

Proud to pour: From sparkling muscadine to petit manseng, a new crop of Southern wines is beginning to win respect --- finally.

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Good enough. Could be worse. Not as bad as I expected. Pretty decent for Dixie. One rung up the ladder from Ripple. Drinkable. Drunkable. Plonk.

For the longest time, talk of Southern-grown grapes and Southern-vinified wines elicited such sentiments from oenophiles. Some impressions were fueled by insecurity of the we-can't-compare-with-California sort. Others were fueled by bad wine.

It would be a stretch to say that a new day has dawned. But Southern wines are improving. Markedly. "If you haven't had a Southern wine in a few years," says Barbara Ensrud, author of "American Vineyards," "you haven't had a Southern wine."

Of equal import, as Southern chefs and home cooks alike embrace the small carbon footprint tenets of the farm-to-fork gospel, some are beginning to question the prevailing food and wine pairings of locally grown greens and locally raised pork alongside West Coast and old-world wines.

"If we're waking up to the art and craft that goes into country ham and other artisanal goods, then we should be open to the art and craft of making great Southern wines," says Scott Jones, food editor of Southern Living. "Too many people are talking about sustainable agriculture and farm-to-table eating, but they're leaving out the wine end of the equation and bringing home bottles of Yellow Tail," says the man who, on occasion, pours North Carolina sauvignon blanc during test kitchen tastings and serves all manner of Southern wines to guests in his home.

'Defining a sense of place'

When chef Michael Tuohy moved from San Francisco to Atlanta in 1986, he introduced California sensibilities of the know-your-farmer and wine-begs-food sort. His Woodfire Grill remains deeply vested in that state's vinified bounty. Of late, however, he's tasting — and liking — more Southern wines. "It's about defining a sense of place," he says. "And it's about evolution." Tuohy believes that, in the wake of our adoption of locally grown vegetables and regionally made cheeses, Southerners will come to embrace local and regional wines.

Despite those beliefs, he only sells a few Southern wines at his restaurant. "We have to find the varietals that perform well in our climate and our soil," he explains. "Wines made from those grapes have to resonate with consumers."

Parse his words and you recognize a hesitance, one shared by many chefs, to sully their reputations by pouring wines that many consumers perceive to be at best unproved, at worst undrinkable.

Woodfire sells Tiger Mountain Vineyards' Burton Blanc, crafted from Georgia-grown and vinified petit manseng grapes. Tuohy appreciates its citrusy bite. He also appreciates where it comes from. "Better to support Tiger Mountain than Howell Mountain," he says, comparing the locus of an emergent wine industry northeast of Atlanta to one of the most precious locales in Napa.

Tuohy is not alone. Following the lead of Chantelle Grilhot, the now-departed enfant sommelier at the Dining Room, the Ritz-Carlton Buckhead serves a Georgia-grown and vinified riesling from Persimmon Creek Vineyards, near Clayton. At Bacchanalia, Anne Quatrano's Atlanta temple of seasonal cookery, it's rare to find a Southern pour on her wine list. But she does sell offerings from Tiger Mountain and Persimmon Creek at Star Provisions, her adjacent gourmet goods store.

Other retailers are stepping up as well. For the longest time, Southern wines were ghettoized, sequestered to their own section, far away from haughtier kin with long-established sources. But this holiday season, John David Harmon, regional wine buyer for Whole Foods, has engineered a grower's champagne promotion which recognizes that Southerners grow grapes, too.

Alongside French champagnes, Harmon is touting the Reserve Methode Champenoise Blanc de Blanc from Biltmore Estate of North Carolina, a sparkler with "biscuity notes" and "bright citrus flavors" that he declares "the equal to any of her French cousins, with a true sense of Southern terroir."

On the other end of the native grape vs. vinifera divide, there's Folkston Funnel Bubble, a demi-sec sparkler made with muscadine grapes and sweetened with tupelo-gallberry honey. It's from Chesser Island Winery on the edge of the Okefenokee Swamp in deep southeastern Georgia. That bottle is not yet on the Woodfire list. But it may be soon.

Tuohy likes how the musky-sweet wine pairs with Woodfire's dessert of the moment, a sweet potato cheesecake. He recognizes that a sparkling muscadine will likely be a hard sell. But, Tuohy asks, "If it's good and if it's regional, why shouldn't we be drinking it?"

From the early years

Tuohy's vacillations define a prevailing tension in Southern winemaking, one that dates to the early years of the American republic when Thomas Jefferson tried and failed to grow vinifera grapes in Virginia.

