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It all comes down to this

The last of four columns about the 2015 vintage at Barboursville Vineyards in Virginia.

Wine

DAVE
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The last day of September dawned sunny at Barboursville Vineyards, northeast of

Charlottesville, but rain loomed everywhere: in the clouds over the Blue Ridge to the west, in the red-clay mud soaked from four days of downpours, and in the minds of Luca Paschina, Fernando Franco and their crew. Most ominously, rain - lots of it - was in the forecast, with a classic nor'easter sweeping up the coast and Hurricane Joaquin barreling behind it, threatening the Mid-Atlantic with a double blow.

The 2015 vintage began with pruning the bare vines in the bitter January cold. It continued with efforts to nurture the vines during spring flowering and later to defend against summer's scourge of disease and pests.

Barboursville has nursed its vines through months of challenges. Finally, the harvest.



This is winemaker Luca Paschina's 25th vintage at Barboursville, which has become one of Virginia's top wineries.

A year's work was in danger if storms damaged the grapes before they could be picked. For Paschina, this vintage holds special significance: It's his 25th since taking the reins as general manager and chief winemaker, a quarter-century in which he transformed Barboursville into Virginia's most recognizable and important winery.

Franco, Barboursville's vineyard manager since 1997, climbed into the 10-foot-high cab of his New Holland Braud SB64 grape harvester and started the engine. It was 8 a.m. Two helpers drove tractors down the vine rows, towing large fans to blow water off the grapes. The Braud followed, straddling row after row of cabernet franc, then petit verdot, nebbiolo and cabernet sauvignon. Below Franco's perch, two fiberglass coils vibrated rapidly, shaking grape clusters from the vines into the vehicle's bin. He paused every few rows to

WINE CONTINUED ON E4



Each year, Barbourville's 185 acres of vineyards produce an average of 37,000 cases of wine. The first of the vineyards was planted in 1976.

A Virginia winery on the rise

WINE FROM E1

dump the grapes into smaller trolleys, which workers towed by tractor to the winery. By the time he turned the engine off for good, more than 20 hours later - at nearly 4:30 a.m. - Franco and his team had harvested 80 tons of grapes from 28 acres of vines.

Virginia's vintners say there's no such thing as a typical vintage in the Old Dominion. Paschina and Franco began harvesting white grapes in mid-August, taking advantage of favorable weather conditions and one of the driest Augusts on record.

"Two or three more weeks of this weather, and we will have a really good harvest for reds," Paschina told me in early September.

He came close. As clouds returned and a tropical depression formed in the Atlantic, the whites and the merlot, the earliest-ripening red, were safely in the winery. Yet Paschina faced a quandary known to vintners around the world: whether to harvest the remaining vineyards in advance of oncoming rains, when the grapes might not be at optimal ripeness,

or wait out the storm, confident that the grapes would dry out and continue ripening without rotting.

"We picked the week before, but on Friday, we decided to wait and let the grapes hang for a few more days," Paschina said. "The forecasts were all over the place, because there were three low-pressure systems, and no one knew what they were going to do. We decided to trust a forecast calling for a little rain and then perfect weather from Tuesday on, so we waited. By Sunday, we knew we were doomed, and we waited for any break in the weather to let us pick. That came on Wednesday."

The urgency felt at Barbourville was echoed in vineyards throughout the commonwealth. At Veritas Vineyard & Winery, west of Charlottesville, crews were "picking as if our lives depended on it," vineyard manager Bill Tonkins posted on his Facebook page the next day. In Northern Virginia, where red grapes typically ripen a week or two later, Rachel Martin and her team at Boxwood Estate Winery near Middleburg decided to leave their cabernet sauvignon hanging on the vines. At Tarara Winery in

Loudoun County, syrah and cabernet sauvignon were "nowhere near ready" to pick, winemaker Jordan Harris said. With the storms ultimately not as bad as forecast, Harris and Martin - and others who waited - felt vindicated.

"If we get a week and more of dry weather, we should be all right," Harris said.

Back at Barbourville, a weary Paschina did not regret his decision to pick before the storm. "The grapes were ripe enough that we knew they couldn't take more rain," he said. "I would like to have had a few more days, but nothing came in under our standards."

A consultant-turned-winemaker

Paschina first came to Virginia in 1990 as a young consultant hired by Barbourville's owner, Gianni Zonin, to help turn around an underperforming winery. Zonin, the head of a prominent family-owned Italian wine company founded in 1821, had bought the property in 1976 and immediately planted a vineyard.

Paschina recalls 1990 as "the worst vintage ever in Virginia -

except maybe 2003." Yet he fell in love with the region and told Zonin he wanted to take on the task of transforming Barbourville into a world-class winery. So he turned the consulting gig into a full-time job, and soon he was trading his native Piemonte in northwestern Italy for Virginia's Piedmont.

There were about 40 wineries in Virginia. A quarter-century later, there are more than 250, with Barbourville the most significant commercially and in terms of quality. The tasting room is always busy, and Paschina oversees a top-notch restaurant called Palladio, featuring northern Italian cuisine, and a small luxury inn. With 185 acres of vineyards, Barbourville produces an average of 37,000 cases of wine each year. Those include crowd-pleasers like crisp pinot grigio and age-worthy viognier, cabernet franc, a Bordeaux blend called Octagon and a luscious vin santo-style dessert wine.

