

# Mr. Jefferson MONTICELLO

## Thomas Jefferson and Wine

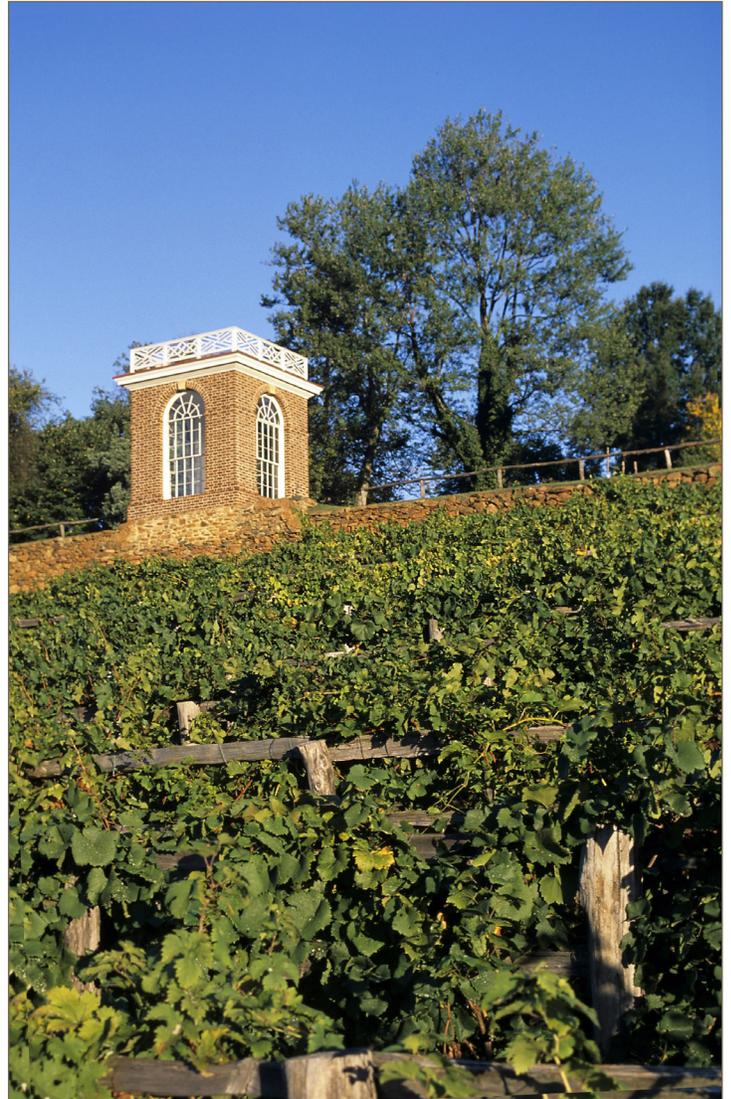
*“Wine from long habit has become an indispensable for my health...”*

Thomas Jefferson to John F. Oliveira Fernandes, 16 Dec. 1815

Thomas Jefferson’s support for the establishment of an American wine industry and his attempts to grow *Vitis vinifera* at Monticello have led him to be described as America’s “first distinguished viticulturist” and “the greatest patron of wine and winegrowing that this country has yet had.” He believed that “we could, in the United States, make as great a variety of wines as are made in Europe, not exactly of the same kinds, but doubtless as good.” A stated “necessary of life,” Jefferson promoted wine as the beverage of health and temperance in America, as opposed to liquors. He argued that “no nation is drunken where wine is cheap; and none sober, where the dearness of wine substitutes ardent spirits as the common beverage.” While Jefferson was not successful in his day, he serves as the first advocate of Virginia’s current burgeoning wine industry. Jefferson recorded plantings of unidentified “grapes” and “vines” at Monticello in the spring of 1771 and 1773. By 1778 he had established a 90-by-100-foot vineyard, but there is no record of any significant quantity of drinkable wine being produced at Monticello during Jefferson’s lifetime.

Jefferson’s recognition as the most knowledgeable wine connoisseur of his time originates with his extensive travels and experience, namely his wine tasting observations from the vineyards of Europe, his continuing pursuit of quality wines for importation, and his role as wine adviser to Presidents Washington, Madison, and Monroe. Monticello’s newly-restored Wine Cellar further brings to life the story of Jefferson and wine through the use of archaeological artifacts, reproduction objects, restored and conserved original fittings, and interpretive signage. Inventories and correspondence in Jefferson’s hand helped determine provisioning and consumption patterns over time and informed the refurbishing of the Wine Cellar with period-appropriate bottles and shipping crates. The Wine Cellar’s importance – for its obvious role in the Jeffersonian meal in the Dining Room above – is enriched by stories of the enslaved workers, like butler Burwell Colbert, who were responsible for its maintenance.

The Wine Cellar was the very first cellar space dug at the commencement of Monticello’s construction. Located in the all-weather passageway under the main house, it reveals Jefferson’s cellar as it looked and functioned during his retirement years (1809-1826). Furnished with glass bottles – the vessels for transporting wine to the



Dining Room above via dumbwaiter – the cellar illustrates methods of storing bottled wine in bins and crates. The prevalence of glass bottles reflects Jefferson’s preference (after his European travels) for ordering wine bottled and shipped directly from the vineyard, an unusual practice at the time. (Wine was typically purchased from merchants, shipped in large casks, and drawn off into bottles at its final destination; some of Jefferson’s wines were provisioned in this manner). By requesting his French wines estate-bottled, essentially cutting out the middleman and the possibility of improper blending, Jefferson ensured its best quality.

Visitors may now enter the Wine Cellar on a new platform situated above the original brick floor. It allows close inspection of the main features on display, such as the only original, surviving door from the dependencies that hung in the Wine Cellar (a stout, iron-reinforced, and double lock-equipped indicator of the value of the Wine Cellar’s contents) and the intricacies of the wine dumbwaiter (one side restored and fully functional, featuring its original weights). Consisting of individually-weighted trolleys, the dumbwaiter allowed four bottles to be pre-positioned behind the locked doors on either side of the Dining Room fireplace. They were easily replenished by signaling someone below to pull the lifts down into the cellar. Once reloaded, the trolleys ascended back to the Dining Room, providing almost invisible operation. Restoration of the Wine Cellar and its adjacent cellar was made possible by the generous support of Howard and Abby Milstein and the Roller-Bottimore Foundation.



Visitors in Monticello's newly renovated Wine Cellar.



*Vitis vinifera* at Monticello