

THOMAS JEFFERSON'S PASSIONS Wine & the University of Virginia

By Ellen Crosby

"You can't be a real country unless you have a beer and an airline," Frank Zappa once said. "It helps if you have some kind of a football team, or some nuclear weapons, but at the very least you need a beer."

Not according to Thomas Jefferson, who believed that what a country needed to get on the map was its own wine. And so Jefferson, considered by some as the "Leonardo da Vinci of America" for his remarkable intellect and far-ranging, eclectic interests, spent decades trying to grow grapes at Monticello, his Virginia home. Though he never produced a successful harvest despite thirty years of experimenting with twenty-two kinds of grapes, TJ was convinced his new country could make, as he said, "as great a variety of wines as are made in Europe, not exactly of the same kinds, but doubtless as good."

As a transplanted Virginian, I have long been fascinated by Jefferson and his passion for wine – he liked to drink it, as well as make it – so it was inevitable that the subject would find its way into *THE MERLOT MURDERS*, my first "Virginia wine country" mystery. Lucie Montgomery, my protagonist, owns a small family-run vineyard and occasionally gets a hand from her friend Joe Dawson, a high school history teacher. After ten years of foot-dragging, Joe is finally finishing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Virginia. The topic is Jefferson's efforts to establish a wine industry in the fledgling United States (of course!), or as the teenage girls Joe teaches call it, "Grape Expectations."

Virginia boasts many excellent state-funded universities, but I knew Joe had to attend UVa, which Jefferson founded and designed as the last major undertaking of his life – he was in his late seventies when construction began in 1819. For those who have never been to Charlottesville to see his legacy, it's worth a detour if you're in the neighborhood. Heck, even if you're *not* in the vicinity, it's worth a trip to see what Paul Goldberger, architecture critic for *The New Yorker*, once called "possibly the greatest piece of architecture in America."

Jefferson envisioned a community of students and professors living and studying in one place, forming the basis for his "academical village" – a term still used today. Inspired by the sixteenth-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio, Jefferson wanted his university's focal point to be a library, rather than the customary chapel. He modeled this building – the Rotunda – on the Pantheon in Rome, anchoring it at one end of a rectangular grassy field, appropriately known as "the Lawn." Lining both sides of the Lawn would be ten two-storey pavilions serving as faculty housing upstairs and classrooms downstairs. Rows of single-storey student rooms would link the pavilions together.

Today the Lawn and its time-worn red brick buildings remain the heart – and pride – of the university. The pavilions now serve only as residences for distinguished professors (classes are held elsewhere), and the rooms – with their working fireplaces – are awarded to student leaders. On a late autumn afternoon it's a pleasant walk along the wood smoke-scented covered walkways, or Colonnades, where you're expected to peer around the occasional open door or through windows, or linger to read the signs and message boards. (My favorite poster, seen a few years ago, was hand-written: "I look forward to the day when there are enough funds for the needs of education and the military has to hold a bake sale to get the funding for a bomb.")

Behind each of the ten pavilions are ten jewels – small gardens which Jefferson, a passionate gardener, intended should be places of contemplation and study, loosely based on the concept of Plato's "groves of academe." In *THE MERLOT MURDERS*, Lucie recalls often visiting these gardens with her late mother, who shared Jefferson's love of botany. Unfortunately for Lucie, however, in the six years since her mother passed away, both the family vineyard and its once well-tended gardens are now derelict and run down, largely thanks to her father Leland's penchant for gambling and shady business deals.

When Leland Montgomery dies under suspicious circumstances, Lucie leaves her mother's family home in France, where she has been recuperating from an automobile accident for the last two years, and returns to Virginia. Distraught by the neglect and seediness she sees everywhere, Lucie tries to persuade her brother and sister to help her restore the vineyard as it was when their mother was alive.

But her siblings can't wait to nail up the "For Sale" sign and be rid of the place, leaving Lucie as the sole family member to have inherited her mother's love of cultivating the soil. She also has to deal with Quinn Santori, the cantankerous, cut-rate winemaker her father hired shortly before he died. At one point, Lucie wonders aloud to Quinn what her French mother would think of an Italian vintner making their wines.

He smiled that half-smile again. "Thomas Jefferson said every man has two countries. His own and France. I figure that makes me a little bit French. Besides, Jefferson's good friend was Filippo Mazzei. A good *paisano* from Tuscany, just like my phantom father. Jefferson gave Mazzei two thousand acres near Monticello to grow *vinifera* in Virginia and produce some good Italian wine in the New World. So if an Italian vintner was good enough for Jefferson, it ought to be good enough for you. Okay?"

Well, it's not exactly okay, and their relationship remains rocky. Lucie doesn't trust Quinn – who appears to be a man without a past – and Quinn thinks what Lucie knows about winemaking would fit on the head of a pin, with room to spare. Still, Quinn invoked Jefferson, much to Lucie's surprise, and from that moment on the chemistry between them changes.

Nearly two centuries after his own failed trials at Monticello, Jefferson undoubtedly would be thrilled to see his dream of growing grapes and making wine in Virginia fulfilled. He also would be proud of the growth and development of his academical village – for UVa, which still considers

Jefferson its guiding presence, is consistently ranked among the top universities in the country.

Though TJ died before construction of the buildings on the Lawn was finished, he did host the university's first formal dinner when the Marquis de Lafayette, his good friend, came to Charlottesville in 1824. The Frenchman, who once led troops on behalf of the colonies during the Revolutionary War, received the kind of hero-worshipping reception a rock star would kill for as he traveled throughout the country on a sentimental return visit. His trip to UVa was no exception.

Jefferson's dinner for his old friend and four hundred guests, held in the unfinished third floor Dome Room of the Rotunda, was apparently an affair to remember. The two former revolutionaries, now old men, hadn't seen each other in thirty-five years. Wine flowed freely, bolstered by endless toasts which included the required thirteen for the original states in the Union. None of the accounts of that evening mention how everyone – including the somewhat fragile 81-year old Jefferson – made it back down the three flights of stairs, though it seems they drank enough to float the place. Even then, the partying didn't stop. By the time Lafayette and his entourage left Monticello ten days later, they and their host had drunk so much red wine that Jefferson's well-stocked cellar was nearly empty and he was sending out an SOS to friends to send more.

Less than two years later, Jefferson was dead. Appropriately enough, he passed away on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of independence of the country he helped found. Rather than listing honors received and offices held, the former governor of Virginia, ambassador to France, secretary of state, vice-president, and third American president chose as his epitaph only those accomplishments he hoped would continue to shape the lives of future generations.

“Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of American Independence, (and) the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.”

Or as Quinn said, when he and Lucie wondered if they – and the vineyard – had a future together, “What did your man Jefferson say? ‘I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.’”