

Fourth
in the
series "The
Story Behind
the Dogs
on Wine Labels"

Chateau Morrisette

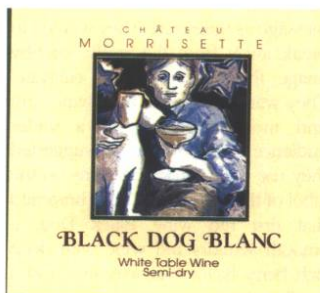
BY BARBARA DENZER

It's a little known fact that among the many accomplishments of Thomas Jefferson — who drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and was our third President from 1801-1809 — was the claim to being America's first wine expert. Hooked on the French obsession with food and wine during his tenure as ambassador to France, Jefferson developed his expertise during 1787 and 1788 that he spent touring the wine regions of France, Northern Italy, and Germany gathering detailed information from the top producers in Europe. His plan was to grow grapes and produce wine at his beloved Monticello in Virginia.

Sadly, Jefferson was not as great a vintner as he was a scholar of wines, author, architect, or politician. However, he developed as a collector of fine wines, and was the unofficial presidential wine advisor to George Washington and James Monroe who preceded him in the office of the presidency.

Jefferson was convinced that wine was an integral part of healthful living,

and did his best to promote the growth of the wine industry in Virginia while he focused on collecting wines. There are still four bottles of a 1787 Chateau Lafite in existence with Thomas Jefferson's initials on the



labels. They are considered by serious collectors to be the most sought after wines in the world.

Wine making in Virginia actually began many years earlier than Jefferson's labors when the Jamestown colonists first settled in 1607. Their initial efforts at wine making were not much better than Jefferson's. In fact, the results were so poor that

the Virginia Company brought eight winemakers and their vine cuttings from France to Jamestown to help establish vineyards. Making wine was so important to our founding fathers that the legislature passed an act requiring each colonist to plant at least 10 grapevines. Unfortunately, no matter how many times they planted and replanted grapes, their vines were ravaged by pests, disease, and fungus because of the humid climate and cold temperatures. Humidity, frost, freezes, and excessive summer heat contributed to many problems including early ripening, rot, and mildew.

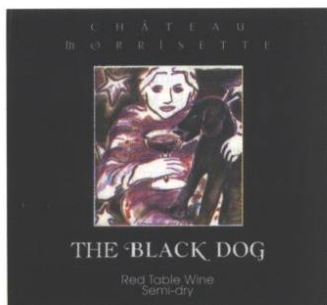
Eventually Virginia grape breeders developed cross and hybrid grapes that were hardy enough to withstand the elements but were not known for their taste. Developing French-American hybrid vines made further improvements, but Prohibition brought the collapse of the somewhat fragile Virginia wine industry.

It wasn't until the late 1970s that sophisticated growing techniques developed healthy, hardy grapevines

that could thrive in the region. Virginia began widespread planting of chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon grapes, and finally developed into a dynamic wine region, second only to New York on the East Coast. There are at least 59 small, mostly family-owned wineries in Virginia, spread across six appellations with very similar climatic conditions.

In the Southwestern Virginia appellation, just off the Blue Ridge Parkway about an hour southwest of Jefferson's Monticello, lies a family winery that dog lovers, as well as wine lovers, should put at the top of their list of destinations. It's the Chateau Morrisette, on the outskirts of Floyd, Virginia. Chateau Morrisette welcomes visitors to their grounds to picnic, take tours of the winery, participate in tastings, wander through the gardens, and enjoy concerts, festivals and entertainment.

Founded in 1978 by William and Nancy Morrisette and their son David, Chateau Morrisette is a family winery.



However, they are in no way a small operation as that term usually indicates.

The Chateau is a unique timber-frame building. It's a large, impressive structure that houses the new production facility, tasting room, restaurant, gift shop, and offices. It replicates an authentic chateau right down to the wooden pegs it's built with, the huge timbers used in its construction, and the six-story tower on the front of the building.

Starting with an initial production of 2000 gallons in 1984, they currently produce more than 75,000 cases of wine

per year at the Chateau. The millions of labels on these wines feature the Morrisette's four black dogs.

Chateau Morrisette is the most prolific of wineries producing labels featuring dogs — a veritable artistic feast of dogs on wine labels.

Originally the Morrisettes created a family crest to portray the image of Chateau Morrisette to the world. They wanted a symbol that didn't take itself seriously. A crest with an "M" in the center of a large shield was designed and appears at the top of most labels. A crown sits on the top of the shield draped elaborately from middle to side. Hans, the original black dog, is standing at the left of the shield, and Be Dog, their other black dog, stands on the right of the shield. The crest of the two black dogs appears in silhouette, a humorous send up to the pomp and circumstance of the more serious crests of blue-blooded royalty.

When it was time to market their first wines, the Morrisettes wanted a label that would convey the same message as their crest. They wanted to break away from the stuffy, snobby image that most wineries cultivate. They wanted to make their wines fun and more appealing to a wider audience. David Morrisette suggested they use their black dog Hans on the label of the first wine. They christened that first red wine Black Dog, a smooth semidry red wine with deep rich berry flavor characteristics and a medium body.

The compliment to the Chateau's first red wine is Black Dog Blanc, their first white wine, an off-dry, soft chardonnay blend with fruitful characteristics.

The Morrisettes decided that Hans, the male black dog would appear on the red wines, and Jazz, a black female, would appear on the white wines. In the new labels for cabernet sauvignon,

pinot noir, merlot and cabernet franc, Hans is painted dressed in red, royal-looking robes trimmed in gold with a crown on his head and a bone held like a scepter in his paw. The backgrounds are changed to differentiate among the labels.

What could be more fun than a canine prince in front of his chateau, except possibly a canine princess in the vineyards of the chateau? Jazz is drawn in a royal blue dress with gold trim, white puffy sleeves and crown on her head. Again, changing only the background to distinguish the label, she appears on the chardonnay and the Vidal blanc.

When the first Riesling was ready, David Morrisette named it Our Dog Blue, and told the artist he wanted a blue dog jumping over the moon with stars for the label. The result is a charming modern piece of artwork.

Frosty Dog is a late harvest Riesling. The label is a delightful graphic of two black dogs in red Santa suits trimmed in fluffy white fur. The dogs are ice fishing and toasting each other with a glass of wine in front of an inviting little igloo. The Morrisettes describe the wine they have depicted in a polar setting as sweet, fruity, fun, and tropical. There's no doubt the label is fun.

THE BLACK DOGS OF CHATEAU MORRISSETTE

- Hans** — the original black dog and winery mascot, and the left dog on the family crest.
- Be Dog** — a female, the right dog on the family crest, the not so little doggie that went to market in the back of a distributor's truck one weekend.
- Nicholas** — the current tasting room greeter and concierge, bon vivant and lady's man, connoisseur of the simple life.
- Jazz** — the newest female black dog in training to be part of the tasting room welcoming committee, and featured on the white wine labels.