Will this region, where muscadine grapes are native and muscadine wines have long been consumed with gusto, kick tradition to the curb, once and for all, in favor of European-style wines?

What's more, if we adopt and adapt grapes like petit manseng and chardonnay, will we have the skills to work around climatic impediments and make wines that compare favorably with California? Or will we return to our roots, valorizing muscadine wines, putting them on a pedestal by way of goosing them with methode champenoise bubbles?

The South has a long and distinguished tradition of winemaking. You could make a convincing argument that our wine industry is 100 years older than California's. And you could back up such bluster with claims to quantity and quality.

Quantity is easy to establish. By 1840, North Carolina was the leading wine producer in the Union, a distinction that it soon lost to Georgia and, in time, states farther north and west. No matter. Southern-grown and -vinified grapes were, for much of our nation's history, an accepted standard.

Quality, on the other hand, has long been a thorny issue. Thanks to prize-happy competitions, many a middling winery has amassed a collection of ribbons and medals that calls to mind the closet of a blingish rapper. There have been, however, signal moments worthy of celebration. And they are not solely contemporary.

At the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition of 1904, Paul Garrett's Special Champagne, a methode champenoise scuppernong, the pride of Medoc Vineyards in North Carolina, won the grand prize for sparkling wines, besting efforts from California and France.

You could argue that muscadines and scuppernongs are not comparable to vinifera grapes. That they are, as some botanists suggest, members of a separate genus. But the reality is that drinkers don't think genus. And trash talk about native grapes is of long note. In 1870, George Husmann, an esteemed winegrower from Missouri, declared that, although he had tried the muscadine grape only once, he didn't need another bite or sip to remind him of a taste comparable to "the bugs we sometime get in our mouth accidentally when picking raspberries or strawberries."

The hard facts are these: Among informed consumers, although sales of grapes made from native wines continue to grow, and the cult of drinkers remains strong, muscadine wines have, for the most part, ceded aspirations of excellence to European varietals.

Specifically, in the latter half of the 20th century, America has bowed to what David Shields calls a French "hegemony over the public palate." Shields, the editor of "A Vision of Wine," a soon-to-be-published compendium of writings by pioneer Southern viticulturist Nicholas Herbemont, cites several causes — among them, the "demotion in esteem of German and Italian wines as a political punishment for the Second World War." And, more to the point of muscadine, the promotion of the "French culinary tradition as a standard of taste in the burgeoning media world of cuisine criticism."

All of which may mean: So long scuppernong, hello merlot.

Virginia's success

Unlike many North Carolina winemakers, Sean McRitchie doesn't muck with scuppernongs. Producers like Dennis Vineyards, on the coastal plain, have staked their reputation on native grapes. And newer entrants, like Childress Vineyards of Lexington, owned by NASCAR racing royalty, work with scuppernongs (as well as vinifera grapes) to, in the words of a tasting room employee, "make a wine that Grandma likes."

The McRitchies, on the other hand, left Oregon for the burg of Thurmond, up above Winston-Salem in the Yadkin Valley, because they believe that the state has a chance to make world-class vinifera wines.

"I've got nothing against scuppernong," says Sean, who, along with his wife, Patricia, makes one of the Deep South's best whites.

"I guessed California chardonnay when I tasted it," Michael Tuohy said of a \$14 retail bottle of the McRitchies' 2006 vintage. "I thought, maybe Carneros, by which I mean it was good, really good." Steve Hutcherson, an Atlanta marketing executive dining at Woodfire the same night, agreed. "It's great to taste good Southern juice. Really good Southern juice. Who knew?"

"We work some with some concord grapes," says Sean McRitchie, showing a guest about the ranch-style house he converted into a winery, with a barrel room in the basement and a tasting room in what was once the sunroom. "And we make a hard apple cider. We're not risk-averse. But we work with what the market will bear and what we know. And that means chardonnay. And cabernet franc. And, don't laugh, I'm planting some pinot noir."

Risk is a constant for McRitchie. For most Southern winemakers. Our rainfall patterns and persistent humidity are catalysts for mildew and bunch rot. And our temperature range is famously unpredictable. Late frosts that come long after bud break. Scorching heat that lasts well into what other regions of the Northern Hemisphere call fall. But the promise is true.

He need only look one state north to see that promise realized. Virginia is making cabernet franc and viognier wines that are world-beaters. In a recent *Saveur* article, Paul Luckas named two Virginia viogniers, orange blossom-kissed whites from King Family Vineyards and Chrysalis Vineyards, to be among the best available. Of the 2005 King Valley effort, from Monticello, Luckas wrote, "It may well be America's best viognier."

