

# Savoring the Flavors of North Carolina's 'Napa'

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I thought I was being so creative, having laboriously plotted out a perfect four-winery tour centered on Elkin, N.C., in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Here in "Yadkin Valley Wine Country," the Napa of North Carolina, there are two dozen wineries to choose from. Only later did I discover that not only had I merely reinvented the upper portion of the Yadkin Valley Wine Trail, but I could have found the entire trip, directions and all, at <http://www.ncwine.com>.

No sooner did tobacco farms start converting to vineyards than North Carolina's tourism machine jumped into the game. Not that winemaking is new here. Before Prohibition, 25 wineries operated, all producing sweet wine from muscadine grapes. The biggest growth in the past decade has been with European vinifera grapes, used to make merlot, chardonnay and a host of other dry wines. Since 2001, the number of N.C. wineries open to the public, using both grape types, has more than tripled, to 80. (That compares with about 140 in Virginia.) In 2003, Yadkin Valley became the state's first official viticultural area.

Our wine-themed weekend was most memorable for its contrasts, from the old and new in historic downtown Elkin to the differences among the wineries.

Historic Main Street, with buildings from the late 1800s, is a trip in time and mind. In four short blocks you can purchase fine art at Yadkin Valley Craft Guild or trade goods for cash at Ace Music & Pawn Shop, linger over a perfect meal at Twenty One & Main or savor a \$3 chili dog at Royall's Soda Shoppe.

When it's time for wine, the Upper Yadkin trail reaches 10 miles north of Elkin, ending in the rural hamlet of Thurmond, 10 minutes shy of the Blue Ridge Parkway. We started at the top, at McRitchie Winery & Ciderworks, owned by Sean McRitchie and his wife and business partner, Patricia.

McRitchie is arguably the state's most versatile winemaker, and one who has had a hand in many Yadkin Valley start-ups. His father, Robert, who helped put Oregon wineries on the map, later followed his son here and helped jump-start the viticulture and enology program at Surry Community College in nearby Dobson.

The McRitchies opened their small, casual tasting room in 2007. Along with several award-winning wines, including a pinot gris, its Estate Chardonnay and the bold Ring of Fire, a blend of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and petit verdot, McRitchie makes a tangy hard cider

from heirloom Pink Lady apples grown in North Carolina.

Heading back toward Elkin, we stopped at Grassy Creek Vineyard & Winery, owned by two couples, Derrill and Lori Rice, and Jim and Cynthia Douthit, since 2003.

Grassy Creek is part of local lore. Known as Klondike Farms, it was a dairy barn and creamery and a rural retreat for John Hanes of the underwear company and the local Chatham family. Eventually the 1,500-acre spread became part of Chatham Manufacturing, Elkin's largest employer before it went under. Former Chatham executive Derrill Rice and his partners bought 200 acres, planted vines in 2002 and opened the winery in 2006. Also on the premises are log cabins, now vacation rentals, that were once used to house textile bigwigs. While Grassy Creek produces several dry whites and reds, it's best known for its red and white sweet table wines that come in 750-milliliter milk bottles.

"Klondike Farms was famous for its chocolate milk," said tasting room manager Wayne Moore, explaining the containers for the Guernsey Red and Golden Guernsey.

Elkin Creek Vineyard, down the road a few miles, is tucked away in the woods, reached by a curvy gravel road. Its history is equally rich.

Owner and winemaker Mark Greene, who grew up in the area, returned decades later to care for his father. When he bought the 1896 Elkin Mill along Elkin Creek, it was to rescue the mill, where he now lives. Then he got the wine bug, took courses at Surry and proceeded to build a vineyard on a steep hillside.

"We're pretty different here. We do everything by hand," said Greene, who gave us a tour and a tasting. He and family members cleared the land and planted the grapes, then built a windmill to pump water for irrigation. Greene even bakes the rustic bread for the winery's celebrated restaurant, the Kitchen at Elkin Creek.

Our final stop, at Brushy Mountain Winery, led us back to Main Street. We happened to land there on owner Matthew Mayberry's 80th birthday. He was cheerfully holding court while locals popped in to offer well wishes and sample the latest vintage of Booger Swamp White, whose name once drew the attention of Jay Leno on "The Tonight Show." "Boogers" is an old local name for ghosts.

Like Greene, Mayberry, a retired geologist, grew up in Elkin and later returned. He first worked in the vineyard real estate business, but a "shazam moment" led him to open his own winery in 2006. All his grapes come from within 15 miles of Elkin.

"There's a lot of romance in the wine business," Mayberry said of his new career.

And of course there's plenty of romance in visiting wineries as well.

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