

Wines and Vines, March 2005

North Carolina's Yadkin Valley: tobacco farmers embrace winegrapes

Gregory D. McCluney

When **veteran California and Oregon winemaker Bob McRitchie** came to North Carolina in 2000, the state had 19 bonded wineries. In 2005, the total will probably reach 40, at least 12 in the new Yadkin Valley AVA alone.

In the same time frame, McRitchie, a Ph.D. who had worked at Franciscan, Cuvaison, Sokol Blosser, Flynn and Torii Mor, established a viticulture and enology program at Surry Community College in Dobson, N.C.

Since then he has created a 5-acre teaching and demonstration vineyard, and produced two commercial vintages of wine, called Surry Cellars. His is the only such college program in the eastern United States.

McRitchie's students have found jobs in the industry, in sales and as winemakers, vineyard managers and interns. Others, many former tobacco farmers, have planted their own vineyards and built their own wineries. To put it mildly, the tobacco state's wine industry is smokin'.

That's true even though conditions are challenging. "If you can grow grapes in North Carolina, you can grow them anywhere," McRitchie says. "We have a capricious climate that can present you with bud break in December, hard freezes in April, hot humid days and nights in summer and continued vine growth into late November. Yet we're beginning to demonstrate that decent wines can be made from vinifera grapes in North Carolina."

McRitchie stresses that new entrants need to appreciate the biological and regional diversity in the state--and avoid vinifera snobbery. "Muscadines grow well in the flatlands with little chemical management, and there are labrusca varieties and hybrids.

"We have a native species, *Vitis aestivalis* (Norton or Cynthiana) that produces an interesting red wine," McRitchie says. "My feeling is we will see smaller, well-defined appellations that will respond to the uniqueness of the region."

With regard to technical challenges, McRitchie says, "Hot days trigger the growth of spoilage organisms in a hurry, so rapid delivery and chilling become important. The same high temperatures can promote rapid and high temperature fermentations of the reds, often resulting in poor color and limited character."

He adds, "Perceptions of the right way to make wine must be examined carefully in light of the fruit at hand. Warm climates tend to give us wines with high pH, modest acids. One might ask whether malolactic fermentation, with its reduction in acid and increase in pH, is appropriate."

In 2003, Yadkin received its own appellation as an AVA from the federal government, and has established a wine co-op in Mount Airy.

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"Getting approval for the AVA was a two-year process," says **Patty McRitchie, Sean's wife and executive director of the Yadkin Valley Winegrowers Association.** She headed the formal application to the federal government. "But I think it was worth it, because it sets us apart. It makes note of the unique soils, climate and geography that contribute to this valley and make the wines what they are."

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It's All About The Moisture

McRitchie's son, Sean, a winemaker and consultant, makes note of even more vineyard challenges than his father. "This climate and soil demand a high degree of creativity," he says. "One of the first things to deal with is directing the water, as we get 40-50 inches of rain a year. This year, we had several hurricanes blow through. And we tend to get a lot of water at the wrong time. We are always fighting for ripeness. (Brix measurement of) 22.5[degrees] is very good for the Yadkin Valley.

"I feel site selection and planning are more important here than in many locations," the younger McRitchie continues. "We experiment constantly with high density plantings, drain tiles, cover crops--things to make the vines compete and ripen earlier. I'm anti-chemical, and I prefer our rocky hillside soils that stress the vines and shed water more rapidly." He avoids the former tobacco fields planted by some of the newer North Carolina winegrowers.

In the winery, Sean McRitchie likes to add complexity with barrel selection. Currently, he is working with 20 different barrels. "I have found this to be a good way to add layers of flavor," he says. His favorite varietals for N.C.? "I think good bets for our future are Chardonnay, Merlot and Barbera."

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The Future?

The Yadkin Valley seems headed toward an intense expansion, similar to Virginia's. With substantial state government support, Virginia now boasts almost 100 wineries and growers across the state. While quality can be an issue, as it is in any rapidly expanding growing region, these wines are improving dramatically in a short cycle. Only a few years ago, the major wine press/critics would not even review or write about a Virginia label. Now, even Robert Parker writes about them. This bodes well for North Carolina winemakers, growers and the Eastern U.S. wine consumer.

Bob McRitchie thinks it will all come together with investment and lots of experimentation. "I'm confident that with time, attention to detail and the willingness to learn, North Carolina will establish itself in the world wine market."

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