He has not done this alone. In the early days, he got advice from some of Virginia's pioneer vintners: Gabriele Rausse, Barbourville's first winemaker, who now has his

own label and manages the vineyards and gardens at Monticello; Jim Law of Linden Vineyards; Shep Rouse of Rockbridge Vineyard; Joachim Hollerith of Prince Michel Vineyard & Winery and Rapidan River Wines; and Alan Kinne, who worked at several early Virginia wineries and now makes wine in California. Daniele Tessaro, an experienced winemaker from Friuli, Italy, joined the team in 2008 and has helped craft some of Barboursville's best wines.

Paschina's most important partner has been Franco. When he joined the team in 1997, Franco had been growing grapes in Virginia for 15 years. Together they transformed and expanded the vineyards, planting vines closer together and using new clones more suited to Virginia's climate. With each vintage, their effort shows in the quality of wines at Barboursville, which more than any other winery has deftly embraced Virginia's long wine history and the image of its most famous oenophile and vintner, Thomas Jefferson.

The estate was once owned by James Barbour, a friend of Jefferson's who served as governor of Virginia during the War of 1812 and later in President John Quincy Adams's cabinet. Jefferson designed a mansion for Barbour that was occupied by Barbour's descendants until it was destroyed by fire on Christmas Day 1884. The ruins remain on the winery grounds, and their image graces Barboursville's labels. Paschina named his Bordeaux blend Octagon, after the shape Jefferson used for the rotundas at Barboursville and at his own Monticello.

The winery's Italian ownership also connects to Jefferson, if indirectly. The restaurant is named for Venetian architect Andrea Palladio, who inspired Jefferson's designs. Jefferson was aided in his vineyard experiences at Monticello by Italian agronomist Filippo Mazzei. And Paschina named the winery's reserve tasting room Library 1821, the year Barbour's mansion was completed and the year the Zonin family first made wine in Italy.

'You learn to be a better grape grower'

Paschina, 53, stands just over 6 feet, with a ready smile and a fidgety demeanor suggesting he's in on a joke about to be sprung. His restlessness contributes to his attention to detail: On a recent visit, he interrupted our conversation in the winery tasting room to clean up a puddle left by a customer's dog. He forages for morels in



Tubs of grapes await transportation from the vineyard to the Barboursville winery. After years of success with French grapes, Barboursville is beginning to plant more Italian varietals.

spring and hunts deer in autumn. His gardens at the winery and at his home on the hillside above the vineyards overflow with heirloom varieties of tomatoes, peppers and herbs.

He touts Octagon as proof that Virginia can consistently make world-class wines capable of aging. First produced in 1998 and in almost every vintage since (the rainy years of 2003 and 2011 being exceptions), Octagon has a longer track record than other wines - such as RdV's Lost Mountain and Glen Manor's Hodder Hill - that have joined it in Virginia's top echelon.

As we sat in Library 1821 and sipped vermentino on a warm early-September day, I asked Paschina how his quarter-century in Virginia had changed him.

"It's a lot more understanding about what to do," he said, speaking thoughtfully with a Piemontese lilt as he chose his words. "And a lot more enjoyment and less frustration when things either go well or go wrong. In the early years, I was apprehensive and uncertain about what the vintage was bringing and how to react to the conditions. Eventually, you learn to be a better grape grower and winemaker in the region you are in, but you also mature as a person."

Virginia's wine industry, too, has matured and in recent years has achieved international acclaim. As one of the state's most prominent winemakers, Paschina has been a

high-profile ambassador. This past June, he poured Octagon at Vinexpo in Bordeaux, France, probably the first time a Virginia wine has been featured at that prestigious trade fair. The Italian government awarded him its Order of Merit in February, and Gov. Terry McAuliffe will honor him this month at a reception in Richmond in the Executive Mansion, where James Barbour was the first governor to reside when the house opened in 1813.

"Luca's obvious charm and cosmopolitan background have opened doors that would otherwise have remained closed much longer for the wines of Virginia," said Jancis Robinson, a master of wine and author of numerous books on the subject, including (with Linda Murphy) "American Wine."

Paschina says he expects the quality of Virginia wine to continue improving, especially as more wineries develop with an emphasis on finding the best vineyard sites and growing their own grapes.

"The best winemakers are really those who know it from the ground to the bottle and all in between," he said. "From a bare piece of land to the wine in your glass, they know every step. Those are the winemakers who will make a difference."

Like most Virginia wineries, Barboursville has thrived with French grapes, especially merlot, cabernet franc and viognier. Yet Paschina has never lost his Italian accent, in speech or in wine. San-

giovese and barbera have been unreliable in Virginia's climate, but nebbiolo does well. The instant success of Barboursville's 2010 vermentino led Paschina to plant other white Italian varieties. This year, he harvested Virginia's first crop of fiano. In the spring, he and Franco planted three acres of ribolla gialla, a trendy white from Friuli. Next year, they plan to plant falanghina. Paschina envisions creating a flagship white blend to complement Octagon.

Although his choice of grape varieties may hark to his Italian roots, Paschina has put down deep roots of his own in the States. He met and married his wife, Patricia, an Annapolis native. They have three children. And over the summer, Paschina took time away from his silver harvest to file an application for U.S. citizenship.

"If I'm lucky, maybe I'll be sworn in next July at Monticello," he said. "That would be appropriate."

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