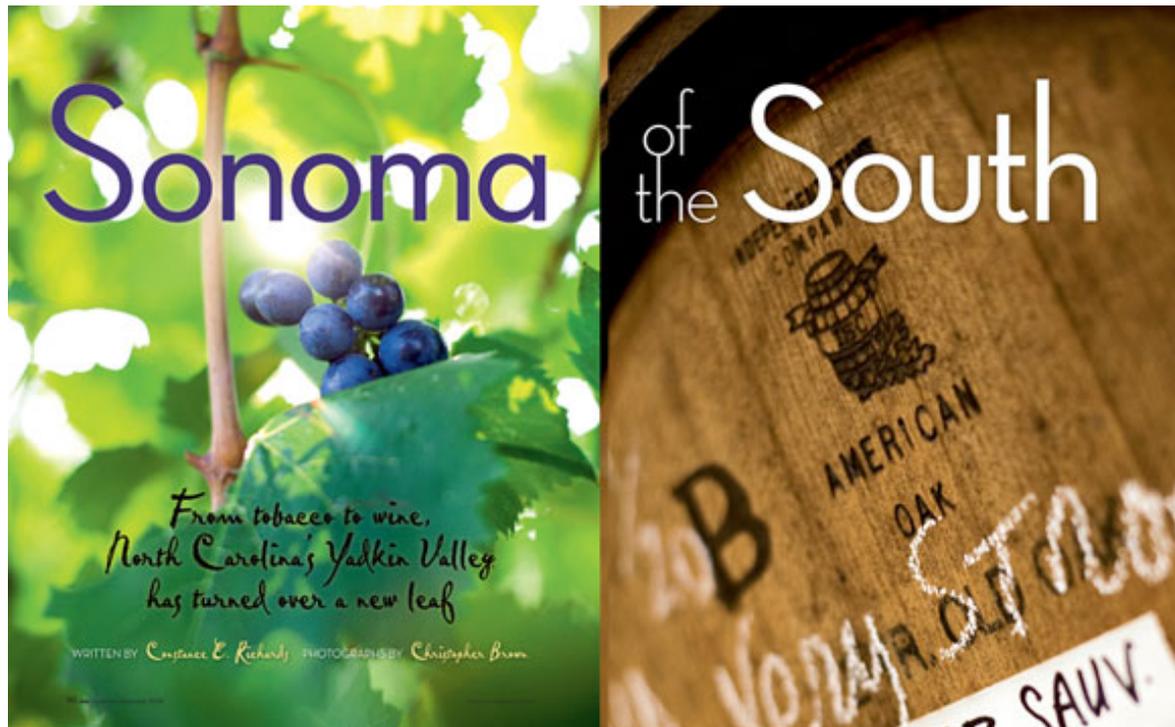


Sonoma of the South

From tobacco to wine, North Carolina's Yadkin Valley has turned over a new leaf

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Rows of staked young vines snake across the front of Sean McRitchie's hillside property. Just beyond, reside a clutch of clucking chickens, flowering perennials, ripening vegetables, and herbs that set a more traditional agrarian tone. But that's how the winemaker and owner of McRitchie Winery and Ciderworks in the Yadkin Valley likes it. And despite all the assumed romance that comes with owning a vineyard, he considers himself more a farmer than anything else.

But no visitor will mistake this for a barnyard. The heady scent of fermenting grapes hangs in the air, heavy machinery—grape crushers and stemmers—glisten on the patio, and an atmospheric barrel room in the basement where the future varietals ferment, is a familiar scene all across the Yadkin Valley and portends the future of the North Carolina agricultural economy.

Farmers, weekend growers, chemists, artisans, second-careerists, whatever the moniker—"winemaker" is a synonym for them all here. Here, some 20 wineries and even more vineyards make their home, with dozens of others in surrounding counties.

The Business of Wine

The Yadkin Valley, composed of Yadkin, Surry, Wilkes, as well as portions of Davie, Davidson, Forsyth, and Stokes counties, is home to North Carolina's first federally recognized American Viticultural Area (AVA)—also known as an appellation—that covers

1.4 million acres. Local wineries range from big names like Shelton Vineyards (30,000 cases per year), Westbend, and RayLen to smaller operations like Elkin Creek Vineyard, that produces 800 cases a year. According to the North Carolina Department of Commerce, the state has more than doubled the amount of land used to grow grapes to roughly 1,300 acres since the year 2000, making it the 10th largest producer of both grapes and wine in the United States.

There's been dramatic growth in Yadkin Valley's wine business since the turn of this century, according to Margo Metzger, executive director of the North Carolina Wine and Grape Council. The state started to see a resurgence in the late '90s, but she says the number of vineyards has more than tripled since 2001.

