

NORTH CAROLINA WINES

As early as 1565 the wine produced from North Carolina native grape was enjoyed and declared exceeding good by writers of the time. Although (*Vitis rotundifolia*) the muscadine (scuppernong) grape has never received the notoriety of the better known California grape it was still a major part of the Eastern North Carolina economy before prohibition. Early colonies at Bath, New Bern, Edenton, and Wilmington were quick to develop small plots to produce the grapes for wine. The most famous of the early wine lovers was Sir Walter Raleigh who actively encouraged the planting of vines for the benefit of the Roanoke Island Colony. In later years this complex of vines was to be called the "Mother Vine". At one time, the author owned a paper label wine bottle from Roanoke Island which contained the name "Mothers Vineyard"

The Raleigh Star newspaper even wrote of the popularity of the native grape and complimented the product produced at Phelps Lake. This article was written in 1809. Although the 1810 census recorded 5,424 stills operating in North Carolina producing 1.4 million gallons of whiskey and brandy with little mention of wine, this and other publications, made the North Carolina grapes famous up and down the east coast with botany interests ranging to Philadelphia and Boston.

Even in 1823 the best wine of the region was accredited to Ebenezer Pettigrew of Edenton and George Spruel of Plymouth. These farms contained just a few acres of grapes and sold only a small portion of the harvest. It is difficult to say this was the beginning of commercial wine production in North Carolina but may be a good starting point. Among the early producers was Sidney Weller who moved from Orange County, New York to Brinkleyville with \$450 to purchase a run-down farm of 400 acres and winery. This, the Medoc Vineyard, is considered by many to be the first truly commercial winery in the nation. The 1840 census showed North Carolina as the leading state in winemaking. At a price of up to \$4 per gallon that was some real money in 1840.

Over the next 20 years and for the period shortly after the Civil War wineries begin to spread throughout Eastern North Carolina. Some of these included: Tokay Vineyard, near Fayetteville; Whiteville Wine Company of Whiteville (originally Vineland); Castle Hayne Vineyard Company, near Wilmington. Sol Bear, Wilmington. Sol Bear had agents as far away as New York and at one time surpassed all other North Carolina wineries in production. These were followed by others such as H. Mahler in Raleigh and G. W. Lawrence of Happy Valley Vineyard near Fayetteville. Just before prohibition the list of wine and grape producer in North Carolina became extensive from the coast to the mountains.

The most famous of all these early vintners was Charles Garrett who purchased the operation originally founded by Sidney Weller. One of the early ventures of Garrett was the Ringwood Wine Company. The Garrett family later developed vineyards throughout Eastern North Carolina with facilities in Weldon, NC; Chockoyotte, NC; Berkley, VA; Memphis, TN; Norfolk, VA; and New York. The Virginia Dare brand was by far the most famous. The extent of the Garrett influence was witnessed by the fact that Garrett and Company was the primary supplier of wine to the South Carolina dispensary system until it was abolished in 1907.

To bottle collectors Sol Bear and Garrett are best known but early bottles do exist from many others such as Pinehurst and Robersonville.

Ref: Scuppernong, North Carolina's Grape and Its Wine by Clarence Gohdes

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February 4, 2011