

In my mind there's no greater pleasure than tasting a glass of wine with the winemaker who made it. That's because any good wine maker puts his or her heart and soul into the wine as it gets shaped. Whether it's how vines are cared for as the grapes grow and mature, whether it's how the wine is aged before it's presented to consumers or whether it's how wines are blended together; the final product is a unique expression of that particular winemaker. When you're sharing a wine with its winemaker, it's almost as if you're sipping on a liquid embodiment of his or her philosophy. It's quite an experience.

And here's some really good news. You don't have to travel very far to do a little liquid philosophizing. One of the joys of living at the lake — and there are many of them — is that we have so many great winemakers close by.

NORTH CAROLINA WINES ON THE WORLD STAGE

North Carolina's production of wine ranks number seven in the United States. Of course, we're tiny if you compare us to California, but seventh position is nothing to be sneezed at. What's more important is that, increasingly, North Carolina wines are being made from the *vitis vinifera*, the noble grapes that you associate with the fine wines from California and Europe.

I can give you loads of data and statistics, but the best indication of how good our state's wines are happened a few years ago. I worked with one of the best chefs in Paris to create a meal at his restaurant; a meal that was paired with wines made by Michael Helton at Hanover Park in Yadkinville. Some French wine aficionados (and they were a tough bunch) attended. They were blown away by the quality of the wine. We took some of it back to the kitchen to share with the staff that created our meal. Their reaction was to pull out an atlas asking, "Where is this North Carolina?" You can't get a better accolade than that.

LIQUID PHILOSOPHY

But, let's get back to the liquid philosophy stuff. My wife, Mary Ellen, and I recently spent a pleasant couple of hours tasting wine

with Sean McRitchie at the McRitchie Winery and Ciderworks in Thurmond (Thurmond is just a little west of Elkin). Sean knows his stuff, and his wines surely show it. Sean was raised deep in Oregon's wine country. He's made wine in Australia and in the Alsace region of France. Sean and his wife, Patricia, came to North Carolina from Oregon and played a major part in the creation of Shelton Vineyards. They fell in love with North Carolina as a place to make their own wine and, maybe more importantly, as a place to raise their family. Goody for us.

They started from scratch in Thurmond. And that's where Sean's philosophy starts to come into play. He wanted a vineyard with some altitude so as to mitigate the heat and humidity of the Yadkin Valley. He wanted rocky and challenging soil, which would make his vines really struggle. It's when vines have to struggle that their real character comes out. The vines have to dig deep to find moisture and nutrients and all of that passes through



McRitchie Winery and Ciderworks produces wines with a taste of place; wines that express the soil of North Carolina.

CAROLINA TREASURE

Just a short hop, skip and a jump takes you to some wines that are definitely world class

into the grapes. Vines are just like people; struggling and overcoming adversity are what bring out the character in both.

A TASTE OF PLACE

Most importantly, Sean wanted to create wines that reflect North Carolina. He has little time for winemakers who want to produce a California-style wine in our state. It's an impossible dream; North Carolina is

not California. The wines Sean makes have a taste of place — and that place is a few, select, rocky hillsides in Thurmond. Actually, his "taste of place" convictions run even a little bit deeper. He likes to pair his wines with food that's also local. He's been known to go hunting close by to bring home meats and then get produce from a local farmer, all with the goal of preparing just the right kind of meal to go along with his wines.

When we visited Sean, one of the wines

we shared was a Chardonnay grown just across from where we were tasting. It's a wine that had been aged in French oak barrels. As we discussed how to pair the wine with local food a word came out of each of our mouths at the same time — barbecue. That may seem a little odd, and I've yet to try it, but I know it will be great. Don't be surprised if you attend an event at McRitchie Winery and you come across some local barbecue paired with Sean's Chardonnay.

One wine in particular shows how far Sean goes to express North Carolina in his wines. It's his Petit Verdot. Petit Verdot is a grape you seldom see in a wine all by itself. It's widely used in Bordeaux as a blending grape to give depth of color and flavor. The reason Sean chose it for his vineyard is that the grape grows in loose rather than tight clusters. There's plenty of space for air to circulate between the grapes. That's important in North Carolina because our humidity causes rot in



From left, Trevor Burton and Sean McRitchie share a little liquid philosophy.

tight grape clusters. That danger compels growers to harvest early, before any rot has the opportunity to set in. So Sean chose Petit Verdot because the lack of rot gives grapes a chance for a long ripening on the vine. And that brings out all the character of North Carolina soil.

And it works. This wine is deep, almost inky, in color. It is deep, too, in flavor. Lots of dark fruit; black currant and blackberry. Add to that the flavors of cedar and leather, and you're into a

Continued on page 42



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Continued from page 40

serious wine. This is a wine that I'm taking along on my next visit to the City of Light. I'll guarantee you that it will send people scurrying to their atlases.

So, indulge yourself. Go try a little

liquid philosophizing. And you don't have to fly anywhere to do it. Simply take a ride up Interstate 77 and taste some great wines with the wine-maker who made them. It doesn't get any better than that. Enjoy. **LOVE**



Trevor Burton of Mooresville is certified by the International Sommelier Guild, he is founder of SST Wine Experiences and, along with his wife, Mary Ellen, conducts wine education and tasting tours to wine regions throughout the world.



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