

By Marek Wojciechowski

Where are your vines?

As those familiar with the North Carolina wine landscape may know, Chatham Hill is a vineyardless winery. We don't grow our own grapes for our wines.

What led Chatham Hill to select this model of operation, and how has the winery been going about sourcing grapes from its inception 12 years ago?

First let's take on a myth common among wine consumers: most wineries make wines from grapes they grow themselves.

Although that perception is relentlessly cultivated by many wineries with vineyards, the real percentage of wineries using grapes primarily from their own vineyards is relatively small. Even more revealing, most so-called cult wines, as well as many higher end, super-premium wines (over \$100/bottle), are made from grapes from vineyards that the winemakers do not operate or control.

Travel to any of the large wine regions and you'll see acres upon acres of vines without a winery in sight. These grapes are sold to wineries throughout the region, and in some cases shipped across country, and this has been done for hundreds of years. Although it's challenging to grow magnificent grapes, it is equally, if not more challenging, to make great wines from grapes you don't grow yourself.

Wineries are allowed to use grapes as well as grape juices and juice concentrates obtained from any domestic — or foreign — winery or vineyard. Although these must be reported to the federal government, there's no law that requires the winery to disclose to the consumer, on the label or otherwise, where the grapes are from. Wines labeled with geographic designations — for example "North Carolina" or "Yadkin Valley" — must be at least 85 percent made from grapes grown in that area. The remainder can come from anywhere.

Establishing a vineyard is a complex, elaborate, extended and risky process. Selection of the site, unless you are limited to the land you already own, is a big challenge.

It is not just considering the composition and drainage of the soil. You also must consider rainfall; temperature profiles of all seasons, including the day-to-night differentials; the population of grape-loving deer and birds; and also the susceptibility of local vegetation to hosting vine-killing microbes and insects.

Another clear advantage for our model is that we can add new varieties to production relatively quickly and inexpensively, which is not the case if a winery has to rely on the grapes growing in its own vineyard.

In our operation, Chatham Hill commits to our growers that



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they can rely on us to continue to purchase their grapes. In turn, they commit to us to provide us grapes each year. This commitment cannot be overstressed, and is what has allowed us to produce wines with consistency.

Back in 1997, my former partners and I first considered starting a commercial winery. None of us had any training or experience, with the exception of my 30 or so years of home winemaking. We quickly realized that with limited capital and the challenges that establishing a vineyard would impose, we had better start with a winery first, relying for grapes on those from small but well established — i.e. older — vineyards in the western part of the state.

It took me two years, after two short harvests, to experiment with making wines using six different grape varieties acquired from five vineyards located in what later became the Yadkin Valley appellation. I was limited to 200 gallons per year — which our alcohol laws allow residents to make without a license — and was equipped with several carboys, a 50-gallon stainless steel tank, two secondhand barrels and very simple crush equipment. My goal was to determine which vineyards I could buy grapes from to produce high quality, award-winning wines.

As it turned out, just about all of the wines I made in those experiments showed very good potential for developing into a commercial quality product. This gave us the assurance that we could build a winery business relying on other folks' North Carolina grapes. By the 1999 harvest, after long and exhausting months of setting up the operation, I was ready to receive our first grapes for commercial production at Chatham Hill Winery.

And that is where the journey began.