

# Virginia's Monticello Wine Trail

By Stacy Slinkard, About.com Guide

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Bordered by Virginia's version of the Blue Ridge Mountains on the west and revolving like spiraling spokes from the hub of Charlottesville, the [Monticello Wine Trail](#) is an enigmatic wine gem of engaging proportions. It's not every wine country route that can play a tune to entice both history buffs and oenophiles alike to its playground, but the Monticello Wine Trail is *not* like most wine country routes. Dotted with more than its fair share of significant historical sites, and brimming with an onslaught of new wineries trying their hands at Virginia's varied terroir, the region is a haven of history and taste. Where else can you tour the presidential homes of three U.S. presidents (Jefferson,



Winemaker, Gabriele Rausse, in front of the Monticello vineyards.

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Madison and Monroe) and enjoy first rate wine tastings mere minutes from each?

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### The Makeup of the Monticello Wine Trail

In some ways the wine scene along the Monticello Wine Trail is reminiscent of Napa and Sonoma 25 years ago, where tasting rooms are not overly crowded, tasting fees are non-existent or minimal and visitors get undivided attention from managers, vintners or owners themselves. However, this is where the similarities end. Virginia wine country is clearly not striving to be the next Napa – as refreshing for visitors as it is for the region. It's interesting to note, that the consistent shining stars for Virginia's grape frontier are typically secondary varietals in California, with the likes of Viognier, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot repeatedly rising to the top of the tasting ladder. The wineries themselves tend towards the boutique end of the spectrum, with a handful of large producers and

many small production estates contributing to the Old Dominion's overall wine volume.

The Commonwealth of Virginia has over 150 wineries with the Monticello AVA being the largest of Virginia's six [American Viticultural Areas](#) (AVAs), and host to 24 wineries and counting. Some of the most popular wineries include Barboursville Vineyards, Jefferson Vineyards, Kluge, Keswick Vineyards, King Family Vineyards, Del Fosse, Mountfair Vineyards, Veritas Vineyards and Blenheim Vineyards.

### Thomas Jefferson, America's First Wine Connoisseur

The story of the Monticello Wine Trail truly starts with Thomas Jefferson, [America's first wine connoisseur](#), who spent 30 years trying to establish vines to make wines on his Monticello Estate, but due in large part to vineyard disease, his vision of crafting Virginia wines never came to fruition. However, his vineyard dreams, though delayed over 200 years, have finally come to pass. Jefferson would be proud to know that Virginia has been successfully cultivating vines and making wines for the past 30 years, with the wines taking a tremendous leap in both quality and consistency over the last decade in particular, as verified by well-deserved recognition and awards coming on both the national and international stage.

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## Wineries to Visit on the Monticello Wine Trail:

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello estate and the apt name of the surrounding wine route, is a choice place to start a Virginia wine country adventure. Not only will your historical bearings be set, but an appreciation for Thomas Jefferson's profound influence on both the state's and the nation's wine future will be cemented. Not to mention the close proximity that many of the trail's best wineries share with the famed [Monticello estate](#). Though Jefferson was never able to produce a bottle of wine from his vineyards, today there are grapes grown and wines made from the soil that he once worked numerous vines in vain. The Monticello gift shop

sells a limited quantity of wines made from the esteemed Monticello vineyards, under the watchful eye of Gabriele Rausse. The Monticello wines go on sale the first Monday of the year, but interested parties had better be quick as they typically sell out in a single day. If you aren't quick enough to grab one of Rausse's Monticello wines, fret not, he sells a compelling series of wine under his own label at the gift shop as well. The dense, concentrated flavors of Gabriele Rausse's Touriga is exceptional with grilled game.

[Jefferson Vineyards](#): A mere mile southeast of Monticello will take you to Jefferson Vineyards, where you can see firsthand where Thomas Jefferson's Italian viticultural partner, Philip Mazzei, planted the first vineyards on a 400 acre estate adjacent to Monticello. Vines were planted repeatedly, but pests and disease prevented the vineyards from ever producing a bottle of wine. Fast-forward to 1981 and find another Italian, Gabriele Rausse, replanting the vineyards once again, but this time with notable success. Known for vibrant Viognier, Jefferson Vineyards puts together a stunning rendition of this northern Rhone grape. Today Jefferson Vineyards cultivates 20 acres of vines (and sources when needed) to produce 4,000 to 8,000 cases of wine annually. Find Jefferson Vineyards wine recommendations [here](#).

Dave Matthews fans will appreciate [Blenheim Vineyards](#), a five mile jaunt from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello off of Carters Mountain road. Owned by the Dave Matthews family and run by Kirsty Harmon, ambitious winemaker and general manager - whose been charged with the not always easy task of simply "making good wine." Blenheim Vineyards is making good, quality wines that are approachable and capable of bringing out the best in both food and friends. Check out the wine recommendations for Blenheim Vineyards [here](#).

[Kluqe Estate](#) is practically neighbors with James Monroe's former residence, [Ash Lawn-Highland](#), another jewel on the Monticello Wine Trail. Kluqe maintains a keen focus on sparkling wines and embraces the title as one of Virginia's larger producers (to the tune of 30,000 cases a year). See Kluqe Estate wine recommendations [here](#).

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[Barboursville Vineyards](#), home of renown red wine, "Octagon," is a "must-see," must-taste stop on any Monticello Wine Trail excursion. Only eight miles from James Madison's home, [Montpelier](#), and an easy trek from Charlottesville, Barboursville Vineyards represents the best of Virginia wine country all under one roof. From a welcoming tasting room and gift shop that sells boxed picnic lunches and of course wine, to the prestigious Palladio restaurant and a lofty lineup of Old World inspired wines, to over 150 acres under vine - Barboursville has it all.



