



Testimony for VT Legislature  
from Deirdre Heekin, Barnard, VT.

Thank you Senators for giving me the opportunity to testify today.

1. I'll start by introducing myself: I'm Deirdre Heekin, co-proprietor with my husband Caleb Barber of Domaine La Garagista, a farm and winery here in Vermont. I am a farmer and winemaker. We farm our vineyards regeneratively and have vineyards, production and tasting spaces in Windsor and Addison Counties. We began planting and farming vines in 2007, our first vintage was in 2010. I am also the VP of the Vermont Grape and Wine Council.
2. I will be speaking specifically to H647 in the omnibus which includes the Vermont Grape and Wine Council's request for parity with Vermont Brewers with our First Class License opportunities as well as asking for a slight increase in our number of pourable ounces in our 4<sup>th</sup> Class License to accommodate selling a glass of wine for those already familiar with a winery's tasting room flights. We see this as the best way to increase awareness of and education about Vermont wine and as a way to increase our contributions to our local food culture, our local agriculture, and out-of-state tourism. I'll take this opportunity to focus on the details of how this legislation can impact a Vermont winery by sharing with you how it could impact my business and in my ability to give back to the state positively.
3. Firstly, I want to say that in the wine industry it is crucial for wineries to have flexibility and as many opportunities as they can to interact directly with their customer base, whether local or touristic. It is additionally important for Vermont wineries to be able to do so as we are a new wine region, with lesser known regional grape varieties and we need to create multiple occasions to educate, communicate, and to share our Vermont stories

through the experience of the wine. From a tourism standpoint, the more opportunities we as wineries can provide to draw the visitor to Vermont, the more they will lodge and dine and experience here. If allowed to grow properly and intentionally, Vermont wine could continue to increase its draw to visitors outside the state.

4. My husband and I have been lucky enough to grow our business in both Windsor and Addison Counties, to have production spaces and tasting spaces in both these locations. We have been able to grow positively in this way over almost twenty years.
5. Our two tasting spaces are in very rural locations, and because of that we have to offer experiences that are a destination for our consumers. We currently can pour 4 2 oz tastes in both tasting spaces. This is great for the first time visitor; it's a way to introduce people to our wines and for them to have an opportunity to taste a few things. We currently only have the one 1<sup>st</sup> class license that allows me to pour by the glass in only one of these spaces.
6. We have seen first hand how this affects how our customer interacts with us in these two different scenarios.
7. In the tasting space where we have the ability to pour by the glass, we see that first time customer return more consistently to enjoy a glass with us. They are willing to make the trek out to the tasting room to have this experience more frequently. We are able to develop and deepen our community relationship with them and spend more time communicating about Vermont wine, and sharing our story, and the story of Vermont food and beverage culture when they come to see us more frequently. It also improves our economic sustainability.
8. In the tasting space where we only can pour the tasting flight, we see customers come a first time, and then, in the best case scenario, we'll see them in six months when they think we might have changed the offerings in our flight, or we might see them a year later. More often than not, we don't see them again at all because to come and taste the flight feels more like a one time experience, especially if they have to make the effort to come out to a rural area.

9. Enjoying a glass of wine is a very different immersive experience than in tasting through a flight.
10. We do have the ability to get a Special Event Permit for each time we are open which allows us to pour a glass, but this is an inconvenient and unsustainable process. In both of our locations, a Special Events permit must be approved by the selectboard. The selectboard meets infrequently, only once or twice a month.
11. I am a farmer first, and I must focus on my farming responsibilities over all else. Our tasting rooms are open only a few times a month because we need as much flexibility as possible when deciding when to be open. Because we are so rural, we are not open all the time, it doesn't make sense economically in these locations, and often we are deciding to be open only a week in advance because of our farming schedule.

Caleb and I run everything from farming the vineyards, to the winery, to sales and marketing to being in the tasting room when it's open. It is next to impossible to plan far enough in advance to take advantage of the Selectboard meetings, and often we miss the opportunity to request a Special Events Permit and have to wait until the next month where we run into the same problem. If I try to pick dates ahead of time and hope for the best, I have to pay for each permit, and often that date we've chosen ends up being a bad date because we have to address something else more emergent in the field, and we lose that date and the money we spent for the permit. It would be infinitely more sustainable for us in our specific situation to be able to have a second 1<sup>st</sup> class license that allows us to open our tasting room at the most beneficial time, and to offer our customers a more indepth destination experience that we know they will return to again and again.

12. I'd like to just finish by also saying how important it is to get Vermont wines in glasses for consumers to enjoy. We are fledgling region still in need of educating our audience whether that is local or touristic. In the state we do have some support from restaurants and wine bars who carry Vermont wines on their bottle lists, but very rarely do they appear on glass lists, so there is nowhere else for people currently to experience Vermont wines by the glass except in the tasting room with a first class license. Giving Vermont wineries parity with the brewers for a second First Class License or the ability to pour

a glass at their 4<sup>th</sup> Class License, would not only make a huge difference in the ability for Vermont wineries to sustain themselves financially and grow, but it would go a long way to promoting not only the wine, and the winery, but Vermont agriculture, and a Vermont story.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely, Deirdre Heekin