



THIS YEAR COOPERATIVE LIVING IS TAKING A ROAD TRIP ALONG THE LENGTH OF ROUTE 11 AS IT CROSSES VIRGINIA FROM NORTH TO SOUTH. EACH ISSUE, CORRESPONDENT DEBORAH HUSO WILL RELATE HER EXPERIENCES ALONG THE WAY.

Story and photos by
Deborah Huso,
Contributing Writer



A Bon-Vivant Bon Voyage Down Route 11

If you delight in foodie travel, Route 11 between Woodstock and New Market won't disappoint! Hit the road for wine tastings, potato chip sampling, and down-home diner fare!

So anyone who has been following my travels down Route 11 on Facebook knows that a big part of the experience for me is food ... and wine ... and heck, even craft brews.



The scenery around the portion of Route 11 between Woodstock and New Market is always beautiful and at times breathtaking. This pastoral vista is near Meems Bottom Covered Bridge.

The Shenandoah Valley may have been known as “the breadbasket of the Confederacy” during the Civil War, but I’d like to argue it continues to be the breadbasket of Virginia. All along Route 11, particularly once one moves into the countryside of Shenandoah County south of Woodstock, are acres and acres of fields bearing wheat and corn, vast expanses of open pasture dotted with Holsteins as well as Black Angus cattle, and plenty of poultry farms.

There is ample supply of local food products here to run a healthy side economy in gastro-tourism (and yes, folks, that is a word!).

IT'S VIRGINIA-MADE, BABY!

It is Vicki Ruckman who begins to introduce me to the food-and-drink culture along Route 11. Owner of The Farmhouse, a gift shop specializing in Virginia-produced food, wine, and gifts on the Main Street of Woodstock, Ruckman tells me one of the primary reasons she started the gift shop, after leaving a career in northern Virginia as a financial contracts manager, was to offer a centralized location for buying Virginia-made goods.

“At Christmas, I always put together baskets for friends with a Virginia theme, but I could never find all the stuff to fill the baskets in one place,” she explains. “I thought it would be great to have one place to go to.”

The Farmhouse has been open since January 2013 and showcases wine from all over the state. “We have 30 Virginia wines here,” Ruckman remarks, “more than anybody else in the Shenandoah Valley.” The Farmhouse also sports everything from Route 11 Potato Chips to locally made coffee.

As it happens, Ruckman’s husband, Monty, is a coffee roaster. “He used



Vicki Ruckman is owner of The Farmhouse, a Woodstock gift shop.

to drink coffee in the Navy and didn't realize how bad it was until he got out and tasted real coffee," Ruckman says with a laugh. He started roasting his own coffee as a hobby, and, like many hobbies, it grew wonderfully out of hand, so now he roasts, packages, and sells his own brand of coffee under the Cabin Creek Roasters label. (And yes, you can buy that at The Farmhouse, too!)

FILL YOUR GLASS ... WITH WINE

If you're a wine enthusiast (and heck, even if you're not), pay a visit to what I might argue is one of the best wineries in the Valley, Cave Ridge Vineyard, 10 miles south of Woodstock and just northwest of Mount Jackson. Vineyard owner Randy Phillips first began cultivating grapes here in 2001 after a 30-year career in D.C. with the U.S. Forest Service. "I've always worked in agriculture," he says, noting that he grew up in the citrus business in Florida before the age of Disney World.

So why wine for Phillips and not oranges? Well, aside from the fact he lives in Virginia, not Florida, Phillips' decision was pretty practical. "Wine production is one of the few agricultural ventures that can be profitable," he remarks.

"We say in this business the wine is made in the vineyard," Phillips adds, pointing out how his natural-resources background has helped him be successful as a viticulturist.

"I knew soil and climate were the keys to good grapes," says this president of the Shenandoah Valley Wine Growers Association. Phillips chose his location in the Shenandoah Valley because the climate and topography mimic that of some of the world's greatest wine-producing regions. The Valley's soil is made up mostly of limestone clay with a little bit of sandstone, offering the drainage necessary for growing good grapes, and the Valley also has the lowest rainfalls east of the Mississippi. Surprised? Phillips says it's because the Blue Ridge Mountains protect the Valley from the coastal storms to the east while the Allegheny Mountains serve as a rain shadow on the west.

