

For wine lovers around the world who enjoy
wine and the good life

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COVER STORY

From a weekend getaway to an award-winning vineyard

On a visit to Robert Muse and Sally Cowal's winery in the US state of Virginia, **Renu Chahil-Graf**, is impressed by the couple's dedication and determination to produce ever better wines, calling the project nothing short of miraculous



Facing page: A sculptured owl stands sentinel over the vineyard instead of a scarecrow. Above: Tasting Room at Muse Vineyards, constructed entirely with local hardwoods. Adirondack chairs to take in the views

On a warm, welcoming May afternoon, families and couples (more on them later) lounge on Adirondack chairs, glasses filled with chilled Sauvignon Blanc, taking in sweeping 360° views over glorious vineyards. Idyllic, yes. But it took grit and determination to establish this vineyard with its award-winning wines...

Searching for a peaceful spot away from trendy Georgetown in Washington DC where they lived, it was love at first sight for Robert Muse and Sally Cowal — an old farmhouse, with a one-acre vineyard cultivated by previous owners as a hobby. However, with a deep-seated interest in good wine, the couple had ambitions beyond this initial acre. The challenge was that both had full-time and fully engaging commitments in neighbouring Washington DC with Robert Muse running his own well-established law offices and Sally Cowal, a senior vice-president of Global Cancer Control at the American Cancer Society. Neither of them intended to discontinue these jobs.

TRANSFORMATION IN 15 YEARS

It so happened that Sally invited me to spend a weekend with them in the Fall of 2003 while I was visiting DC. Quite unsuspectingly, on arrival at their country house, I was handed a bucket, given brief instructions and so started my first experience of plucking grapes! This turned out to be the first harvest at Muse Vineyards.

Fast forward to 15 years later. Arriving at dusk on a Friday evening, approaching 6 Serendipity Lane in Woodstock, Virginia, a subtly lit welcoming logo, Muse, suddenly appears. It's on the side of a stunning building, constructed entirely with local hardwoods and housing the Tasting Room. Perched up on a hill facing the Appalachian Mountains, with the Allegheny range behind and the Shenandoah river running below, a more ideal setting would be hard to come by. So how did they arrive at this?



Above: Bridge over Shenandoah river for vehicular traffic leading to the vineyards. Right: Robert examining the vines in the vineyard. De-budding and shoot thinning are done by hand



Muse vineyards, extends from an elevation of 600 feet at the river level to a height of 1000 feet. There are three distinct contiguous vineyards, each with its own soil type

NOTHING COMES EASY

Slowly the story unfolds. Following their initial experience with the one acre, Sally and Robert immediately set about a serious study of winemaking. Determined to make quality wine, a process of extensive reading, learning about varietals, soils and methods began. First, close to home, but then from Europe, primarily France and Italy, in order to understand classical and traditional winemaking methods. A lawyer, used to in-depth study and analysis, Robert amassed 3,000 or more books to study everything you would ever want to know about wine and winemaking. He delved into serious research. Walls of their country house are lined with bookshelves containing the well-thumbed treasure trove. "Vacations" in Europe were really an excuse for field study. Each year saw implementation of new knowledge, working with more varieties and continuing experimentation. Nothing comes easy.

To complicate matters, Muse vineyards, extends from an elevation of 600 feet at the river level to a height of 1000 feet. There are three distinct contiguous vineyards each with its own soil type. Loose loam formed from crystalline rock, red gravelly clay, and silt loam alluvium formed from sandstone and shale at the lowest level on the river's bank. As Sally explains, "This affects what you grow, how you grow it and where you grow," multiplying the complexity of experimentation and decision-making.

Over the years the two co-proprietors bought adjacent land, increasing the property to 40 acres, with about 33 acres now under cultivation. Robert and Sally have created a state-of-the-art boutique vineyard using only traditional farming and wine production techniques and using the highest quality French and Italian vines which are grown on American rootstock. With a relentless pursuit of excellence for making artisanal and premium wines, Muse makes wines only with grapes grown, crushed, aged and bottled on their estate. Increasingly a rarity in the US, especially for small, independent producers like Muse.

THE AWARDS POUR IN...

Their efforts paid off. The owners were completely taken by surprise when Muse Vineyard's 2009 Clio was named Virginia's top wine and awarded the Governor's cup for 2015! Many more awards were to follow. A double gold for the 2013 Clio at the San Francisco International Wine Competition, gold for two Clios at the Indy International Wine Competition, Gold for the Petit Verdot 2013 Atlantic Seaboard Wine Association, and more golds at the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition.

