

Chatham Hill takes wine to the people

By Melanie Coughlin
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An nondescript low-slung brick office building near Research Triangle Park is an unlikely location for a winery. But that's exactly where the award-winning Chatham Hill Winery makes its home. Now in its 11th year, Chatham Hill was North Carolina's first urban winery, embracing the concept of taking winemaking to where the people are.

"We bring the experience of wine to the population of the state," says vintner Marek Wojciechowski. He and his wife Jill Winkler own Chatham Hill. At one time in the winery's history, the couple planned to move to a location more typical of a winery. But they quickly realized their customer base was in RTP and decided to stay. "This is home," says Winkler.

This home is an interesting juxtaposition of cozy and industrial. Warm colors and soft lights beckon visitors to be comfortable and linger. The barrel room is far from utilitarian; it's inviting enough that couples have married and had receptions there. But Chatham Hill does play up to its high-tech location. It has free wi-fi, and customers are welcome to bring their laptops. A recent exhibit at their gallery was digital art.

It's fitting that this couple would create a place of dichotomy. Wojciechowski is a Ph.D. electrochemist, and Winkler is a nurse who speaks soothingly and smiles easily. Chatham Hill started as a back-room experiment for Wojciechowski and two other scientists working at a biotech company.

"As scientists, we were experimenting to see what we could do," he says. When Wojciechowski's partners were ready to move on, Winkler stepped in with her master's in organizational management and leadership development to help.

Their efforts resulted in wines that have won medals at competitions across the nation. In all, Chatham Hill sells about 20 different wines. Expect to find Rieslings, chardonnays, merlots and zinfandels alongside fruit-



Photos by Mollie Tobias

Chatham Hill Winery, North Carolina's first urban winery, makes its home in the Research Triangle Park area. Taste and buy their wines at 3800 Gateway Centre Boulevard in Cary. For more information, visit www.chathamhillwine.com or call (800) 808-6768.

infused sweet wines. With Wojciechowski's expertise in chemical reactions, he puts his spin on traditional wines. He wants Chatham Hill's wines to be "something unique instead of trying to be like Italy or California."

Wojciechowski dispels myths about winemaking, when he tells budding vintners seeking advice, "You don't have to be a grape grower to be a winemaker."

Chatham Hill's longevity makes Wojciechowski an expert among members of the N.C. Wine Growers Association. Chatham Hill was North Carolina's 14th winery, and today there are more than 100 wineries in the state. The couple buys grapes from the Yadkin Valley, the state's largest appellation.

Wojciechowski and Winkler are down-to-earth about what is often considered a pretentious pursuit. "We meet people where they are with their (wine) experience," says Winkler. "We both like to learn, and we like helping others learn." Chatham Hill is intentional about bringing winemaking to where the people are both literally and figuratively. It regularly hosts wine blending days. At these workshops, novices create their own blend then bottle and label the wine to take home. Over winemaker dinners with Wojciechowski, people learn to identify their own wine tastes. Wojciechowski's convivial style makes Chatham Hill customers comfortable no matter what their experience with wine. It turns out this urban winery feels more like tasting wine in someone's home.

Read freelance writer Melanie Coughlin's blogs at redheadedsteppchild.blogspot.com.