Phillips grows many varieties of grapes and is one of the few Valley producers of Riesling, which originated in Germany's Mosel Valley. Cave Ridge's most popular wine right now is the award-winning Fossil Hill Reserve. It's a red blend of Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Chambourdcin and features a label design based on one of the fossils discovered on the vineyard.

Phillips says Cave Ridge produces about 4,500 cases of wine annually, and he doesn't have a hard time selling them. "There are 17 wineries in the Valley now," he says. "People are discovering this is one of the best places to grow grapes."



The Farmhouse (left and above) specializes in Virginia-produced food, wine and gifts on the Main Street of Woodstock. Owner Vicki Ruckman opened the business in January 2013 and showcases wine from all over Virginia. She says that the store stocks more than 30 varieties of Virginia wines. The Farmhouse also offers customers other products, from coffee to Route 11 Potato Chips.

Randy Phillips (right) first began cultivating grapes at Cave Ridge Vineyards (below) in 2001 after a 30-year career with the U.S. Forest Service in Washington, D.C. He says the Shenandoah Valley's climate and topography mimic those of some of the world's greatest wine-producing regions.





IN LOVE WITH A POTATO CHIP

It's a great place to grow potato chips, too, or rather, make them. You absolutely cannot take a road trip down Route 11 and not stop by the Route 11 Potato Chips factory just outside Mount Jackson. This 21-year-old company actually had its roots in an old feed store in Middletown after company president Sarah Cohen discovered by happenstance just how fun it was to make potato chips.



The Route 11 Potato Chips factory is a beehive of activity, as this traffic-directional sign indicates.



Her family once owned a farm in Warren County and grew vegetables. When a neighboring farmer lost the market for his potatoes one year and remarked to Cohen's father that he did not know what to do with his crop, Cohen's dad said, "Hey, let's make potato chips!"

And so they did, starting a small factory in Maryland that Sarah Cohen began running after graduating from college. It was so small only two people worked there. Cohen found she loved the hands-on nature of the business, but she didn't want to be in Maryland. She wanted to be in Virginia's beautiful Shenandoah Valley. For five years she worked hard to develop flavors and products while in Middletown, slowly growing a business that produces what I personally consider one of the best potato chips out there.

And let me tell you — I am not a potato-chip fan. I'm not even a junk food fan, but give me a bag of Route 11 Potato Chips, and I gobble them up like a starving animal. They're that good and that precisely, perfectly crunchy.

I just had to ask Cohen how she mastered that perfect crunch and that addictive flavor. "Well, we knew we had to make a crunchy chip that wouldn't break your teeth," Cohen says matter-of-factly. "We needed to stand out in the crowd."

Route 11 Potato Chips Vice President Mike Connelly, who teamed up with Cohen 13 years ago to bring his manufacturing expertise to the Mount Jackson

factory, explains, "There are several ways of cooking potato chips. We do kettle style and slice the potatoes directly into the hot oil. It's like having a giant skillet." He says Route 11's unique flavor and crunch are the result of just the right chip thickness and just the right amount of cooking.

"Yes, it's like home cooking on steroids," says Cohen. Since the company's humble beginnings more than two decades ago, it has moved from producing 60 to 600 pounds of chips per hour, and that's still small by potato-chip-industry standards.

And in case you're wondering how these chips got their name and the road sign logo you'll see on all their products, Cohen says that occurred by happenstance as well.

"I happened to be driving through Strasburg and saw an old Route 11 sign," she explains. "I liked the Americana aspect of it and asked a local sign painter to make me a logo."

The rest is crunchy history ...

OTHER MUST-SEES ON THIS STRETCH OF ROAD

As you travel Route 11 south from Woodstock, you'll notice a persistent vista to the east, the long face of **Massanutten Mountain**, which parallels this historic road from Strasburg into Rockingham County east of Harrisonburg.

If you want to see what it's like inside the mountain, check out **Endless Caverns** (1800 Endless Caverns Rd., New Market, 540-896-2283, www.endlesscaverns.com).

