

The rise and fall of a wine industry

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Did you know that if you buy a bottle of wine with the year 2009 on its label that the grapes are being picked this fall? Did you also know that Sir Walter Raleigh wrote that the area soon to be known as North Carolina had so many grapes that "In all the world, a similar abundance was not to be found?" And that by the beginning of the 20th century, North Carolina was the leading wine-producing region in the country?

That in 1900, North Carolina wines won medals at the Paris Exposition? Did you know that in 1904, a North Carolina sparkling wine took the grand prize at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, beating out ones from France and Italy, as well as other states?

The wine industry in North Carolina has risen to prominence several times in the past two centuries, only to collapse, due to the Civil War, natural problems with the cultivation of vines, and Prohibition. In the past 20 years, it has made another amazing comeback, with the number of wineries now around 82, triple the total in 2001. According to a recent study, the wine industry has brought in more than \$800 million to our state's economy and created thousands of jobs. There is now more support from state government, as well as research being conducted at one of our leading universities, N.C. State University.

If you are looking for something to do on a beautiful fall weekend, a drive to the Yadkin Valley, north of Winston-Salem. The Yadkin Valley is the first area in North Carolina to be designated as an American Viticultural Area or AVA, earning that distinction in 2003. If you only have a few hours, however, and want to learn about wine-making here in your own back yard, take exit 285 off I-40 in Research Triangle Park, follow the grape signs and take in a tasting and tour at Chatham Hill Winery.

Chatham Hill Winery was started in 1999, making it the 14th bonded winery in North Carolina. Marek Wojciechowski, along with two partners, decided to try his hand at making European-style wine. Marek and his wife Jill, residents of Durham, have since bought out their partners, and he quit his "day job" as a chemist in Research Triangle Park a few years ago to devote himself to full-time winemaking. Legend has it that Marek first experimented with wine-making while living in an apartment in his native Poland and all was well until his "experiment" overflowed from the bath tub and flooded the apartment below him!

I recently decided to take Marek's Winemaker's Tour and learn more about his

wine. Chatham Hill is known as an urban winery. You will not see vines growing anywhere near the facility. "Grapes care where they are grown but not where the wine is made" according to Marek. The conditions in our part of the state just are not conducive to growing European-style vinifera grapes. It does not cool off enough at night during the summer here (we all know that, right?) for the vines to thrive. They need hot temperatures in the daytime, but much cooler weather at night.

Marek works closely with three growers in the Yadkin Valley who grow exclusively for him. Grapes can be at his door within three hours of being picked and the crush begins immediately on site. (It's all machine done these days... you'll have to watch I Love Lucy reruns to see anyone stomping around in the vat!) As I write this, Chardonnay and Viognier grapes are arriving from Wilmoth Vineyard in Pilot Mountain. Marek is a firm believer in supporting North Carolina growers and will buy from producers here as long as he can find high quality grapes to fit the style of wine he wishes to make.

As well as buying most of his grapes from in-state growers, Marek uses synthetic corks made in Zebulon for his non-aged wine (he uses Portuguese cork for the barrel-aged wines). The discarded skins and seeds are hauled away to a landscaper in Apex for composting. Chatham Hill has helped other wineries get started because Marek believes the state's winemakers should work together to better North Carolina's wine reputation.

Marek can often be found in his office-lab tasting his wines to get just the right blend. The tour that I took included "thieving from the barrel." Merlot was drawn from an oak barrel using a wine thief, a glass cylinder, for the group to taste. My husband, who accompanied me on the tour, remarked that this experience "feels like taking communion." Winemakers must constantly taste to know what the wine needs and to know when it is ready for blending and bottling. The Chatham Hill barrel room is full of French, Polish and American oak barrels. There are also large stainless steel tanks for the young wines that do not require aging in oak.

Along with the European-style wines, Chatham Hill bottles Sweet Carolina fruit-infused wines. Flavors include peach, raspberry, blueberry, blackberry and pomegranate. These are delicious chilled (think of the raspberry wine in a glass rimmed with dark chocolate or a glass of peach sangria made with peach wine, peach nectar, with cut up strawberries and nectarines in it) on a hot summer day. Or the Sweet Carolina Red mulled, along with spices, at Thanksgiving or Christmas.

I recently visited the Durham Farmers' Market where I bought small red potatoes from one vendor and green beans from another. I then drove to the South Estes Farmers' Market in Chapel Hill at University Mall to buy swordfish steaks from Southport Seafood Company. I wrapped the potatoes, skin and all, in aluminum foil along with sea salt, pepper and rosemary from my deck herb garden and

placed them on a hot grill. The fish was seasoned with salt and pepper and added to the grill. Think of this meal paired with a bottle of Chatham Hill's 2007 Viognier. If you can't make it to the winery, Total Wine at Patterson Place usually has a good selection of Chatham Hill wines. Harris Teeter, Lowe's Foods and Kroger stores carry them also, mostly the Sweet Carolina wines.

Even if Marek is a Ph.D. scientist and has test tubes sitting around in his office, I think there is an element of magic in wine-making. That magic, along with months of caring for the vines and grapes during the growing season, the labor of transforming the juice of the crushed grapes into wine and the tender loving care administered by the winemaker is in every bottle we uncork.

More information can be found at www.chathamhillwine.com and www.visitncwine.com.

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