



DAMON AND GEORGIA CALLIS  
AT THE URBAN WINERY.

## An Urban Endeavor Dionysus Makes His Presence Known in Silver Spring

BY LISA CHERKASKY ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL KAMENJAR

**H**and pressing 12 tons of grapes, aging the juice, bottling and personally labeling the wine – it’s all in a day’s work for Damon and Georgia Callis, the creators and owners of The Urban Winery in downtown Silver Spring. Okay, make that a year’s work. And don’t underestimate the contributing bravura of Sophia, the Callis’ 16-month-old third-born, who is the “supervisor for now”.

If you are going to jump into an endeavor requiring passion, dedication, perseverance, love, and endless hours, you’ll want the Callises in your corner. Both were raised in the culture of the large, joyful Greek family table, where food and wine are intrinsically joined and all are welcome.

Silver Spring is now home to the only downtown, professional winemaking operation in the Middle Atlantic, opening officially in June of 2015. “We are

two years young. We are making it,” exclaims the ebullient Damon of the typically rural, bucolic enterprise that he has transplanted to the city dweller’s doorstep.

Working in synchronicity, the Damon and Georgia built their partnerships – marital, familial and business – on the foundation of their parent’s teachings. While both are well-versed in the pleasures of the grape, Georgia’s father, Anthony “Bole” Callis, is the patriarch of the Urban Winery’s hands-on wine-making endeavors, a revered tradition and craft embraced whole-heartedly by both Georgia, by birthright and choice and Damon by marital right and choice.

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A complex and ambitious outfit, the winery is so much more than a watering hole. Whether tasting, creating or congregating – or all three at once – the winery is a welcome gathering place for those who want to deepen their appreciation and knowledge of wine. And it is gorgeous, a serene and sophisticated blend of modern and rustic.

Get thee to The Urban Winemaker to experience – up to your elbows – the pleasure, beauty and science of small-lot wine production.

Damon educated me while we talked recently. “We are *négociants*, as we source grapes from different Maryland farmers.

That's our first option. We also travel to New York, California, and other wine growing regions where we negotiate grape contracts. We set ourselves apart by actually producing wine from grapes, rather than starting with purchased juice. This is a very challenging process in an urban setting, but we are dedicated to providing the full scope of wine operations to our customers."

Do go for a glass of an Urban Winery vintage or one from the largest selection of regional Maryland wines offered anywhere. Or, without leaving your seat, venture farther afield with a personally selected flight of wines from around the world. The sommelier will be happy to advise your sipping and swirling.

Once intoxicated – figuratively or literally – you will want to dive in by attending viniculture classes. Offerings include deductive wine tasting, wine history and culture, and pairing wine with food.

On my bucket list is the creation of my own vintage, counting on guidance from an Urban Winery sommelier or perhaps by Damon Callis himself. I want to learn how to test wines for pH and brix, to design my own label and to bottle and cork the wine myself. Join me.

Just in case you thought otherwise, Damon makes it clear. "Bottling is not sexy. It's very hard work."

With so much togetherness and with such deep investments of time, emotion and money, one might ask, how's that working for the Callises? They couldn't imagine doing it without each other. "We have different skill sets. She's the brains and I'm the charm, usually," Damon says with a laugh. "I'm a Marine so I tell it how it is on everything, including wine. I am



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Hours:  
Tuesday to Thursday: 4:00 p.m.-10:00 p.m.  
Friday: 4:00 p.m.-11:00 p.m.  
Saturday: 1:00 p.m.-11:00 p.m.  
Sunday: 1:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.

brutally honest."

Damon, clearly an extrovert, mentors the Urban Winery's wine ambassadors, staff members who "have a passion and can articulate it," people the winery could also not do without. Wine ambassadors do not just carry glasses of wine from point A to point B, they are deeply invested in the glories of the glass, sharing their experience and knowledge of wine generously with clientele.

In a magical combination of design and alchemy, the winery's two most popular wines, a white and a red, bear names that succinctly describe the Callis' life philosophies and essence.

A blend of Chardonnay, Viognier and Vidal Blanc, Parea, is the delightfully drinkable white whose name translates to "respected friends." Philotimo, the red that understandably outsells all others at the winery, carries a name whose most common translation is "love of honor". In Damon's words, "Philotimo describes an individual who "always does the right thing, even when no one is looking."

Emphasizing the noble approach the Callis family uses to map their personal and professional lives, "parea is why we do it and philotimo is how we do

it," Damon says.

We can all be grateful that the next generation of Callises is in good hands and the wine tradition will carry on. Sophia, aged 7, Stephen, aged 6, and Stella are already knee deep in wine, community and work.

Ask Damon if his children contribute to the family business. "Absolutely." he replies robustly. "We put all of them to work." We have "our own little production line. We could probably use three or four more workers but Georgia and I are not sure we want to go that route now. It would probably be cheaper to hire them," he says, laughing heartily.

The apex of summer 2017 will be the release of a new wine, "Agape," which means, in true Urban Winery form, "unconditional love." Serendipity, and perhaps divine will, played a role in the naming, and this wine, dedicated to Sophia, will complete a trilogy of Callis-style purpose in wine appellation.

The label bears Sophia's whimsical art - a rainbow and two birds, dated 9/16, one of hundreds of her drawings bedecking Damon's office walls. Shortly after choosing the design of the label, Damon came upon, appropriately, Genesis 9/16, the statement of the covenant of love between God and all creation. The rainbow is presented to symbolically represent God's promise to all creatures that the world would not again be flooded. What kismet.

"Where do you go to find inspiration? It is right in front of you," says Damon.

We can all hope the earth will not flood and we'll all be swirling and sipping Agape this summer while loving the earth's bounty unconditionally. Heaven knows we all need it. <sup>[M]</sup>