While you're in New Market, also make a stop at the **New Market Battlefield State Historical Park** and the **Virginia Museum of the Civil War** (8895 George Collins Pkwy., 866-515-1864, www.vmi.edu/newmarket). Route 11 and I-81 bisect the battlefield, where 257 Virginia Military Institute cadets helped fend off advancing Federals in May 1864. This year marks the battle's sesquicentennial, and you can experience reenactments of the historic battle on May 16, 17, and 18.

Other upcoming events along this stretch of Route 11 include **The Edinburg**



New Market Battlefield State Historical Park (above and right) and the **Virginia Museum of the Civil War** (lower right) are among the area's premier historical attractions.



Ole Time Festival (540-984-7272, www.edinburgoletimefestival.org), which takes place the third full weekend in September with antique car and tractor shows, a bed race (a must-see indeed!), children's petting zoo, and arts and crafts vendors. While you're in town, also check out the historic **Edinburg Mill Visitor Center & Museum** (214 S. Main St., 540-984-8400, www.edinburgmill.com). The mill is one of only a few to survive the Civil War. ■



● IF YOU GO ...

Visit **Shenandoah County Tourism** online (www.shenandoahtravel.org, 888-367-3965) before hitting Route 11 through the region between Woodstock and New Market. While in Woodstock, be sure to stop in at **The Farmhouse** (125 N. Main St., 540-459-9006, www.allthingsva.com) to find a plethora of Virginia-produced goods. The Farmhouse is part of the of the **Artisan Trail Network** (www.artisanscenterofvirginia.org/artisan_trail_network) and holds "Meet the Artists" on Saturdays twice a month or beer, wine, and cider tastings. For eats in Woodstock, stop by **Woodstock Café & Shoppes** (117 S. Main St., 540-459-8888, www.cafeshoppes.org) for a really wonderfully wide array of edibles ranging from fried goat cheese to braised pork belly.

Before you head south from Woodstock, download a map of the **Shenandoah Valley Wine Trail** (www.shenadoahvalleywinetrail.com). The trail runs from Stephens City to Lexington with many of its wineries right here in Shenandoah County. Among them is **Cave Ridge Vineyard** (1476 Conicville Rd., Mount Jackson, 540-477-2585, www.caveridge.com), which requires a bit

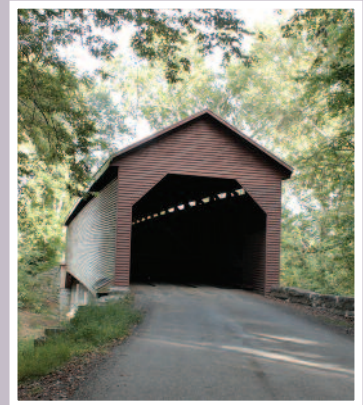
of a detour off Route 11 but is well worth the trip. The winery holds tastings six days a week, being closed on Tuesdays.

Be sure to visit the **Route 11 Potato Chips Factory** (11 Edwards Way, 540-477-9664, www.rt11.com) while you're in Mount Jackson, too.

You can actually access the **Route 11 Potato Chips** factory by taking Route 720 south of Mount Jackson through the scenic **Meems Bottom Covered Bridge**.

For overnight digs in Mount Jackson, the best spot is **The Widow Kip's Country Inn** (355 Orchard Dr., 540-477-2400, www.widowkips.com). Owners Bob and Betty Luse actually purchased the inn more than two decades ago from Rosemary Kip, who was married three times. Her last husband died — hence the name of the inn. The inn has nine rooms and two breakfast seatings, and believe it or not, the Luses do everything here from cooking and cleaning to grounds maintenance and greeting all by themselves!

For dinner fare, head south to **New Market** for real 1950s-style road-trip fare at the **Southern Kitchen** (540-740-3514). I highly recommend one of their open-faced sandwiches ... like turkey and mashed potatoes served over wheat bread and slathered in gravy. Yum! ■



Meems Bottom Covered Bridge.



Owners Bob and Betty Luse at The Widow Kip's Country Inn.