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Yadkin Valley

has become Napa Valley East

Story by *Bill Bauer*



For years I traveled the I-77 corridor from Wytheville, N.C. to Charlotte, N.C. — always in a hurry and never pausing to see what lay amidst the gently rolling hills east and west of the interstate.

Over the last decade, little has changed along the highway, with one exception. From the North Carolina border to Statesville, exits are sprouting green and white signs bearing names like Rag Apple Lassie, Swan Creek and Divine Llama, each with a bunch of purple grapes, indicating

the emergence of a new winery. In fact, in the last decade, over 30 such enterprises have been established in the Yadkin Valley — now being referred to as the Napa Valley of the East.

Fertile soil, abundant rainfall and sun — all ingredients in the magical recipe that produces the grape — permeate the Piedmont of North Carolina. Coupled with technology and the pull-up-your-shoulders mentality of a new brand of grape growers, winemaking has become

an enormous boost to an economy that once thrived on tobacco and textiles.

“I’ve been a farmer all my life,” declares Frank Hobson, who with his wife Lenna, owns and operates Rag Apple Lassie Vineyards. “When the tobacco market fell out, I had to do something with the land before it became a housing project, so we turned to grapes, and it’s been a hell of a ride.”

But it’s one that both Lenna and Frank say they would do all over again. Their first vines were planted in the spring of 2000.

The view from the raffaldini patio at Cascade Highlands Winery is hard to beat. “One of the best things for a winery is to have another winery open next door. Then it becomes a destination,” said Cascade Highlands executive director Brandon McCann. *Photo courtesy of Cascade Highlands Winery*

For the adventurous, the folks at the Divine Llama Winery can put together a llama trek deep into the woods, combining wine sampling and lunch.

Photo by Craig Distil

Ten years later, Rag Apple Lassie, named after Frank's 4-H Champion Holstein show calf, produces a wide variety of reds and whites, vinted and bottled from fruit meticulously grown on the 100-year-old Hobson Farm.

While the Hobsons' story is unique, each of the wineries has a similar "grape roots" tale to tell.

"I bought you half interest in a tobacco farm," Charles Shelton told his brother after waiting five days to get up the courage to reveal his purchase. That was back in 1997 when he decided that after years as successful real estate and building developers, he and Ed ought to try their hand at farming. The old farmland was cleared, vines were planted in 1999 and the Shelton Brothers were immersed in growing grapes and making wine.

Today, Shelton Vineyards in Dobson, N.C., is the largest of the wineries in the Yadkin Valley. The estate measures 400 acres in size with 200 acres of vineyards. Ten different grape varieties bud from approximately 136,000 vines that, strung end-to-end, would stretch for 145

miles. Beautifully landscaped picnic grounds are available and the Harvest Grill Restaurant offers fine dining and handcrafted artisan style cheeses.

Once thought of as a part of the country where only sweet varieties from the muscadine grape could be bottled, the Yadkin Valley now produces a vast number of vintages and blends from the driest of whites to the sweetest of the reds.

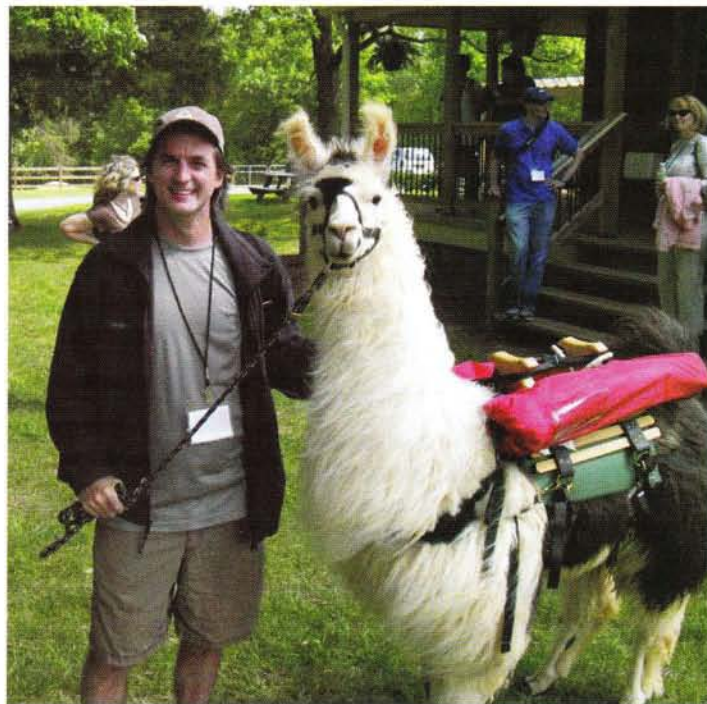
Statistics continue to tell the story of the rapid growth of winemaking in North Carolina. The state's wine production ranked 8th in the United States in 2009, while its grape production ranked 9th. Wineries more than quadrupled from 21 in 2000 to a whopping 90 in 2009, and their grape-bearing acres jumped from 600 to 1,700 over the same span.

