineyards port-blueberry sauce paired with the award-winning Gray Ghost Vineyards Adieu 2009.

For us, of course, our attraction to the Inn was the owners' commitment to the local concept and their steadfast promotion of Virginia wines. However, we also sought quality accommodations in quiet surroundings that made us feel truly pampered and relaxed. It was very easy for us to feel spoiled at the Inn at Meander Plantation. The well-appointed Madison cottage offers charm and elegance from another time. And the shower---Ahhh!! Five shower heads project water from all directions to soothe even the weariest of travelers. My own enjoyment, though, was the plush robes made available to guests of the cottage. In fact, I looked forward to encasing myself in a comfy robe at the end of each day. However, before ending each day, we made certain to sit on the bright-red Adirondack chairs which overlook the gorgeous mountain landscapes that surround the Inn; we usually brought along a glass of our favorite Virginia wine! And be sure to stroll around the well-manicured grounds that feature elegant gardens and fountains; you may be greeted by the owners' horses or their friendly dog, Callie.

At the end of our five-day stay at the Inn, we had to bid adieu to Suzie and Suzanne. We were reluctant to leave! We know that we will return to the Inn; however, we encourage readers to plan a trip to Virginia wine country along the Monticello Trail, and be certain to book a stay at the Inn. Be certain to mention that Virginia Wine Time sent you.

