

Growing Wines of the Catawba Valley

BY LESLIE JOHNSTON / ALAN CLARK

While some oenophiles think of vintages created in Napa Valley when selecting a wine to drink or wineries to visit, those that live in Burke County can choose from several local wineries' tasty treats. In a state with a long history of wine making that currently ranks ninth in the country for wine and grape production, it's no surprise that these operations are widely sought after by residents and visitors alike.

"It was a hobby that got out of control," laughs Betty Fowler, owner of Lake James Cellars in Glen Alpine. Betty and her husband, Mike, originally began making wine in their basement. In 2005, they opened a retail outlet for their products with their son Josh as a winemaker.

Housed in a restored 1915 textile mill, Lake James Cellars shares the historic space with another of the Fowlers' businesses, Old Mill Antiques. "This may be the only place where you can shop for antiques and enjoy a glass of wine," Betty adds.

The business recently received a grant to install a 28kW Solar electric system along with a solar thermal system for hot water. The renovated facility and business operation is expected to become the epicenter of

sustainable, "Green" business in Western NC and a flagship for others in the NC Wine industry.

Lake James Cellars has wines for every palate from dry to sweet. The Fowlers' most popular selections are the Mimosa Red, a blend of cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, zinfandel and syrah; and the chambourcin.



The Fowlers have garnered some awards with their vintages. Their Tramintte, a white wine, won a bronze medal at the 2010 North Carolina State Fair.

Although they are now cultivating two small vineyards themselves, the Fowlers currently buy all of their grapes from different vineyards across North Carolina.

Like the Fowlers, Raintree Cellars' Ed Yoder was also a hobbyist for some dozen years before launching his business in 2007. "The peach chardonnay that we served at my daughter's wedding started the requests that I get a license to sell the wine I was making in my basement," Yoder explains.

Today, Raintree Cellars occupies the old Yoder Brothers grocery store in Hildebran, a landmark in eastern Burke

County. Yoder's specialties are fruit and berry wines, many of which have colorful names inspired by family members and Yoder's military days. Among his dry white wines, Big Dog, named for his own canine, is a pinot grigio with just a hint of lemon, while Torpedo Juice is a blend of melon flavors and dry white. The popular Blue Jay is the perfect blend of a smooth blush wine enhanced with a pop of blueberry.

"The fruit wines are my best sellers," Yoder says, "especially the peach, blackberry and pomegranate, and at Christmas time, the sugar plum."

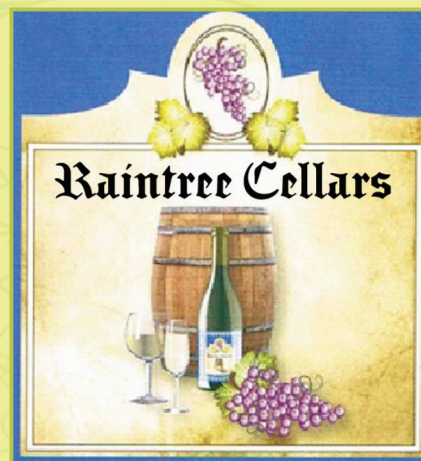
At the Waldensian Heritage Winery in Valdese, co-owner Dennis Powell maintains the winemaking technique brought to North Carolina by his own ancestors, Waldensian immigrants from northern Italy, in the 19th century. The winery, which opened in 1989, surprisingly has no employees, rather local volunteers are the only "workers" on site.

"While we offer dry and sweet wines, red, white and rosé, the dry burgundies are the winery's signature product," says Powell. "We are the oldest working winery in the area," he adds, "and each year, we produce about 4,000 gallons of wine."

The rolling foothills and temperate climate of the Southern Appalachian range offer ideal conditions for growing a variety of high quality, unique wine grapes. Burke County, in the heart of the Catawba Valley, is especially well suited to growers and wine makers who seek rural locations convenient to large markets like Charlotte, Greensboro and Raleigh. Tasting rooms along our I-40 corridor benefit as well from visitor traffic on their way to other attractions in Western NC.

Ed Wisnieski and Jennifer Foulides have chosen Burke County to soon establish a new winery and tasting room. According to Wisnieski, "Burke County is a prime location for our decision to establish our future business endeavor ..." and that factors for success include "...; rich soil, terrain, climate and a group of supportive people that are committed to its success." Ed and Jennifer found this here in the Catawba Valley, we expect others will too.

If you're interested in joining the growing wine industry of the Catawba Valley, visit www.catawbavalleywines.com or contact Business Development at the Burke TDA at 828-403-9600.



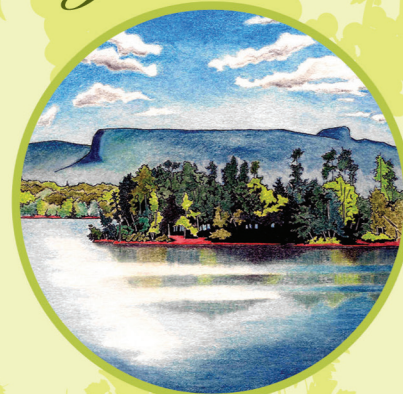
521-E U.S. Hwy 70 East • Hildebran, NC 28637
(828) 397-5643 • Wednesday-Saturday 12-6PM
www.raintreecellars.com

Waldensian Heritage Wines



4940 Villar Lane Northeast • Valdese, NC 28690
(828) 879-3202 • Thursday-Sunday, 1PM-6PM

Lake James Cellars



204 East Main Street • Glen Alpine, NC 28628
(828) 584-4551 • lakejamescellars.com
Tuesday - Saturday 10-6 • Sunday 1-5