In Yadkin Valley alone, the number of wineries grew from five in 2003 to 30 in 2009. The Valley even hosts the state's first certified organic winery — Carolina Heritage Winery — where wine grapes are grown using no insecticides and only natural fertilizers.

"We are all in this together,"

said Brenda Dove, co-owner of Flint Hill Winery and Restaurant. While they are competitive, the winemakers are also cooperative, and a genuine camaraderie exists among them. "One of the best things for a winery is to have another winery open next door. Then it becomes a destination," said Brandon McCann, executive director of the Cascade Highlands. The region's rapid transformation into a winemaking Mecca has resulted in the Yadkin Valley being designated as an American Viticultural Area, or appellation.

The predominant type of grape in the region is French *vinifera*, commonly known as European *vinifera*. Unlike other regions of North Carolina where muscadines are more prevalent leading to the production of sweeter wines, the Yadkin Valley is showcasing such varieties as chardonnay, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, syrah, sauvignon blanc, pinot grigio, viognier and Riesling. Still in the infant stage, the area has yet to declare a signature wine, but insiders believe it will eventually become viognier, a popular French dry white, that produces less grapes per vine, making it cost prohibitive to export from France. "It is not imported much into the United States and does not grow well in Cali-



Shelton Vineyards in Dobson, N.C., is the largest of the wineries in the Yadkin Valley. The estate measures 400 acres in size with 200 acres of vineyards. There are plenty of areas to enjoy a picnic and a fine bottle of wine.

Fertile soil, abundant rainfall and sun — all ingredients in the magical recipe that produces the grape — permeate the Piedmont of North Carolina. *Photo courtesy of Cascade Highlands Winery*



fornia,” claims Frank Hobson, explaining its popularity among grape growers in the area.

“There is a romance and a mystique attached to owning a winery that you don’t have with cornfields and tobacco fields,” Hobson said. The Yadkin Valley and Swan Creek AVA areas have perpetuated plenty of romance in wine tasting as well. For a modest fee of \$5, including the glass as a memento, visitors can venture to more than 30 wineries, many of which are no more than 20 minutes apart. Wine pairing dinners can be arranged at several restaurants in Mt. Airy, Elkin and at both Shelton and Flint Hill Vineyards.

Yadkin Valley Wine Tours depart daily from the Holiday Inn Express in nearby Clemmons and include lunch. For the adventurous, the folks at the Divine Llama Winery can put together a llama trek, deep

into the woods, combining wine sampling and lunch.

Romancing the grape has no boundaries in Yadkin Valley — all one has to do is exit the highway at one of those green and white signs to find out what North Carolina’s version of Napa Valley is all about. ❖

For general information, trail maps and links on the Yadkin Valley Wine Trail visit yadkinvalleywineries.com (1-336-366-4734) or visitncwine.com (1-877-3NC-WINE). For specific information on festivals and events, visit the individual winery websites on the Yadkin Valley/Swan Creek link.



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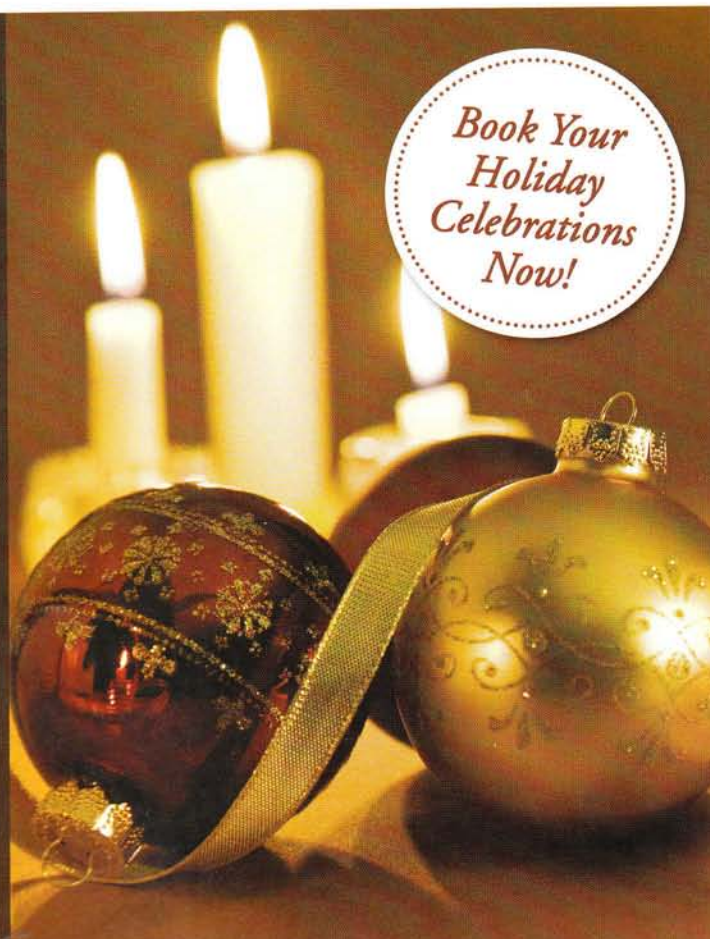
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