

CAROLINA Wine Country

Vineyards can thrive in North Carolina soil and renew agricultural prosperity

By Ed Williams

Across central North Carolina, particularly in the foothills, a quiet revolution in agriculture hints at what's to come: North Carolina's return to grape-growing and a glorious past that once made it a national leader in winemaking.

Twenty years ago, a sprinkling of vineyards fed four commercial wineries. Tar Heel viticulture—the science of growing wine grapes—poked along for the next decade. Consider what's happened in only the last six years:

- ☛ North Carolina wineries increased from 18 to 42 by the end of 2004. Another 10 are expected to open by the end of this year.
- ☛ Vineyards doubled, from 175 to 350. More are being planted this year.
- ☛ Acreage planted to grapes jumped from 600 to 1,500 from 1999 to 2004.
- ☛ The value of wine grapes increased from \$2.2 million to \$3.3 million annually.
- ☛ Two community colleges are now running specialized viticulture programs and a third is poised to do the same.
- ☛ N.C. State University is expanding its core of Extension specialists to service grape growers in both the eastern and western parts of the state.
- ☛ The state tourism division and the N.C. Arts Council have begun major marketing efforts to promote agri-tourism and pump more money into rural counties that are home to artisans, specialty food producers and vineyards.

Like California, like Carolina

European vinifera—Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon for example—is leading the way and now easily eclipses North Carolina's hybrid varieties such as Seyval Blanc and native grapes such as Scuppernong.

North Carolina—with its beaches, mountains, and Piedmont-Sandhills golfing resorts—has long courted tourist dollars. But a new attraction—agri-tourism—could prove a significant boon, particularly in economically-depressed rural areas.

In the last 15 years, North Carolina grape growers have proven that the soils and micro-climates in certain areas of the state, particularly the Yadkin Valley region, are capable of producing quality wines. That revelation hit sleepy Napa and Sonoma counties in California in the 1950s and it happened again in parts of Virginia in the 1970s. After that, the mystique and romance surrounding the wine world began attracting crowds of tourists, creating an economic ripple effect.

While wine grapes don't bring in the same kind of revenue that tobacco has brought, it comes close. And grapes easily eclipse nearly every other farm crop, fetching \$1,200 per ton of grapes in 2004. On average, an acre of vineyard produces three to four tons of grapes a year. Given that financial picture, owners of five or 10 acres of land can turn a tidy profit.

But again, the economic ripple effect of wine is key. Wake Forest University sociologist Ian Taplin recently researched the North Carolina wine industry, concluding that the state's economic gains partially depend on bed and breakfasts, small inns and restaurants springing up around clustered wineries. That spin-off means new jobs in a state that has seen its manufacturing base erode in the last 10 years.

“The more wineries created, the more visibility the industry gets and the more it attracts new people,” Taplin said.

That’s certainly likely in rural Surry, Yadkin and Wilkes counties, now a hotbed for a dozen wineries. But it may also emerge in places like Alamance County, which saw four wineries open in just the last 12 months. Debbie Stikeleather came from a farming family and watched in alarm as explosive residential growth gobbled the countryside near Mebane. So she and her husband bought an old tobacco farm, planted grapes and built Iron Gate Vineyards, the first winery to open in Alamance County.

“Mebane is growing by leaps and bounds,” she said. “It seems like wherever there’s a good plot of farm land, there are all these subdivisions going up.”

Joe Neely saw the same thing in Davie County, where suburban sprawl from Winston-Salem began chewing into the countryside. So he bought 115 acres on what was once dairy land, planted 38 acres of vineyards and carved out RayLen Vineyards, perhaps one of the state’s most visible wineries for travelers along Interstate 40 near Mocksville.

In Boonville, third generation tobacco farmer Frank Hobson could see the golden leaf under fire in the 1990s and decided he needed an alternative crop to see him through retirement. He and his wife Lenna ran the financial figures and now have 30 acres under vine at Ragapple Lassie Vineyards.

“Frank has farmed all his life,” said Lenna Hobson. “Being connected to the earth, honoring the earth, has always been important to him. Our agenda for doing this was purely to keep the land agricultural.”

Brothers Charlie and Ed Shelton, successful residential and commercial developers in Winston-Salem, saw possibilities on what was once dairy land in Surry County. From it, they carved Shelton Vineyards, one of the largest wineries on the East Coast.

“We envision more hotels, resorts, restaurants, shops, and perhaps a public golf course or two,” said Charlie Shelton. “The wine industry, coupled with the area’s many natural resources

Above left: An early morning fog creeps over Shelton Vineyards near Dobson in the Yadkin Valley region.

Below left: This block of vines was recently planted at Sanctuary Vineyards along the coast of North Carolina near Jarvisburg.

Below center: The Syrah grape is in its final phase of ripening and awaits harvesting.

Below right: At Westbend Vineyards in Lewisville, the wines are routinely checked as they evolve in the barrel.

(Mount Airy’s “Mayberry” persona and Pilot Mountain’s recreational venues) could be a tremendous draw if we had more facilities to accommodate a greater volume of tourists.”

It’s nothing new

North Carolina’s earliest visitors—Giovanni da Verrazano and later crews from Sir Walter Raleigh’s explorations—remarked on the profusion of naturally-growing grapes, most likely Muscadine, along the coastline. By 1835, the state’s first commercial vineyard, Medoc Vineyards, was founded in Halifax County. By the turn of the century, 25 wineries were operating in North Carolina, making it one of the largest wine-making states in the U.S.

Prohibition brought North Carolina’s flourishing wine industry crashing down. It wasn’t until the 1970s that Duplin Winery in eastern North Carolina and Biltmore Estate Winery in the mountains again established a Tar Heel presence in the wine world.

Since then, vineyards have been planted as far east as Knotts Island and Ocean Isle and as far west as Asheville and Morganton. The variety of wines made from native grapes, hybrid grapes and vinifera grapes is staggering.

George Denka, who spent much of his career in the wine and spirits distributing ranks, is now president of Shelton Vineyards. He believes that the diversity of grapes produced in North Carolina has created “a real identity crisis” for wines from the region. “I believe we should celebrate the diversity of wines,” he said. “But spend some time and money to educate wine consumers about the differences among the various grape and wine types. The only way to overcome the confusion that exists with some consumers and industry professionals is to aggressively educate, taste the wines, compete in national and international wine competitions, and take our story to the marketplace.”

Taplin, the Wake Forest University sociological researcher, says North Carolina is not close yet to competing with California’s wine industry but “they might be able to establish a niche with newer types of wine made with grapes that grow well here like Viognier and Italian varietals.”

Added Denka: “As an industry, we have to be patient and realize it took California well over 50 years to reach the levels of credibility and acceptance that they currently enjoy.”

Ed Williams, High Point city editor for the News & Record in Greensboro, has written about the wine industry since 1990. His column “On Wine” appears monthly in the News & Record.



John Wright, Sanctuary Vineyards



Childress Vineyards



Bill Russ, N.C. Division of Tourism

For a free guide to North Carolina’s wineries, contact North Carolina Grape Council, 1020 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699.
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