

MEET AND EAT

CHATHAM HILL WINERY

Understanding the Urban Mentality

Triangle's Only Winery Parallels the Growth and Recognition of Winemaking in the Tar Heel State

NORTH CAROLINA is the nation's 10th largest producer of both grapes and wine, with more than 350 vineyards and 60-plus wineries in 30 counties. Pretty impressive, considering the growing climate in the Tar Heel state is not exactly ideal.

Winemakers here have long battled the "too sweet" stigma of the muscadine and scuppernon grapes. For Chatham Hill Winery, established in 1999 as the first in the Triangle, the struggle has been more of a war on words: how to explain and defend the concept of their urban winery.

across the country, the impetus being to go where the people are – places like the Triangle. Chatham Hill Winery holds the distinction of being the first urban winery in North Carolina.

It's been said that one of the great things about grapes is that they care a lot about where they're grown, but not at all where

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they're made into wine. Banking on the grape's indifference and the public's ability to adapt, Chatham Hill owners Marek Wojciechowski and Jill Winkler set out to create an atmosphere and experience just as gratifying as the "bucolic" appeal of the back roads vineyards and wineries. Apparently geography isn't everything; more than 6,000 visitors a year tour the winery, which produces approximately 8,000 cases annually.

They doubled their space recently when they relocated to a new facility at 3800 Gateway Center Boulevard in Morrisville, just down the street from their old location at 3500.

Jill says their recent move has helped them to focus. "We constantly hear visitors saying 'what an unusual setting,'" she says. "So we had to ask ourselves 'how can we help people see it through our eyes?' This new facility has a presence that helps them to embrace the urban winery model. Now it's easier for us to say 'this is what we are and what we can do' and not try to be something else."

THE MISSION

Marek's mission is to produce high quality, handcrafted wines from grapes grown in North Carolina. Chatham Hill currently produces two distinctive brands of wines: French-style wines under the Chatham Hill label and a line of unique, fruit-infused wines under the Sweet Carolina label. Over the years, Chatham



Chatham Hill Winery's tasting room

URBAN WINERIES

The growth of urban wineries, defined as a winery located in a heavily populated area as opposed to a vineyard, has been fueled by skyrocketed land prices in wine-producing regions such as California. Rather than invest in expensive land, vintners rent a space in a downtown or industrial park setting and truck in the fruit from regional vineyards and then ferment and cellar the wine on-site. In recent years the trend has spread

Hill's wines have won numerous awards, both regionally and nationally.

Their 2005 Merlot won the Bronze Medal at the *San Francisco International Wine Competition*, the largest and most prestigious wine competition in America. The judging was held in the Hotel Nikko in San Francisco on June 15-17, 2007. Many of the Sweet Carolina wines have won awards as well.

Both Marek and Jill work passionately to promote the identity of North Carolina wines and like to remind people that around the turn of the 20th century, North Carolina was the nation's largest wine producer.

"We own that history," says Jill. "We have different soil and climate, terroir – it's who we are and where our roots go."

Marek agrees. "We used to try to be like California," he says. "What's wrong with just being ourselves?"

A TRUE PARTNERSHIP

While Marek diligently works to perfect his wines, Jill is busy with their promotion. This task she admits did not come naturally to her in the beginning. "I used to think marketing was manipulative," she says. Now she enjoys figuring out how to bring the magic they create to people's attention. "As long as it's done with integrity and honesty," she adds.

Jill's background was in healthcare. Over the years she worked both bedside and administrative, eventually overseeing a home health agency in Chapel Hill, responsible for 250 clinical staff. Her biggest interest has been in service improvement. "That has probably been the biggest thread that is woven throughout my career," she says, "the idea of trying to change things for the better." She earned her masters degree in organizational development and management. "It's all about change and how we're all part of something larger," she explains.

Jill understands the importance of systems

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working together but knows that it takes willing and motivated people who enjoy what they do. "I've worked in lots of organizations where there was so much pain in how people were treated," she says. "I don't think it has to be

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that way. My overall goal has been to create an environment where people can be authentic and grow as much as they want to."

She says it takes lots of patience and the realization that people can't "leave everything at the door" when they come to work – which so many work places expect you to do.

"We need to be supportive of one another, embracing the full person," she says. "Even when we greet guests, we try to meet people where they are in their experience of learning wine. We ask simple questions."

She and Marek don't like titles, even though they've had to work out "what's yours and what's mine." She sees "hers" as having everything to do with people, from running the tasting room to marketing, sales, partnerships and relationships with a strong team of dedicated folks.

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CHATHAM HILL WINERY

Marek Wojciechowski and Jill Winkler

LESSONS LEARNED

We asked her what lessons she's learned along the way. "I read a book once that starts out – 'life is hard,'" she answered. "Whoever told us that it's not? You continue to have to work at life and sometimes think things

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should slow down and get easier and yet they don't. I've had to trust my intuition and my gut. I always try to pass that along to my daughter and younger women when I mentor. That voice inside you that is the truth – listen to it and don't ignore it. It's where your strength comes from."

Is there anything she would have done differently? "I wish I would have listened to that inner voice more. As women we listen to it, but don't always trust it." |



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EXPERIENCE CHATHAM HILL

Chatham Hill's recent move has allowed increased wine production and a more upscale venue for public wine tasting. An atmosphere of a wine bar with a retail component, the Tasting Room and Winemaker's Barrel Room can also be transformed into a one-of-a-kind corporate and private venue, hosting evening gatherings and winemaker dinners. The Tasting Room can accommodate up to 180 people.

The winery offers an alternative to the bar scene every third Thursday of the month when they remain open from 6-9 p.m. Come by, play some trivia, meet friends and enjoy a glass of wine and some light munchies.

Cost: Cost of wine purchase. Reservations not required; however, if you have a large group and wish to reserve a table, call first.

Tasting Room hours: Monday-Friday 11-5, Saturday 11-6, and Sunday 1-5.

Wine Tasting and Winery Tours are offered daily.