



**A VINE LIFE** “I was always told there was no way to produce great sparkling wine outside of the Champagne region. So early on I went to check that for myself,” says Claude Thibaut, who is putting Virginia on the map for sparkling wines. The vintner keeps a barrel room at Veritas Vineyard & Winery in Afton.

# Virginia Sparklers

Can Charlottesville produce the world’s best bubbly?

| By George W. Stone | Photography by David Rehor |

Vintner Claude Thibaut’s goals are modest: He merely wants to make the best sparkling wine ever bottled in the United States. Good thing he had the sense to settle in Thomas Jefferson’s neighborhood. If nothing else, the man who turned his backyard terroir into the bedrock of American viticulture is a good inspiration—even if Jefferson himself once derided sparkling Champagne as a fad.

If anyone has the effervescence to turn Charlottesville’s vines into world-class wines, it’s Thibaut. Born, raised and practically bathed in Champagne, this worldly winemaker left his family’s vineyard in France to study enology in Reims; he spent years creating award-winners in Australia and California. About seven years ago, billionaire-bubbly-bottler Patricia Kluge entreated Thibaut to add sparkle to her cellar.

Some French wine masters tilling the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains might consider themselves exiled. But not Thibaut. For him, Virginia’s soil produced an epiphany. “When I was working in California, I had no idea that I could make high-class sparkling wine from Virginia—you just don’t look at other states with that expectation,” admits Thibaut. “But I quickly realized that the flavor profile was right for sparkling wine.”

At Kluge Estate, Thibaut challenged notions that cool climates and limestone soil were essential for producing a wine that compares with its Champagne cousin. The

subtle bubbles he made at Kluge proved that the classic French *méthode Champenoise* translated successfully to Charlottesville.

But something was missing for Thibaut, who was then approaching 50. He realized that his dream would not be complete until his own name—like his father’s—appeared on the bottle. So he launched his own winery, dedicated exclusively to producing sparkling wines from Virginia grapes. Now, with his third vintage in the bottle, Thibaut-Janisson Blanc de Chardonnay, \$28, is a Mid-Atlantic success story. It’s crisp, aromatic, bright and loaded with streams of tiny bubbles. The sparkler has been served at White House fêtes, including a birthday party for Thomas Jefferson, and is poured at top local restos, such as Citronelle, Restaurant Eve, Proof and Equinox.

So Thibaut’s audacious dream now seems not so crazy as he finds himself at the heart of a wine revolution in Virginia that complements the local-and-sustainable movement sweeping the culinary world. “When you have a state this beautiful, and if you had the right farmer beside you, then you can produce a great thing,” says Thibaut. “There is a long way to go before we’re known as the champagne maker in the States, but we’re up for the challenge,” the winemaker adds, with evangelical conviction. Thomas Jefferson would approve. ■

*Thibaut-Janisson Winery, tjwinery.com.*

## Top Virginia Bubbles

### ► Afton Mountain Vineyards

The Tête de Cuvée Brut 2005 is a smart blend of pinot noir and chardonnay grapes with a clean, dry, green apple finish.

### ► Barboursville Winery

“The Barboursville Brut is an Italian Prosecco in style, but made using estate-grown pinot noir and a dash of chardonnay. It’s very refreshing and tonic, perfect as an aperitif, and a great base for many cocktails,” says Thibaut.

### ► Horton Vineyards

“This unconventional sparkling wine is made from the Viognier varietal. The fine bubbles lift the aromas, adding to the grape’s tropical fruitiness,” says Thibaut.

### ► King Family Vineyards

“The Brut 2006 blanc de blancs is made of 100% estate-grown chardonnay and aged in oak barrels, giving flavors from toasted bread to wild berries and even lemon,” says Thibaut.

### ► Kluge Estate

This stunning vineyard bottles no less than four sparkling wines: a bright, floral rosé, a creamy blanc de blancs, a rich blanc de noir and a decadent Reserve.

### ► Prince Michel Winery

“The 2005 Prince Michel is a true *méthode Champenoise*-style. Three years of aging on the yeast brings the creaminess that you expect from a great blanc de blancs—vibrant apple and pear, and a creamy dry finish,” says Thibaut.

### ► Veritas Vineyard

“The 2006 Mousseux is a great blend of chardonnay and cabernet franc with a deep rosé color and intense fruitiness of cherries and cassis. The sweetness level is almost extra dry, which makes it a perfect companion to many desserts,” says Thibaut.