Local winemakers have an incentive and a little help in the field. With tobacco farming in sharp decline, the nonprofit Golden LEAF Foundation provides funding for projects that will benefit tobacco-dependent, economically distressed, rural communities. It offers programs to help farmers recrop their land with, among other products, grapes. The foundation has built partnerships with local governments, educational institutions, economic development organizations, and other public agencies, as well as nonprofits to achieve this goal.

One beneficiary of the foundation's efforts, Surry Community College in Dobson offers a degree in viticulture and enology. Students learn aspects of the business—plant science, vineyard stock selection, propagation, soils, vine nutrition and pest management, fermentation science, as well as planning, layout, economics, and management of vineyards.

North Carolina is now home to 350 vineyards and more than 70 wineries in more than 30 counties. Statewide, the wine and grape industries account for more than 5,700 jobs. The crops vary across the state, with muscadine grapes typically harvested in the coastal and eastern regions, while vinifera (European varieties) and French-American hybrids are grown in the Piedmont, mountains, and much of the foothills area.

But it's no accident that winemakers have migrated to the Yadkin Valley. The French have a term, *terroir*, to describe soil, temperature, topography, weather, and how they all combine to define the essence of an area's wine. "Here, the rolling hills aren't too high, making for great drainage and exposure to the sun," says Metzger. "It's hot in the daytime and cools off at night. That difference of high and low temperatures gives grapes the opportunity to rest and concentrate their sugar to make great wine."

Different types of soil retain moisture and have a major effect on how vines grow in this state. Additionally, the makeup of the soil has nutrients that contribute to the health of the vine. The Yadkin Valley is a big area, and each part of it has variations in the soil, from hard clay to loamy. But rich soil isn't always an advantage. "Sometimes if you make the grapes struggle to survive and challenge the vine," says Metzger, "that manifests itself into

flavor.” And flavor brings notoriety.

As an area starts to grow and thrive, other winemakers see that success and want to join in. “And that’s why we’ve seen a clustering in the area,” she says. “A lot of credit is due to those trailblazers who said, ‘we can grow good European wine grapes here,’ and took the risk.”

The Family Business

Sean, one of the area’s most prominent winemakers, has been working in the wine industry in some capacity for 35 years. The Oregon native began working in vineyards and wineries on the weekends at the age of nine. By 14, he was hosing out barrels and driving the tractor at his father’s vineyards.

His father, Bob, who recently retired as a wine-making instructor at Surry County Community College, had left a career as a biology professor to get into the business. He helped Oregon establish its wine reputation first at Sokol Blosser Winery and then at Willamette Valley Vineyards.

After working in Napa Valley in the days when, as Sean remembers, “it was just some guys in flannel shirts,” he picked grapes in Germany and France and worked for a Wirra Wirra Vineyards in Australia.

He came to North Carolina in 1998 at the request of Shelton Vineyards, to oversee production and manage the winery.

“It was a great opportunity to take something from scratch and help develop it,” he says. Today, he runs his own operation and is the consulting winemaker for three other wineries—part of a consulting business he runs with his wife, Patricia, that help aspiring winemakers establish vineyards and open their own wineries.

“The business is never boring,” says Sean. “It’s raw agriculture, a different challenge every year. And that’s what keeps it interesting—making the wine better and better.”

Down on the Farm

Sean relies on a team of workers for harvesting. And with grapes already fermenting in blue plastic tubs in what he calls his laboratory—a clean outbuilding where all the science of winemaking takes places—he’ll start his day in earnest when the cabernet franc grapes arrive in the afternoon, ready to be stemmed, crushed, and pressed in the equipment he keeps on the patio.

In addition to what’s grown on his own five-acre estate, Sean buys fruit from other growers, as is typical in many wine regions around the world. He’s also added dry apple cider to his repertoire, taking advantage of one of the most abundant crops in North Carolina.

“Cider goes really well with Southern food, and I liked the idea of doing this in small batches,” he says. Like his wine, the cider is made with “a clean style,” he explains. “I like the fruit to be there, not dominated by oak.”

And as for his wineries, the operation is producing a Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Traminette (similar to a Gewürztraminer), a Sangiovese dry rosé named Pale Rider, and a blend called Ring of Fire that bears the complex nose and taste of wine produced by someone who has a mature hand. A merlot and sparkling Niagara wine (the only onemade in the area) round out the list.

But Sean is far from satisfied. Much like the trailblazing winemakers he admired years earlier, he is developing wines based on what can thrive in Yadkin. “You have to grow what fits, and we’re still learning that here,” he explains.

