

Fine fizz from Virginia

30 Sep 2009 by Linda Murphy

The Champenois are no strangers to California, having in the 1980s established Domaine Chandon, Mumm Napa and Domaine Carneros in Napa Valley, Roederer Estate in Mendocino County, and the defunct Maison Deutz (now Laetitia Vineyard & Winery) in the Central Coast.

Yet who could have imagined that Frenchmen Claude Thibaut and Manuel Janisson, the latter of Champagne Janisson & Fils in Verzenay, would produce a gorgeous sparkling wine in the state of Virginia?

Thibaut, a University of Reims graduate who consulted on California sparkling wine projects for Kendall-Jackson's late Kristone brand, J Wine Co. (Judy Jordan's fizzy extension of her father's Jordan Winery in Sonoma) and Iron Horse Winery, as well as Yarra Bank in Victoria, Australia, moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2003 to create a sparkling wine made from Virginia Chardonnay. In 2007, he and Janisson released their first wine, the non-vintage Thibaut-Janisson Blanc de Chardonnay, made by the *méthode traditionnelle*.

The Thibaut-Janisson Blanc de Chardonnay (\$25) sent to me this summer was a joy to drink -- delicate, sophisticated and reminiscent of Schramsberg's lovely California Blanc de Blancs, though with a bit less complexity and depth. It's elegant and suave, with minerality and subtle notes of apple, white peach and yeast - serious sparkling wine from a region not expected to produce it.

Thomas Jefferson would most likely approve, comparing Thibaut-Janisson to some of the champagnes he tasted in his day. Alas, Thibaut-Janisson is currently available only in Virginia and the Washington, DC, area, yet its quality sends a strong message that states other than California, Oregon, Washington and New York are capable of producing impressive wines.

The lack of availability of this sparkler in most US states underscores the provincial regulations in America which prevent small-production wines from being accessible to consumers in most states. My enthusiasm for Thibaut-Janisson is cooled only by my inability to buy it in California stores or online. Those who can get it, should buy it now, because the quality and interest of this sparkler exceeds its \$25 retail price.