

## Garden State Wine Makers Make Taste Buds an Offer They Can't Refuse

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By CARLA SPARTOS

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WHAT exit is that bottle from?

Utter the words “New Jersey wine” and you’ll hear all sorts of wisecracks. But after a weekend road trip exploring a handful of some of the state’s 40 or so wineries, I happily discovered that New Jersey is making vino that transcends the punch line to a tired Joe Piscopo joke.

Far from turning out mass-produced plonk, a la Thunderbird, producers are growing quality estate-produced wines.

So, where to begin? The state has two distinct growing regions roughly divided into the farmland of the north and the coastal region of the south. Still, wineries are haphazardly strewn about, making it difficult to pinpoint an obvious travel route. My trip involved traversing much of the rural farmland of central New Jersey (for help planning your trip, check out [newjerseywines.com](http://newjerseywines.com)).



Checking the stock at Unionville Vineyard in New Jersey.

Photo: Real house wines of New Jersey, Photograph by Unionville's Assistant Winemaker Stephen D. Johnsen.

Geography isn't the only confusing aspect. The North Fork is known for its merlot, the Finger Lakes for its riesling and as for New Jersey? It's experimenting with a wide array of varietals so plan to taste a lot of wine to find out who excels at what.

My first stop was Alba Vineyard in Milford, a haven for cyclists and a short drive from the scenic Delaware River. Here, owner Tom Sharko and winemaker John Altmaier are planting riesling and Burgundian varietals such as chardonnay Sharko, a former Bernardsville furniture maker, bought the property out of bankruptcy in 1997. But while vines were planted as early as 1980, some still exhibit a youthful exuberance that's undesirable in fine wines. “We’re getting there,” says Sharko of the painstaking process. “Nothing happens quickly in this business.” and pinot noir using a high-density planting method on southern-facing slopes.

Alba's tasting room is an old dairy barn dating to 1801, and \$10 buys visitors a glass, a cheese plate and an extensive sampling of wines — including a 2008 dry riesling with tropical notes and a honey nose (\$14.99) and a smoky 2008 pinot noir (\$21.99).

“We’re situated between Philadelphia and New York — if we can’t sell wine then we’re doing something wrong,” says Sharko, noting the “tremendous” local market. Judging by the weekend crowds, they’re doing something right. A half-hour country drive away — through charming river towns like Frenchtown and Stockton — you’ll find Unionville Winery, another grape getaway situated in a classic red barn with a brick farmhouse in back.

The big draw here is winemaker Cameron Stark, a UC Davis grad who previously worked at Napa’s Robert Sinskey Vineyards. But despite his credentials, Stark admits it’s tough combating the notion that “New Jersey can’t possibly make good wine.” At Unionville, Stark is planting everything from chardonnay and pinot noir to Rhone varietals like syrah, grenache and mourvedre. He aims for a more subtle “European style” and produces a series of blends. (Indeed, talk to many NJ winemakers and they’re liable to fault California for producing flabby, overblown wines.)

In the tasting room, \$5 buys you a basic tasting of five wines, while \$10 also gets you a sampling of premium single-vineyard bottlings. But be prepared to pay top-dollar for the latter — a 2008 Pheasant Hill Vineyard chardonnay with good fruit, acid and oak balance costs \$45.95.

And that brings us back to the state’s image problem: If you’re going to spend \$50 on a bottle, do you want “New Jersey” printed on the label? “Unfortunately people have a misconception — they think New Jersey is an oil field around the airport,” says winemaker Nicolaas Opdam of Laurita Winery. “It is the Garden State.” Located on the outskirts of drab New Egypt, Laurita, my final stop, turned out to be a pleasant surprise. It has everything — except maybe a good restaurant — that you need for a weekend stay, including an equestrian center and a meticulously kept B&B, Dancer Farm, in the former home of harness racing champ Stanley Dancer. I stayed in the two-room Vintner’s Suite, which featured a whimsical assortment of antiques, exposed-brick-and-beam walls and a large bathroom with Jacuzzi tub. Friendly innkeeper Diana Lee Black turns out a delicious breakfast and the winery is located just down the road. It’s equally impressive. The vast tasting room, which features three bars, is constructed from two barns that were dismantled and reassembled onsite. The recycling ethos doesn’t end there: Six tracking solar panels in the vineyards provide a third of the winery’s power. Like most winemakers in New Jersey, Opdam is producing a vast assortment of varietals, and his chardonnay in particular offered good fruit, acidity and weight. Still, the industry is young and only time will tell if the vines being planted today will eventually put the region on oenophiles’ radar. “In 30 years, we’ll be on the cover of Wine Spectator,” predicts Unionville’s Stark. Hey, it took the Finger Lakes at least that long.

### **Unionville Vineyards, Ringoes**

Try the mouthwatering 2007 dry riesling (\$13.95) or softly tannic 2007 Big “O” blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc (\$25.95). Both the 2008 dry rose and Pinot Grigio were sold out, but a barrel sampling of the upcoming vintage showed lots of promise — including a fresh-tasting rosé with hints of strawberry.

**Info:** 9 Rocktown Rd., 908-788-0400; [unionvillevineyards.com](http://unionvillevineyards.com)

**Party!** The state's top producers — including Alba, Unionville and Laurita — will pour samples of their wines at the 2010 East Coast Food & Wine Festival, June 26 and 27 at Hopewell Valley Vineyards in Pennington, NJ. \$35 in advance, \$40 at the door. For more details, go to [slowfoodandwinefestival.com](http://slowfoodandwinefestival.com).