A US Ambassador in a previous avatar and still the quintessential diplomat, Sally started initiatives to make Muse wines accessible to the local community. A tasting menu was introduced with a small tasting fee of \$10 to sample five recent releases, with an add-on option for three reserve wines. Accompaniments such as salads and cheese plates are also available to buy. Muse's sparkling Chardonnay, made using the traditional *chamenoise*, labour intensive method, was the perfect start. Served in their signature flute, fresh tasting with light bubbles and easy to drink, it's perfect as an aperitif on a warm afternoon.

Slowly I worked my way up to the Cabernet Sauvignon 2015, gold medal winner at the 2019 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition. A robust red, with 25% Petit Verdot, it had a blissfully rich aroma, and was fully satisfying on the palate with dark cherry and blackberry notes. Over 20 different grape varieties have been grown at Muse Vineyards, with Nebbiolo soon to be added. The creative development of blends have produced exceptional results.

MUSE'S MUSE

As an interesting aside, Sally explained that the names given to some of their blends such as Erato, Thalia and Clio, represent muses of times gone by. Erato, the muse of lyric or love poetry is 40% Sauvignon Blanc, 19% Vidal, 19% Marsanne, 16% Chardonnay and 6% Muscat. Thalia, the muse of pastoral poetry. Has 68% Rousanne, 28% Marsanne and 4% Viognier. Clio is the muse of history!

Searching through the vineyards, I finally track down Robert Muse in the winery. He describes the winemaking processes, and shows me equipment sourced from Germany, Italy, South Africa and France. The French oak barrels, personalized with the Muse name have cryptic markings which indicate the forest the oak came from and date of production of the barrel! As we walk through the vineyard, Robert examines the vines, concerned that the work crews have not done sufficient pruning. "De-budding and shoot thinning, all done by hand, are essential early on in the season," he explains, "in order to have a clear canopy to work from and maximum sunlight before the foliage explodes."

We examine the soil, gravel, sandstone... and the drainage, which Robert muses (no pun intended) is one of the most critical variables in a vineyard. With his hands-on approach, personal attention to detail, constant monitoring, making sure the whole plantation is netted in growing season and mid-course corrections ensures that only the best is to be found at Muse Vineyards. Although engaged in winemaking himself, Robert works closely with the noted winemaker, Tim Rausse, benefitting from his talents in traditional winemaking and his Italian descent.

WHAT'S NEXT?

As to the future, Sally and Robert both feel that their goal is "to produce the best wines they possibly can". Although the vineyard produces about 200 cases per year, with a good season they hope to achieve a production of 300 cases, or 36,000 bottles a year. Sally's initiatives of setting up a wine club, organizing tastings in all seasons, a welcoming wood-burning fireplace in the tasting room in the winter, regular music and other events – all go towards attracting a regular, year-round clientele. A European style wine trail through the vineyards is a great initiative, bringing people close to the vines, watching them grow and feeling a part of the whole process!

Going back to where we started – who are these people relishing wines

With a relentless pursuit of excellence for making artisanal and premium wines, Muse makes wines only with grapes grown, crushed, aged and bottled on their estate



Above: Sally pictured in the tasting room. Tastings are available in all seasons attracting a regular, year-round clientele with varied activities including a wine trail through the vineyards in good weather
Left: Robert's vast collection of books on wine and winemaking fill the couple's country house

on a sunny May afternoon? It turns out, they are two families from Pune and Aurangabad! Working nearby in the tech sector, Sandeep and Kushal with their spouses, Swapily and Arudranee, are regular visitors to Muse Vineyards, bringing along their kids, Kabir and Riaan. Yet another generation, Pam and Robert Bray, wine club members, visit regularly in all seasons. Even when the river overflows the low vehicular bridge, they are happy to walk across the hanging bridge to get to the wines they love!

Muse vineyards is a melting pot of ages and cultures, drawn together by this remarkable couple. Sally who started her diplomatic career in New Delhi, when venerable Kenneth Keating was US Ambassador to India, is now a senior Executive with the American Cancer Society and co-founder of Muse Vineyards. Robert, who did his wanderings at an early age through India, Australia, and as a barrister in London to establishing his own legal office in the US is co-founder of Muse vineyards. They continue in their professions in Washington DC and work weekends in Woodstock, creating history at Muse Vineyards on Serendipity Lane. It's miraculous, serendipitous – or what! ♦

GETTING THERE

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