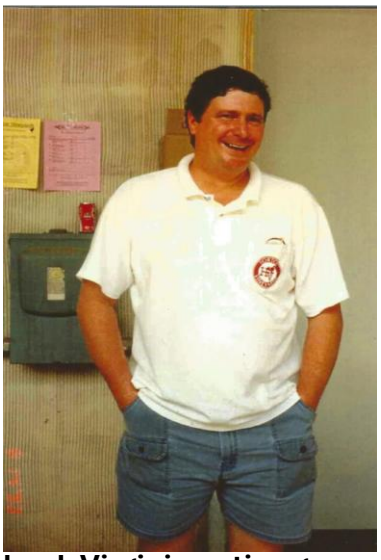
Dennis Horton named 2025 Formica Award Winner



The next time you take a sip of Virginia Viognier or hearty Norton, tip your cap skyward and say "Cheers" to a man who was instrumental in the success of these wines – Dennis Horton.

He was a pioneer in the Virginia wine industry and was well known for his innovative approach to viticulture, but his role in introducing – or reintroducing, in one case - new grape varieties to the state is considered by many to be his major achievement to the state wine industry.

Horton, who died in 2018, left a lasting legacy by being the first to plant Viognier grapes in the state and by bringing back Virginia native grape Norton after disease, war and prohibition had wiped out the Norton vines. Horton was also the first to release varietal Cabernet Franc, Tannat and Petit Manseng, in addition to Rkatsiteli, Malbec, Roussanne and Marsanne, and many others. The introduction of Norton, Viognier, Cabernet Franc, Tannat and Petit Manseng revolutionized the quality of the Virginia wine industry, and he was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Virginia Wineries Association in 2011 for his pioneering work.

For those accomplishments and a back story matched by few others, Horton has been named winner of the Richmond Wine Society's 2025 Joe Formica Award, given annually to a person (or entity) who has made significant contributions to the wine industry, with an emphasis on Virginia.

The award is named after Formica, a founding father of RWS and a lifetime major force within the organization and in state and international wine circles.

The RWS Board of Directors selected Horton from among a record 11 nominations sent in by RWS members. He will be honored at a wine dinner in late October or early November. Details of the event will be announced later.

Barboursville Vineyards' Luca Paschina (2021), Michael Shaps (2022) of Michael Shaps Wineworks, viticulturalist Lucie Morton (2023) and winemaker Gabriele Rausse (2024) were the previous winners.

Dennis Horton was born in Hermann, Missouri -- a town with a rich winemaking heritage – and developed an early appreciation for viticulture. In 1977, he and his wife, Sharon, relocated to Virginia. By 1983, they had planted a small vineyard at their home in Madison County, marking the beginning of their winemaking journey.

Recognizing the potential of Virginia's terroir, Horton, along with business partner Joan Bieda, purchased 55 acres in Orange County. They established Horton Vineyards and produced their first wine in 1991 and completed their own winery facility in 1993.

In 1989, Horton, internationally known for his work with Rhone varieties, planted the first Viognier vines for commercial use in Virginia. His 1993 Viognier gained national acclaim and was the start of Viognier being designated as Virginia's official "Signature Grape" in 2011.

Horton brought the Norton grape -- discovered and cultivated in Richmond in the 1820s -- back to Virginia in 1992 from cuttings from his hometown's Stone Hill Winery.

He also introduced a quadrilateral training system with a horizontally divided “lyre” canopy to increase yields, making Viognier commercially viable (its uneven yields had led to its virtual extinction in France). His 1993 vintage of Viognier was the most awarded in the U.S. at the time. His 2016 Petit Manseng won the 2019 Governor’s Cup.

Horton's commitment to experimentation and education influenced a generation of winemakers, solidifying his role as a foundational figure in Virginia's modern wine industry.

“Dennis’s impact on the Virginia wine industry is immeasurable,” Annette Boyd, Director of the Virginia Wine Board Marketing Office, told the Drink What You Like podcast.

Horton passed away on June 19, 2018, at the age of 72. His wife, Sharon, their daughter, Shannon, and granddaughter, Caitlin, continue to operate Horton Vineyards.