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A winery with no vines comes to downtown Cary

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Marek Wojciechowski pulls a sample of red wine for testing at the new Chatham Hill Winery facility in Cary.

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By Andrew Kenney — akenney@newsobserver.com

CARY — A familiar scent changed Jill Winkler's life.

It permeated the walls of her office in the Gateway Centre business park and hung there, day after day: the smell of wine.

She knew the scientists next door were making the stuff, for some reason or another, in the back of their research and development lab.

"Literally, I smelled the grapes fermenting behind my office," Winkler said, seated in the freshly painted lobby of [Cary's only winery](#). "At harvest time, I'd be in there working and there would be little fruit flies all over the place. But I was interested – I'd go back there and find out what they were doing."

What she found was a future husband and a new career. Some 15 years later, she's a co-owner of Chatham Hill Winery, the business that this summer has brought urban wine-making to downtown Cary's rejuvenation effort.

Back in 1997, the operation was just three guys with some scientific equipment, laying out a vino operation in an utterly plain business center in Morrisville.

It was unexplored territory then, the idea of an American wine producer divorced from the bucolic rows of the vineyard.

In fact, [North Carolina wine](#) was a relative rarity back then. The state barely had a dozen wineries at the time, and most put out the sweet taste of muscadine grapes.

Marek Wojciechowski and his two partners saw an opportunity in the new crops of European grapes that growers had adopted to the state's soils. With their scientific expertise and access to new growers, they hoped to remake the taste of the state's wines.

"We said, 'Let's open up the first winery in the Triangle.' I wanted it to be pure North Carolina," said Wojciechowski, who moved from Poland in the 1980s through a science exchange program.

So they served their test runs up to friends and family in the back of the lab, including Winkler. The native New Yorker sampled the wines and needled the men with questions, looking on as they legally established a full-fledged winery in 1999.

"It's the attraction to wine itself. We were looking to make something more fun than our medical diagnostic devices," Wojciechowski said.

In those opening years, it was largely word of mouth that brought people to the curious business. But Winkler wasn't there to see the business grow – she switched jobs, eventually losing contact with the Chatham Hill Winery crew.

'We just liked wine'

It would be about four years before Winkler reconnected with Wojciechowski. Winkler still remembers the invitation.

"He said, 'I'd love to show you the winery,'" she recalled.

When they arrived back at the old office site, she found a much-changed facility.

"All of a sudden, instead of this 50-gallon tank, there were big tanks and oak barrels," she said.

That visit would mark the beginning of a mid-50s romance for the pair. They bonded over their interest in medicine – she had worked for a Medicaid-related nonprofit, while his company had used grants to study breast cancer and lead-poisoning detection.

They also, of course, shared plenty of wine.

"I didn't really know that much about wine, and still don't," Winkler said. "We just liked wine – wine and food, wine and family and friends. Pretty simple, the way most people enjoy wine."

She tried to avoid getting too involved in her boyfriend's business, but a new degree in organizational development had her filled with useful advice.

Slowly, her life became intertwined with the winery.

By 2007, the couple were married, and their partners had released their stakes in the business.

A decade after that wine smell crept through the office walls, the newly avowed husband and wife were all in.

"This was our livelihood now. He had left his work full time, and I had left my work full time," Winkler said.

And they faced an existential crisis.

'That's what we are'

Thousands of people were buying wine from Chatham Hill, which was producing up to 7,000 barrels per year, but the question came constantly: “They walked in the door and they’d say, ‘What is this, what are you doing here? A winery in a business park?’” Winkler recalled.

Truth was, Wojciechowski had planned for years to add a vineyard to his winery. He and his partners thought they might buy land near Chatham County or Chapel Hill – hence the name Chatham Hill Winery.

Yet years and years on, the business still was tucked in that anonymous office complex. And when an unexpected deadline gave the winery four months to move, husband and wife suddenly had to ask just what kind of winery they were running.

A rural property on N.C. 751 fell through, leaving them looking again at an office park property. If they took it, they’d be sacrificing their dream of a traditional American vineyard and winery.

“This is when the notion came up of an ‘urban winery,’” Winkler said. “I found it on the internet. I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s what we are.’”

Moving downtown

An “urban winery” is a lot like a craft brewery. Both are small manufacturers that buy supplies from farmers and, most often, manufacture their beverage in or near a city.

They make their facilities accessible to customers, who often like to see where their drinks are made.

“It’s relatively new. It’s something that’s kind of developed across the country recently,” said Michael Kaiser, director of communications for the [National Association of American Wineries](#).

Most of the country’s vine-free wineries have opened in the last decade, making Chatham Hill an unwitting leader of the trend.

Their new role clear, the couple accepted their urban-wine mission. They hosted events, brought in private parties and helped customers learn the differences between their pioneers, Rieslings and cabernets.

They kept a focus on Carolina grapes too, with three of their four major suppliers based in state.

“If it were pure business, there would be no North Carolina wine in this winery. We work very hard to develop North Carolina as a prime grape-growing region,” Wojciechowski said.

And when the time came, they decided to make one more change: They moved to central Cary.

“We moved here not just to reduce our operation costs, but also to be part of downtown,” Wojciechowski said.

After talks with town staff about Cary’s downtown push, the couple made an investment of more than \$200,000 to upfit a former industrial building on Chapel Hill Road, the eastern entrance to downtown.

Crews stripped the nearly 9,000-square-foot building to its steel, then laid hardwood floors, painted wine-red and yellow walls and installed a bar.

The process took months, and workers still were poking around in the ceiling last week – but it’s just about done, and customers already were filtering in for tastings.

“It’s been on my to-do list, and me and Mom love wine,” said Melissa Cox of Durham.

“It’s fun to find local wines,” her mother added.

Especially, Cox said, when they’re not muscadine.

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