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Kluge Estate confident Virginia is for vineyards

By ROGER MORRIS
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The Virginia wine country around Charlottesville is a great summer travel destination for wine lovers - about a four-hour drive from Delaware - with more than a dozen wineries, most of them of good to very good quality.

But you may want to go there just to see the new kid on the block - Kluge Estate. Millionaire owner Patricia Kluge has the money, vision and determination to try to accomplish what is generally attempted only in California - create a world-class winery from scratch. If she has her way, Kluge Estate will be the first grand winery in the East.

Kluge hired big-name winemakers, big-name architects, big-name chefs, and even big-name public relations help for a Four Seasons coming-out party in Manhattan earlier this spring.

Recently, I visited Kluge Estate in the rolling countryside of magnificent horse farms south of Charlottesville. The winery itself is still on the drawing boards, but the young vineyards are magnificent, as is the tasting room - the Farm Shop, which also offers exquisitely prepared entrees and desserts for lunch on the porch or shaded lawn. Be careful not to trip over the white-clad, on-premise chefs.

For \$3, you can taste the 2001 Kluge Estate New World Red, an elegant, smooth, yet young Bordeaux blend (\$56 a bottle) and a superb before-dinner drink, Kluge Estate Cru New World Aperitif, a chardonnay fortified with brandy with fresh fruit and a mellow honeyed finish (\$26). A chardonnay sparkling wine, Kluge Estate SP, has not yet been released. Is the New World Red worth \$56? Maybe not, although it is very nice and will become a collector's item as future vintages become more complex as the vines mature. You'll need it for a major vertical tasting in a dozen years.

The estate is huge, "so we just plant on the crowns of the hills," Kluge says. "This is a jewel of a terroir" for growing grapes, she believes, noting that vine roots will have to dig down through 15 feet of clay to get to the nutrients in the volcanic subsoil. "Through luck and destiny, all the elements for making great wine are in place." She freely quotes her friend Robert Mondavi and wine journalist Hugh Johnston on the promise of Virginia wines.

There is no doubting Kluge's determination to succeed. On the day I talked with her, she was preparing for a trip to England to discuss sales with the premier wine-importing house there.

Kluge wines, if not yet great, are quite good and have the potential to be great. The \$56 price tag is fair warning that this isn't going to be a nickel-and-dime operation. (For more information about Kluge and Virginia wineries: www.klugeestate.com and www.virginiawines.org.)

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