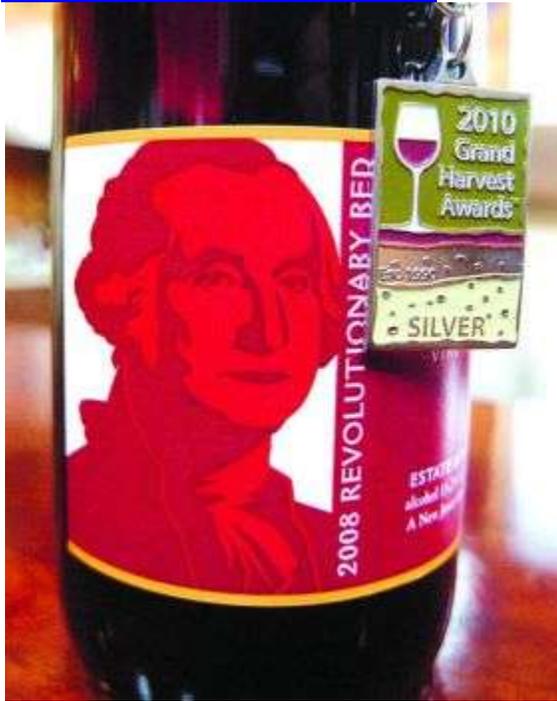


## Unionville Vineyards Full of Rich History (and Wine!)

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George Pacciello/staff photographer A star from the George Series, Revolutionary Red, advertises the vineyard's Colonial history.

EAST AMWELL TWP. — With a picture of George Washington, Unionville Vineyards celebrates its history right on its label. The vineyard has 88 acres at its main location on Rocktown Road with an additional five acres in Pheasant Hill in Hopewell Township. Unionville Vineyards offers three series of wines, including the George Series, which pays homage to George Washington and the history of the area. Wines in this series include Heritage White, Revolutionary Red, Fields of Fire and Lafayette's Pride.

"All of our grapes are grown in the Colonial Crescent," said the vineyard's Marketing and Sales Director Jennifer Tanner, in regard to a crescent-shaped area encompassing parts of Hunterdon and Mercer counties and Pennsylvania where Revolutionary War troops set up encampments and marched to battle. "We wanted to celebrate the history that took place right here."

It was at the farmhouse on the Pheasant Hill property where Gen. George Washington and Gen. Marquis de La Fayette along with 15 other Revolutionary War generals held a Council of War meeting in 1778, according to local lore. "It was where they made the decision to engage in the Battle of Monmouth," said Tanner, who recently visited the farmhouse, which was built in the early 1700s. "I got this wonderful feeling of being in awe of the history that happened here. I remember sitting in front of the huge fireplace in the kitchen and wondering if some of the men had been in this room."

The vineyard's East Amwell location also has a rich history. "There's a 200-plus year old map that shows this whole area was a small village called Unionville," said Tanner. "We kept that name." The site's original structures, including the still-standing barn and house, date to the 1880s when the land served as one of the largest peach orchards in the state. "In 1858, the house and the barn were built as a dowry for one of the owner's daughters," said Tanner, a Raritan Township resident.

Around the turn of the century, the peach orchard suffered a devastating blow. A blight called the San Jose scale, actually a tiny insect, "destroyed most of the peach orchards around New Jersey and the owners had to go out and burn their crops," Tanner said. Following the blight, the orchard served as a dairy farm in the early 1900s until 1965, when it was transformed into a grain farm. In the early 1980s the farm would again change its purpose – this time it would be used for growing grapes and making wine.

"In 1982, the first vines were planted at Unionville," Tanner said. "They took about five years to mature enough to harvest and then they were processed and fermented." Although the land has changed hands and functions, Unionville aims to keep its rich history alive. The old barn, where many original beams are still visible, is now used to process the grapes and bottle the wine. "The wine starts its life in here after the grapes go through the crusher outside," Tanner said.

The barn has seen two additions — first in the early 1900s and another in the 1960s. The barn is also the home to a small gift shop where visitors can purchase wine as well as treats from local businesses. The shop is open daily and tours of the property are held on weekends. In one lower level room of the barn, the winery can hold functions from small parties to cooperate meetings. "We call it the cave," said Tanner in reference to the cool, dark stone room. "All the stone seen here was cut from the property and the tables and stools formerly served as our barrels for holding wine."

In 2009, the East Amwell Historic Society honored the Unionville Vineyards barn with a preservation award. "When you work in such a historical setting, you're looking at the history right before your eyes," said Stephen Johnsen, an assistant winemaker at Unionville. "People are always in awe of and feel the impact of things that have happened in the past. People come here for the wine, but they enjoy the history of the site and the old structures." "I came to Unionville first as a volunteer in the early 90s," said Johnsen, a self-professed wine lover who has collected wine from all over the world. "I just fell in love with the place." In the past 30 years, said Johnsen, New Jersey has made a comeback in the wine industry. "A lot of people don't realize that New Jersey has history with wine," said Johnsen, a Burlington County resident who made a second career out of his love for wine. "Before prohibition, the state was the second largest producer of wine in the country." Also standing on the property is the original farmhouse with its large windows, wide-plank wood floors, floor-to-ceiling bookcases, and decorative ceilings. Although it's not currently in use for everyday operations, vineyard personnel occasionally use it for special events.

“We had tango lessons here for Valentine’s Day,” said Tanner. “It was amazing to see people dancing across the floor in this wonderful old home.” Despite its growth in the areas of retail and event planning, the focus of Unionville Vineyards is its vines. “At the heart of it, we’re a local farming business,” Tanner said. “We grow amazing grapes and harvest them. This location has always been some sort of a farm and it still is.”