Wine as a Second Career

Retired art teacher Michael Helton has also been learning what works since opening Hanover Park Vineyard. “You’ve got to have great fruit to make great wine,” he says. A born tinkerer who bought an abandoned 1897 farmhouse back to life, Helton spends his days fixing equipment and experimenting with blends.

A 1996 honeymoon in France enticed him and his wife, Amy, to consider winemaking as a second career. Later that year, the teachers invested in 23 acres of land and the farmhouse near Yadkinville, which was, oddly, a dry town at the time. The couple often returns to France to visit and learn from winemakers (and Amy admits that one of their finest compliments was when a restaurant in Paris asked to prepare a meal around their wines.)

Today, the shelves in the tiny tasting room of the two-story clapboard house are weighed down with bottles (some bearing medals)—the dry white Viognier, the lesser-known Rhône Valley-style Mourvedre, and Chambourcin along with a Chardonnay, rosé, a dessert wine, and various Cabernet blends. With its first harvest in 1998, the winery now makes 2,000 cases a year.

One Saturday morning during harvest season finds a group of friends chattering in French among the vines as they pick small, plump grapes and place them in buckets. This is the Helton’s volunteer army, members of their wine club. “We think this gives people a sense of ownership,” says Amy of their relaxed approach of integrating friends into the process. It’s an opportunity that many wineries offer; in Hanover’s case, members get discounts, enjoy wine gatherings, dinners, and receive wine shipped to their home six times a year.

Outside the old farmhouse, the fields of the former tobacco farm unfold over five acres, showing dense grape clusters heavy on the vine. The Heltons’ sheep graze in a field fenced-off from the vineyards, and in the new cedar-clad barrel room resides the fermenting wine,

burbling away in oak barrels (you can hear it if you stand close), along with stacked barrels awaiting their fill, and cases ready to be picked up by the distributor. Michael's large contemporary paintings adorn the otherwise bare walls.

"Michael calls it liquid art," Amy says with a laugh.

A Way of Life

Somewhat harder to locate is the Elkin Creek Winery near the eponymous town. Several turns down side roads, past a school and hay fields, a winding gravel approach road directs visitors to the winery and restaurant.

Mark Greene, a banker-turned-restaurateur before he succumbed to the call of the vine, invites guests into his crushing room, where stainless steel vats anchor one end of the hall, and plastic bins hold the fermenting grapes. He adds yeast to some bins, dipping through the crushed, floating skins to get at the juice beneath.

He then excuses himself and steps into another area, which serves as the barrel room, tasting room, and a place where the grapes continue to process. There, he climbs aboard a narrow plank and proceeds to agitate four bins of grapes with a copper tool — a process winemakers call "punching down." He's only fallen in once, making sure not to inhale the noxious carbon dioxide fumes that gather at the top.

"People who aren't in the business think it's romantic," Greene says. "It's more of a lifestyle than a job."

Greene's winemaking is a family legacy. His grandfather made wine in Italy, and his father continued the tradition at home. Mark has brought it full circle, planting six acres of grapes behind the 120-year-old mill he owns. Attending every viticulture class offered at Surry Community College and apprenticing at numerous wineries in the area gave him the confidence to make his 800 cases a year, which he only sells out of the winery.

Sharing information among winemakers has been a key to the valley's success. "We help each other out here," says Greene, "You go to a winery and taste some bad wine and you're going to think they're all bad." It's in each winery's best interest for them all to succeed.

Adding a 50-seat restaurant to the vineyard invites visitors to experience his wine with food. Quiet and measured in his demeanor, Greene also sees himself as a farmer, but notes that not many farmers "get to see people taste what they grow."

The Future of the Grape

"As we grow, we'll see more appellations," says Metzger, citing that the Swan Creek terroir of Yadkin Valley will likely be the first. The two-year federal designation process is almost

complete and means that the Swan Creek region will become an AVA within an AVA (similarly, Sonoma Valley has 13 appellations). It also makes sense for the consumer and for marketers of the region, says Metzger.

An industry that has seen support from the state government, winemaking will continue to thrive in North Carolina, and what will logically follow is a greater tourism infrastructure. “It’s a big area that encompasses seven counties,” Metzger explains. “As we try to create wine journeys—people will need places to stay and places to eat.”

The state is trying to market the region of far-flung wineries into an easy area to cover during a short stay. Some wineries, like those near Elkin, have already done that on their own.

As to the future of winemaking in the valley, Metzger points out that farming has never been an easy business. But she feels that, over time, those folks making quality wine will be rewarded for their hard work. The vines are still young, and they will continue to produce more complex flavors as they mature.

For now though, she knows the area is growing in the right directions. “Yadkin Valley has been a shining example of what North Carolina can do, not only in wine quality,” says Margo Metzger, “but also what it can do in creating a destination.”