

Sarah O'Herron

Maryland's Black Ankle Vineyards is making an impression with its award-winning wines and its green approach to grape farming and winemaking.

Photos by Molly McDonald Peterson

Black Ankle Vineyards is the creation of wine lovers Sarah O'Herron and her husband, Ed Boyce. They started the project in early 2001, scouring the Piedmont area of Maryland for the perfect vineyard site, and settled on a farm in Mount Airy, just east of Frederick, the following year. They planted vineyards in 2003 and 2004 and made their first wines with the harvest of 2006. The 145-acre property includes 12 varieties of grapes on 22 acres and produces about 3,000 cases annually. The winery's tasting room, which opened in 2008, is remarkable: The solar-powered building was built with wood, straw, clay, and rocks from the property, and it has a living roof. The young winery quickly distinguished itself, winning the Maryland Governor's Cup award in successive years for its 2006 and 2007 Crumbling Rock wines (Bordeaux-style blends of Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Petit Verdot). O'Herron and Boyce have shared this adventure with their five children, four of whom were born as the vineyard project unfolded.

When my husband, Ed Boyce, and I decided we would try our hands at grape growing and winemaking, we had one goal in mind: make great wines. Not wines that were great "for Maryland," or great "for the East Coast," just plain great—wines that could sit on a table beside wines from anywhere else in the world and belong. We also had no preconceptions of how to go about achieving that goal. We were wine lovers and had drunk many great bottles of wine (including, truth be told, several as we were making this decision), so we knew what we liked to drink and the kinds of wines we would like to make, but nearly nothing about how to make it all happen. We had no farming or winemaking experience and started completely from scratch.

While this lack of experience and knowledge may seem like a big disadvantage, we saw it as the perfect place from which to start. As former management consultants with a specialty in assessing best practices, we had plenty of experience approaching an established business with fresh eyes, looking at what was

being done well and who was doing it, and deciding how to use that knowledge to make further improvements. We looked to the whole world to be our classroom, avidly studying what the best grape growers and winemakers were doing, not just in Maryland or on the East Coast, but in France, Italy, Austria, California, New Zealand, Australia—anywhere that had a history of making the kinds of wines we aspired to make at Black Ankle Vineyards.

Aside from providing some wonderful travel opportunities (after all, this project was supposed to be fun), this approach led us down several paths that we had not anticipated. It led us to plant our vineyard much more densely than had previously been considered wise in our region. We have just shy of 1,900 vines per acre, while a number closer to 750 was the norm at the time we planted. It led us to include in our plantings some unusual varietals for the area, such as Albariño and Grüner Veltliner, which we discovered grew in climates that were much more similar to ours than we would have guessed. It led us on a

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hunt for a farm with big hillsides, extremely low-fertility soils, and literally tons of rocks. In those conditions, our vines would be just unsure enough of their own survival that they would concentrate most of their resources into ripening their next generation (the grapes), making for some fantastic wines.

Finally, it led us to a belief in the power of sustainable farming. As we traveled the world, we heard dramatically conflicting opinions voiced with the greatest conviction on any number of issues about grape growing. When it came to sustainable farming, however, we heard a similar theme from all of the great winegrowers that we met: The more the vintner is able to work in harmony with nature, the better the end product will be.

While we have not yet figured out how to grow our grapes completely organically, we have embraced sustainable growing as fully as we can. We control all our weeds manually (with the help of both tractor and hoe), use only our own compost in place of chemical fertilizers, and scrupulously tend the vines so that the sun and wind can provide their maximum benefits in protecting the vines from disease. The result is a vineyard that is remarkably balanced and hardy and that, since our first vintage in 2006, has been able to produce delicious, healthy, and fully ripe grapes despite the challenges of our thrill-a-minute Maryland weather.

Many grapevines live to be 50 or even 100 years old, producing better and better wine as they age. At only 8 years old in 2010, our vineyard is just a baby, and we look forward to tasting what it will produce in the future. If all goes well, our children and their children will taste the best that it has to offer. Here's a toast to that!

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