



The Urban Winery Invites City Slickers to Raise a Glass

The Urban Winery in Silver Spring, Md., not only bills itself as the closest winery to the nation's capital, its proprietors also tout their business as the first winery in the overall D.C.-Maryland-Northern Virginia region to be located in an urban environment.

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"Georgia is the winemaker, and I'm basically her business partner," said Damon Callis, during a recent interview with the *Beverage Journal*. "We'd been making wine together as amateurs for 18 years. But we started to see a lot of the opportunity that arose in Silver Spring and in Maryland, in general."

He continued, "The concept of an urban winery is not new. It's actually been around for a long time. Even before Prohibition, much of America's wine industry was created in an urban environment and was distributed. It was only after Prohibition where players like the Mondavis started to create this farm-style wine approach in the U.S. In reading up and studying the history, there really wasn't an urban winery in the Mid-Atlantic. The closest one was New York. We fell in love with the [idea]. Making wine is fun. But sharing it with others and then them coming back and sharing it with people they know is what keeps us going every day."

Callis made it clear that he and his wife are not farmers. They get grapes from such far-flung locales as California, New York, and Pennsylvania. They've also developed relationships with various farmers throughout Maryland, from the Eastern Shore to Carroll County.

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"Contributing to our local economy and our local agriculture is very important to us," he said. "But what's really important is knowing the palettes of our customers and giving them a very different experience when they come to our tasting room. The Urban Winery experience is Taste ... Learn ... Create. Our wines range from Merlots from Maryland to Zinfandels from California. We make dry, white wines. But we also make some semi-sweet white wines that are fabulous, and we're also making white wines with hops. VidalPA is one of our newest products that we're releasing in cans. We also have a Bourbon Barrel Merlot."

Other popular favorites now being served include their Silver Spring Red 2015 -

Vinter's Blend, the Silver Spring White 2015 - Vinter's Blend, and the Bole Legacy Zinfandel 2014. The Urban Winery is a good place to get a bite to eat, too, with a menu that includes such tasty dishes as Greek meatballs, lamb lollipops, and spiced chicken wings. Customers are urged to pair the food with an array of wine tasting flights.

Georgia started making wines at a young age, learning the trade from her Greek immigrant father, Anthony "Bole." When Damon met Georgia, he soon learned that to impress Dad, he had to make wines with them. The rite of passage became more than just a way to get in good with his girlfriend's old man. Winemaking became his passion, too.

But he had no idea it would become a career. He was a Marine and eventually became a financial planner. Georgia, meanwhile, was a registered operating room nurse. Their backgrounds have only served to make them better business operators.

Damon especially leans on his military experience, living and working by the Golden Rule: "Prior planning prevents poor performance. My training has given me the perseverance to say, 'I'm going to charge that hill. I'm going to climb it, reach the top, plant my flag there, and proclaim it mine..' That's the attitude you have to have. You

have to have a chip on your shoulder, because there's so much competition in this industry. You have to accept and embrace challenges each and every day."

He added, "Making wine in an urban environment is extremely challenging, more so than in a rural environment with the time restrictions, the amount of space, the cost per production in space. We're bringing the wine to the people versus bringing the people to the wine, and that's very rewarding."

Also rewarding has been the wine education the Urban Winery has been able to provide the general public. Classes are offered on a regular basis in the Winery's barrel room. There is a limit of 10 people per class, during which three wines are explored each with a specific regional focus. "Wine Ambassadors" talk about the differences of each wine in sight, nose, and palette and then invite their students to sample small bite pairings created just for the class.

Callis concluded, "We have an environment where people can challenge themselves, challenge their palette, get out of their box, and enjoy wine as it should be ... amongst friends. We aren't trying to be the Mondavis. We just want to be Damon and Georgia Callis of Maryland, producing awesome wines." ■

