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West Coast family makes East Coast wine into A FRUITFUL JUGGLING ACT

by Ed Williams

On the 10th anniversary of Sean and Patty McRitchie's arrival to North Carolina wine country, the McRitchies are—in a way—starting fresh.

McRitchie Winery & Ciderworks of Thurmond, North Carolina—the brainchild of a West Coast couple who decided to go East—enjoyed a break-out year this year. Fresh off a slate of award-winning wine releases, Sean and Patty McRitchie added to their portfolio a Merlot, a sparkling Traminette and a dry rose fashioned from Sangiovese. These joined two Chardonnays, a Pinot Gris, a red blend, a sparkling Niagara, and a hard apple cider.

Sean also hopes to plant Pinot Noir—almost unheard of on the East Coast.

It was 10 years ago that Sean and Patty McRitchie left Oregon to help settle what would become one of North Carolina's largest and highest profile wineries: Shelton Vineyards near Dobson. By 2000, Patty McRitchie knew: "We liked North Carolina well enough to know we wanted a piece of it."

That year, they bought 20 acres and planting Chardonnay vines there a few years later. In their mind's eye, they could see vineyards and a winery springing from what Sean calls "rocky, poor, crappy land." To be sure, the more stressed the land, the better it is for vines, so Sean and Patty felt they hit pay dirt.

When the McRitchie's Chardonnay won "Best of Show" last year—the top honor at the North Carolina State Fair in Raleigh—they knew they were home.

Years ago, they could see a tasting room in the homestead there and a winery in the cabinet shop. On wild, sloping timberland with plenty of odd angles but good drainage at the edge of the Blue Ridge, the McRitchies could see a new beginning.

And they saw all of this even as they were seeing Shelton Vineyards through the early years, and then—as consultants—seeing other grape growers through their infancy. Those relationships paved a foundation for what is today a tiny, boutique north of Elkin, producing wines from both estate-grown and purchased grapes.

Ask Sean and Patty where they see themselves 10 years from now, and they demur—probably because who could have predicted the last 10 years?

"I think it was more my family that we decided to plant the vineyard," says Patty McRitchie. "My family lives in Washington State and they've always been interested in wines and vineyards and they sort of put the bug in our ear. That got us thinking that maybe some day, we'd like to have a winery of our own."

Ironically, that would be on the East Coast, and in the South.

Not that the idea was completely foreign to Sean McRitchie. Since age 13, he'd worked in the wine industry alongside his father, Dr. Robert McRitchie. On the West Coast, Sean's early work

included ditch digger and vine pruner. Later, he traveled the world, zipping between Australia and Europe and the U.S., taking advantage of the flipped grape growing seasons in the two hemispheres.

Later still, he worked as cellar foreman at Domaine Chandon in Napa Valley, California. Then he did a stint as general manager at Benton Lane, as Pinot Noir specialist in Oregon's Willamette Valley.

A headhunter linked the McRitchies and Shelton Vineyard. Sean oversaw the vineyard planting and field maintenance there. Patty was responsible for researching and lobbying federal support that would one day recognize the Yadkin Valley region as uniquely suited to growing grapes. The Yadkin AVA is one of the nation's largest appellations.

After leaving Shelton, both Sean and Patty worked—and continue to work—as consultants to other growers. They most recently consulted with Big Turtle Vineyards near Dobson and Owl's Eye Vineyard near Shelby. On top of that, Sean serves as winemaker for Brushy Mountain Winery, Round Peak Vineyards and Flint Hill Vineyards.

In addition to doing custom crush for other growers, the McRitchies are also part owner in a mobile bottling line company—Artisan Bottlers—which assists smaller wineries in getting wine from barrel or tank into the marketplace.

If all that sounds like giant juggling, consider: Sean and Patty McRitchie are also raising three kids—Asher, Ava, and Aiden.

Asher, 8, and Ava, 11, have done their part in the McRitchie enterprise: Stomping grapes into juice. At age 13, Aiden finds himself out in the vineyard, mowing grass. And in the winery, he has the privilege of washing out tanks.

Sean sees all this and marvels at the symmetry in the world of wine. "He's becoming a cellar man at a much younger age than me. It's fun to see your kid doing the same kind of things you were doing."

For more information, Call 336.874.3003 or visit mcritchiewine.com.

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