The McRitchies aspire to that league. Sean has the experience to make it happen. He grew up in a winemaking family. In high school, he worked his way from ditch digger to cellar master. His father, also a convert to North Carolina, was, until recently, a wine educator at the community college down the road. Success for the McRitchies will depend, in large part, on whether Sean can engineer the right marriage of climate and grape.

"We don't know yet what the best grape is for this [area]," Sean says. "Cabernet franc does well. And we've had success with chardonnay." Not knowing "can be liberating," says Patricia. "There's freedom in that. We're not settled. We're open. You know, it seems strange to move from the West Coast to the East Coast to try something new. But here we are."

Beyond 'good enough'

With Southern wines, honesty is important. Never mind all the ribbons and medals. Truth is, we have a ways to go. Too many whites taste vegetal. Too few reds have the ripe fruit and fine-grained tannins on which great wines are built. But a little homework and a curious palate will get you far. Beyond wines that are "good enough." Into the realm of good wines, worth buying by the case, worth drinking over the next year.

If you put your trust in demographics, it's now clear, courtesy of a recent survey marking a strong surge in wine consumption by NASCAR fans, that vinous connoisseurship is not the province solely of the bourgeoisie. If, on the other hand, your approach is geographic, you should know that grapes are grown and wines are made in all 50 states.

There's good sparkling wine coming out of New Mexico. (Gruet is the producer.) And Rhone varietals are grown and vinified in Idaho. (FIG, Mike Lata's Charleston, S.C., restaurant, stocks a lively viognier from the Snake River Valley region.) This bodes well for nontraditional viticultural areas like the American South, where, in addition to category leaders in Virginia and strong efforts from North Carolina and Georgia, one finds hopeful signs in Tennessee. "Yes, Tennessee," says Barbara Ensrud. "Don't count them out; their performance has been inconsistent but promising."

More pragmatically, if your definition of the South includes Texas, take heart and drink up. The Lone Star State ranks fifth among wine producers. On the western flank, and in the Hill Country, they're turning out consistently good vintages, especially those wines based on Italian grapes like sangiovese. Among the labels to look for: McPherson Cellars and Flat Creek Estate. Both are on the wine list at Monica Pope's T'afia, in Houston, the Southern restaurant that, in offering a \$20 five-glass Texas wine supplement to its market tasting menu, may do the best job of pairing localish foods with localish wines.

But impediments remain. Especially in Deep South states, now on the cusp of competence, even greatness. States like North Carolina and Georgia.

Arcane shipping and distribution laws, dictated by archaic blue laws, are, Scott Jones says, a big part of the problem. "It's not always easy to get your hands on the good stuff; they don't make it easy, but it's important to keep looking and tasting and to support the wines you like."

Equally vexing, however, is the issue of insecurity. If the South doesn't take pride in its own products, no one will. "This is moonshine country," says Martha Ezzard, a former AJC editorial writer who, along with physician husband John and winemaking partner Bill Stack, owns the Tiger Mountain label Tuohy has come to know and love. "I guess I should say it was moonshine country. But some ideas die hard."

The Ezzards make good wine. They also tell a good story. The sort of story a place-proud Southerner wants to embrace. A story that begins in the 1830s, when John's forebears began working the land. And continues through the 1940s, when John's father raised dairy cows on the inclines now trellised with, among other grapes, cabernet franc, tannat and petit manseng.

That history informs the Ezzards' resolve. "I knew this place should be worked," John says. And so does the land. "I thought we had the topography," he says of Tiger Mountain's 2000-foot elevation and southern orientation. "After that, it's about finding the right grapes and refining how we grow them."

As Martha packs a case of wine to send to Robert Parker, the wine critic with the so-called "golden nose," she does a gut-check. "Maybe we're pushing it. Sending our wines to the big hoogie wad, Parker. But we're proud of what we're

doing. And we've got to start somewhere. Our 2005 cab franc is drinking nice right now. Really nice. Hopefully he'll taste them. And we'll find out what the big man thinks."

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Last year we invited John T. Edge, one of the country's foremost chroniclers of Southern food traditions, to write stories about how our region's past continues to influence the way we eat. This year, he has focused on the way we drink. Saving Southern Food is a companion series to the Southern Recipe Restoration Project. (See K4 for the latest installment.) To read the rest of the series and find out more about the Saving Southern Food Initiative, go to ajc.com/food.