

## Gray Ghost Groupie

Good morning. Thank you, Amy, for your kind words. We are honored to be special guests at this event today as we celebrate a remarkable 30 years of Gray Ghost Vineyards. We are thrilled to enjoy this occasion with Amy, Al, Cheryl, Al Jr., other members of their family, the Gray Ghost staff, Representative Comer, and all of you here today.

I was a high school history teacher for almost thirty years. Each quarter, I introduced a new unit of study to my classes. Daily, though, I was required to ask myself essential questions I would have to answer once the unit was completed. So, today, I will pretend that all of you are students in my class, and I will introduce today's unit of study, Gray Ghost Groupie. Here are the essential questions I will answer: 1) How did I become a Gray Ghost Groupie, 2) Why did I become a Gray Ghost Groupie, and 3) What are the benefits of being a Gray Ghost Groupie? There will be a pop quiz at the end of my lesson, so take notes and pay attention.

So, how did I become a Gray Ghost Groupie? I don't remember exactly when, but in the late 1990s, I read an article in the Washington Post about a court case involving a local winery owner named Juanita Swedenburg. The case involved shipping Virginia wines to other states, and Juanita was the champion of this court case. However, the article sparked my interest in Virginia wines. When I moved to DC from New Orleans in 1992, a friend took me to a few Virginia wineries, and although I was not much of a wine drinker back then, I knew I was not drinking the best wines. I never returned to them. The article, though, encouraged me to give Virginia wines another try.

On a Saturday afternoon, I had gone horseback riding and looked quite regal in my riding togs. I imagined myself to look like a country squire surveying his property. I even had the long hair tied in a ponytail to complete the regency look! I planned to stop by Swedenburg for a wine tasting after my ride and could not have imagined a better way to finish my afternoon. Awaiting me in a dark tasting room was Juanita Swedenburg. The lights were turned off, and she curtly asked if there was something that she could do for me. I replied, "I read about your winery in the Post and would like to taste your wines. I could see a tasting menu that listed several wines, but she offered to pour only four of her wines. The tasting consisted of a small drop of wine in a small glass, and she didn't attempt to present or explain the wines she poured. The implied message was taste, buy, and leave—quickly! I proved to be a persistent customer and asked her about the other wines on her list and whether those could be tasted, too. With a "said the spider to the fly" attitude, Juanita asked me, "So, do you like Chardonnay?" I meekly replied, "I guess so; I don't know what I like just yet." Juanita's next question was, "Well, do you think you would like Cabernet Sauvignon?" My answer was the same: I don't know, but I'd like to try both since I see you have bottles of Chardonnay and Cabernet." She responded politely but sternly, "I'm not pouring those today. If you want to taste Chardonnay and Cabernet, go to Gray Ghost Vineyards." She was even nice enough to give me directions. Needless to say, I left and drove to Gray Ghost Vineyards. I've been a groupie ever since then.

I can now answer the second essential question: Why did I become a Gray Ghost groupie? On that first visit, I gazed upon immaculate vineyards and was greeted warmly by Cheryl in what was then a very small tasting room. The wines I tasted that day completely changed my previous view of Virginia wines. As I swirled, sniffed, and tasted my way through elegant wines, I received the education about wines that I had been looking for, and I knew that I did indeed like both Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. I learned that Al and Cheryl developed their winemaking craft in California and even searched for vineyard sites in that state. Lucky for us, though, they grasped the potential for producing excellent wines in Virginia. After establishing the vineyard in 1986 and opening the winery in 1994, testaments to Al and Cheryl's expertise, with an emphasis on vineyard management as well as winemaking technique, came pouring in.

Over 3,000 awards have been given to Gray Ghost wines in the past 30 years, including Best of Class in several competitions, four Grand Star Awards, a Best of the East Coast accolade, and proclaimed Best of the East for four years.

In addition to impressive achievements, though, I ultimately became a groupie due to the hospitality of the Gray Ghost family, which includes the staff. I have always been welcomed as a valued friend, and over the years, I have recruited other Gray Ghost groupies. That would include my husband Paul, whose idea of fine wine was Sutter Home White Zinfandel. We shared a bottle of Gray Ghost Merlot on our first date almost 20 years ago, and he never returned to generic California swill again. It was also 20 years ago that we launched our wine blog, Virginia Wine Time, and Gray Ghost Vineyard has been featured regularly. This year, I began my cooking show, The Cajun Cooks, and each show ends with a recommendation for pairing with Virginia wines. In episode four, I revealed that the Gray Ghost Gewurztraminer partnered well with shrimp creole. Paul and I have made friends with other groupies with whom we have harvested grapes each growing season and, of course, shared Gray Ghost wines.

Now, I will answer my last essential question: What are the benefits of being a Gray Ghost Groupie? One benefit is the ability to share these exceptional wines on special occasions. My parents visit us every Thanksgiving, and we prefer to skip the Black Friday madness with a trip to Gray Ghost. Here, we kick off the holiday season with a favorite wine paired with Thanksgiving leftovers. As an extra bonus, we also get a sneak preview of Al's marvelous holiday cork decorations. I have made it a tradition to celebrate my birthday at Gray Ghost, too, and that occasion gives me a chance to wish my fellow Aquarian, Cheryl, a happy birthday. Each summer, I vacation with my family on the lovely beaches of Dauphin Island, Alabama, and a case of Gray Ghost wines joins us for the trip.

Another benefit of being a groupie is showing off well-crafted, award-winning wines to friends who may not know that Virginia is capable of producing stellar wines. The Reserve Chardonnay and Reserve Cabernet have developed cult followings amongst our friends. Several years ago, we hosted a dinner party for friends, and I knew I wanted to serve a Gray Ghost Reserve Cabernet with the main course, beef tenderloin. (I think this was the 2006 vintage). I decided to aerate a bottle an hour or so before our guests arrived; of course, I had to taste it, too. I knew this wine would be a hit, and I gave Paul a small pour to savor along with me. I thought, "I should try this with cheese to see how it pairs with food." I cut up some cheddar cheese, plated them with baguette slices, and served another small pour of wine. Paul and I ended up drinking the whole bottle before our guests arrived. Luckily, I had another bottle to serve to my guests, who were blown away.

The best benefit of being a groupie, though, is being accessible to winemakers Al and Cheryl, who never tire of answering our questions about vintages, winemaking, vineyard management, or the intricacies of owning a winery. We also get to hear Al's latest jokes! A groupie also saves the date for fun events throughout the year, including Christmas and Valentine's Day; of course, we guess which weekends to keep open during harvest so we don't miss out on harvesting a favorite variety and the fun after-party. Regulars also know that they will always be warmly greeted and treated like friends by Amy and the Gray Ghost tasting staff. This level of hospitality, though, is extended to all customers, including first-timers who, like me so many years ago, will discover that Virginia can produce world-class wine.

I have now taught my unit, Being a Gray Ghost Groupie, and answered the essential questions. Paul will now hand out the quiz! Congratulations to Gray Ghost Vineyards on 30 years of outstanding success. I will continue to be a groupie, and I know that many more outstanding vintages and experiences from Gray Ghost Vineyards await me.