

# The Fine Wines of North Carolina: Growers, vintners learning, patiently, what works best

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(Journal Photo by Jennifer Rotenizer)

When I first wrote about North Carolina wines - in the fall of 2001- the state had 19 wineries with sales of \$12 million.

Now the state has more than 70 wineries - and more than 20 are in Yadkin Valley. Winery revenue for 2005, the latest year for which figures are available, was more than \$48 million.

North Carolina is currently ranked 10th in the country for wine production.

N.C. wineries have enjoyed a lot of support, from state and local governments envisioning potential economic benefits, and from residents, many of whom enjoy wine or simply want to support the new industry because of state pride.

Yet many people have yet to taste their first glass of N.C. wine. And the \$64,000 question in many people's minds: "Is the wine any good?"

A corollary question: "How good can the wine become?"

The second question is appropriate because the wine business is a slow business, requiring a lot of patience on the part of the grower, the winemaker and the consumer.

A grower planting grapevines may wait two years to get the first harvest of grapes and five or more years before the vines mature and produce a good quantity of quality grapes. Worse, he or she may find that the particular kinds of grapevines planted don't do well in a particular location, and may have to rip them all out and plant different kinds.

A winemaker may crush grapes and start making wine one September, but - particularly in the case of red wine - not really know how good the wine has turned out until two years later. Some questions, such as how well a particular wine ages, can take 10 or more years to answer.

"It can take six or seven years before a winery can make a profit," said Margo Metzger, the executive director of the N.C. Wine and Grape Council. The council was created in 1986 by the legislature to help grape growers and winemakers with marketing, research and education.

The wine consumer has to have patience, too. Some wines simply need to be put aside to be consumed years later, once they have aged to their peak. Though many N.C. wines are ready to drink upon release, the N.C. consumer still must patiently sift through the various wines and wineries searching for a bottle worth drinking.

That's right. Not every bottle of N.C. wine is good. Of course, not every bottle coming out of France, California or any other established region is good, either.

Metzger named quality and consistency across the state as two of the biggest challenges that the industry faces.

But N.C. wineries have more challenges. Any time grape growing and winemaking spreads to a new region, the learning curve is steep. North Carolina does have a long history with native scuppernon grapes, and some wineries are working with those. The largest winery in the state - and one of the top 75 in the country in terms of sales - is Duplin Winery, in Rose Hill in Eastern North Carolina, which produced about 270,000 cases of mostly sweet wine last year.

Most wineries, though, have planted primarily *vitis vinifera* European grapes that have not been tried here much, if at all, and doing so means almost starting from scratch when it comes to winemaking.

Young vines typically don't produce the best fruit. Many growers are still learning the vagaries of planting, pruning and other practices. Many winemakers, new to the business, are learning how to crush grapes and ferment and age their wines.

Perhaps the biggest challenges are figuring out what grapes to plant and what kind of wines to make in this area. Some grapes and wines do better in certain climates, and even smaller considerations such as soil composition and sun exposure have a big influence on the wine.

In short, it's a complicated business, and N.C. wineries are still learning the ropes.

But the good news is that they have learned quite a bit, and the wines are getting better all the time. "In the four years I've been with the council, there's been a marked improvement every year," Metzger said.

Camel City Cafe & Wine Bar held a blind tasting in November that pitted North Carolina wines against a few widely known and respected brands from California and elsewhere. North Carolina wines were preferred in three out of the seven match-ups, with one tie. A particular upset was the preference for Westbend Vineyard's 2005 Barrel Fermented Chardonnay over the 2005 Kistler Carneros Chardonnay, which is always highly rated and sells for more than three times as much.

In a recent story in [The Atlanta-Journal Constitution](#), John T. Edge, the director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, talked about the improvement of Southern wines in general. He specifically cited the [McRitchie Wine Co.'s 2006 Chardonnay](#) and Biltmore Estate's Reserve Methode Champenoise Blanc de Blanc sparkling wine.

[Sean McRitchie](#), who grew up in a wine-making family in Oregon, is even trying pinot noir, a grape notoriously difficult to grow and turn into good wine.

"Most vineyards are testing something," Metzger said. "Most have their go-to grapes that they know work for them. Then they have one or two varieties that they plant small amounts of to see how it goes. There's lot of trial and error to see what suits your vineyards."

Almost every producer of dry wines makes chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, two of the most popular varieties in the world. Lately, a lot of wineries have been trying such grapes as riesling and sauvignon blanc. Some are experimenting with such lesser-known grapes as traminett (a white hybrid of gewurztraminer) and chambourcin (a French red hybrid).

Such wineries as Round Peak Vineyards, near Mount Airy, and Raffaldini Vineyards in Ronda, are trying their luck - and having success - with such Italian varieties as nebbiolo, sangiovese and vermentino.

Cabernet franc and viognier - two European grapes that have had success in Virginia - are many experts' picks to become the signature grapes of North Carolina. "If I were a betting woman, I'd put my money on cabernet franc and maybe viognier," Metzger said. "They really grow well here, and they're fairly traditional varieties, but they are not the varieties that everybody else is doing."

She also said not to discount muscadine, a native grape that has a long history in North Carolina and that can make a good sweet wine.

Metzger agreed that price remains an issue for many consumers. Most N.C. wines sell in the teens, and that's more than many consumers are willing to pay, especially for wine from a relatively new region. And increasingly more wineries are saving their best juice to make reserve wines that sell for more than \$20.

"When you pay \$14 for a North Carolina wine, you're helping to support state agriculture," Metzger said.

She also pointed out that most North Carolina wineries are small compared to others in the world market and therefore have much higher proportional overhead. And because they are new, they have enormous capital outlay and debt. "It's expensive to get into this business," Metzger said, both in terms of the farming and the winemaking.

"The world market for wine is so competitive. And even our large wineries don't have the economies of scale of large places in California, Argentina and Australia."

(It also should be noted that price and quality do not always go hand in hand in wine from any region. In other words, no matter how good the wine and what the price, it's almost always possible to find something better and cheaper.)

Despite the challenges, North Carolina wine is here to stay. "Last year was a tough year to start with an Easter freeze and then get walloped with a severe drought," Metzger said. "For us to make it through relatively unscathed shows the staying power of this industry.

"We still have a long way to go to get consistent quality across the state. But it's much more common to find something really delightful when you open a bottle."