Barboursville Vineyards

History, landscape, fine wine, choice food, quaint wine country accommodations and much more are yours with a stop at the Barboursville winery. Learn more about Barboursville wines and vines [here](#).

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[Keswick Vineyards](#) is a family-owned winery about 20 minutes from James Madison's Montpelier estate. They do an outstanding job on the hospitality front with a well-appointed tasting room, a covered-porch for outdoor tastings, hosting periodic winemaker dinners, weddings, and offering family picnics where even the family dog is invited. Keswick is one of those wineries that knows that the business of wine is really about relationships, treating visitors as honored guests and inviting them into the wine country scene with gutsy wines and down-to-earth winemaking philosophies. Find Keswick Vineyards wine recs [here](#).

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On the northwest side of the Monticello Wine Trail, in the town of Crozet, lies the artisanal winery of [Mountfair Vineyards](#). Owned by Fritz Repich, whose contagious enthusiasm, unparalleled passion and larger-than-life personality make an indelible mark on his small-batch Old World red wines. The Mountfair tasting room is open Friday-Sunday, from noon to 5 p.m. and chances are good that you'll meet Fritz and family on any given day. Two must try wines are the *2008 Mountfair Inaugural*, a carefully structured blend of Cab Franc and Merlot – resulting in focused, accessible fruit, malleable tannins and a long, vivid finish. The *2007 Mountfair Wooloomooloo* is not just fun to say, but immensely more fun to drink. With Petit Verdot taking the role of dominate grape, expect the dark nuances of blackberry and a touch of molasses on the nose, blackberry debuts again on the palate, joined by ripe cherry and black plum with a thin layer of sweet vanillin and dusty cocoa on the finish.

If you've had your fair share of wine tasting and are looking to shake things up on the Monticello Wine Trail, then you may want to check out [Albemarle CiderWorks](#). Technically an "apple wine," the hard apple cider produced here is unlike any commercial cider you've ever tasted. These hard ciders are made in the colonial style and are decidedly dry, elegantly crisp and exceedingly light and refreshing. The Shelton family has been growing heritage apple varieties for the past 20 years and only recently decided to try their hand at hard ciders, with enormous success. Albemarle CiderWorks tasting notes [here](#).

### Getting Around the Monticello Wine Trail

Before heading out on the Monticello Wine Trail, you might snag a guide map for the appellation at [www.monticellowinetrail.com](http://www.monticellowinetrail.com) or in Charlottesville area tourism kiosks. Keep an eye out for the road signs bearing grape clusters and "tours" alerting close proximity to Virginia wineries.

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Prefer to leave the driving to the professionals? Then there are two primary companies in town that will plan your itinerary and escort you to the best of the Monticello appellation wineries.

Whether it's a special weekend for two, wine country tours, a picture perfect wedding or a prestigious option for corporate transportation, [Albemarle Vintage Limousine](#) has an array of rare, meticulously-kept vintage vehicles (two 1940s Fleetwood Cadillacs and two elegantly restored jaguars, a 1946 Mark IV and a 1947 Mark II) that turn up the sparkle factor on any drive. They've also recently added a Cadillac Escalade to use for touring and formal evening vintage limousine service for dinner out complete with long stem roses for the ladies. Knowledgeable chauffeurs, down-to-earth owners and an exceptional grasp on all of the hidden treasures that lie along the Monticello Wine Trail, make for a memorable, private, customized excursion of the local wineries, vineyards and choice historical venues.

[Arcady Vineyard Wine Tours](#) is another alternative for touring the Monticello wine country, with knowledgeable tour guides, a pre-planned itinerary and a designated driver to cover your tasting excursion. Tours are \$125 per person (which includes tasting fees) for a half day of wine tasting, typically covering 3-4 wineries.

### Where to Stay on the Monticello Wine Trail:

[Keswick Hall](#) is a luxury country estate, owned by Orient Express that sits on 600 acres of rolling hills leading up to the Blue Ridge Mountains. Many of the well-appointed rooms overlook a redesigned 18-hole Arnold Palmer golf course and enjoy easy access to the infinity edge pool and spa. [Fossett's](#) an award-winning restaurant, enjoys sweeping views, superior service and an outstanding array of cuisines, ranging from stylistically Southern to traditional French, melded into complete gourmet harmony.

[The Clifton Inn](#) resides on a captivating 100-acre estate that was originally a wedding gift from Thomas Jefferson to his daughter, Martha. Combining the personal attention of a B&B and the first-class style and service of a high-end resort, the Clifton Inn manages to bring the comforts of southern hospitality and the ongoing charms of yesteryear (like complimentary Madeira in guest rooms) together in a lovely infusion of sophistication and enduring elegance. The onsite restaurant is a cornucopia of gourmet delight, with a seasonal, one-of-a-kind menu that throws out the traditional order of courses, opting for delectable tapas-sized entrees based loosely on food types.

[Barboursville Vineyard's Inn and Cottages](#): Barboursville Vineyard's lies in the heart of historic Virginia, so it's not surprising that the estate is graced with several elegant buildings circa early 1800s. An inn with three exquisite suites and backed by luxury cottage accommodations make an extended wine country excursion starting and ending with Barboursville Vineyards both exceedingly quaint and ultra convenient.

[Charlottesville Bed and Breakfasts](#): There are plenty of B&Bs sprinkled along the Monticello Wine Trail – take your pick [here](#).

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