

Byron winery produces award-winning muscadine wine

When travelers pass Byron on their way to sunny Florida or back home to the frozen North, they can't help but notice the giant peach perched on a tower near Interstate 75. The decorated water tower is a good clue that they are in Peach County, which is in the heart of the Peach State. Experienced travelers know if they pull off the interstate, they can buy fresh peaches, peach cobbler, peach ice cream and peach preserves. Now, they also can buy peach wine.

In October 2010, GeorgiaBob's Cane River Vineyard opened in Byron. This boutique winery specializes in making wines from muscadine grapes grown in their own vineyards. Cane River's best selling wine is their Peach Country Peach.

"It's a nice crisp wine and not super sweet," said Bill Browning, co-owner of GeorgiaBob's Cane River Vineyard. "It's made from muscadines with a peach flavor added. It sells well partly because of the label. People are driving through and they want something with a peach on it."

While Cane River's wines attract the tourist trade with clever packaging, the amber liquid inside is worthy of the purchase price. Several of Cane River's wines have won awards including the Peach Country Peach, which won a silver medal at the Finger Lakes International Wine Competition. Another one of Cane River's award winning wines is their Robin's Red, named in honor of Robins Air Force Base's 70th anniversary. It captured a Bronze medal at the Atlantic Seaboard Wine Competition.

"We've perfected some good wines," Browning said. "We have here several varieties of muscadine wines that I would put up against anyone's wines."

In addition to a small vineyard on the premises, Cane River has approximately 60 acres of muscadines in vineyards scattered around Middle Georgia. After the grapes are harvested, they're taken to Horse Creek Winery in Nashville, Ga., where they're crushed, pressed, fermented, bottled and labeled for Cane River.



Horse Creek produces wine for their own label as well, and they also grow their own muscadines. Although made at the same facility, the two labels are different wines with specialized recipes. Ed Perry, owner of Horse Creek winery, is determined to dispel the myth that muscadines don't make fine wines.

"In the olden days, people thought of muscadine as only being a sweet wine but that's just not true," Perry said. "The Robin's Red is a high-end, dry red wine like a merlot."

Cane River relies on the expertise of Joe Smith of Yonah Mountain Vineyards in north Georgia. Smith also guides the wines for Horse Creek Winery. Smith's own wines are made with the traditional vinifera grapes such as merlot and

- **GeorgiaBob's**
- **Cane River**
- **Vineyards**
- 144 Cane River Drive, Byron, Ga.
- (866) 330-VINO (8466)
- www.canerivervineyard.com

- **Hours of operation:**
- Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m.-8 p.m.
- Available Sundays for special events.

- Wine tastings are available any time during normal hours, and a tasting includes your choice of five wines and a commemorative glass for \$5.

- Reservations are suggested for large groups or parties.

- At left, GeorgiaBob's Cane River Vineyard co-owner Bill Browning shows off their muscadines.
- Above, sales associate Jenny Fink offers a taste of the vineyard's Byron Plum wine.

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chardonnay, but he's enjoyed the challenge of working with muscadines.

"There's a different balancing act to make wines from muscadines as opposed to viniferas. Once you understand it, it's fun to make," Smith said. "One thing we want to capture is the freshness and the grape's taste. It's the taste of the South."

Barbecue is also the taste of the South, so what better to pair with a nice muscadine wine than a plate of pulled pork and cole slaw? Two of Cane River's four owners are partners in Georgia Bob's Barbecue, so after a wine tasting, guests at Cane River can stay for lunch or dinner. They can enjoy a glass of their favorite selection while chowing down on a rib platter from GeorgiaBob's.

Capturing the taste of the South, or more specifically the taste of Georgia, is a goal of Cane River. In addition to the Georgia wines, they have cheese straws, peach butter and Vidalia onion corn relish in the gift shop. For those with more adventurous taste buds, they also have pickled beets, asparagus and garlic. For the really daring, there's jalapeno and garlic stuffed olives.

"Actually, the stranger the item, the better it sells," said Cane River sales associate Jenny Fink. "We try to carry the down-home type of food items. We have a lot of interstate traffic and the people want to take back something from Georgia."

The concept of pairing wine with barbecue might seem odd to people in Napa Valley, but it works in Byron, and not all of the customers are interstate travelers looking for a Georgia souvenir. Locals are appreciating the winery as well. Cane River can serve as a

Did You Know?

- Through extensive cultivation, there are over 300 varieties of muscadines now, some of which were developed specifically for wine making.
- The muscadine is one of America's native fruits and grows extremely well in the warm, humid areas of the Southeastern U.S.

special event facility and has hosted several wedding receptions, rehearsal dinners and birthday parties. There are even a couple outdoor weddings scheduled this fall in the vineyard.

"It's really pretty out there especially in the evening when the sun sets," Fink said.

Cane River plans to construct a winemaking facility on the property. It will soon be offering more traditional wine choices such as a rosé and a Chardonnay made from grapes grown in north Georgia. It seems the concept of a winery in Mid Georgia is a winner.

"We've been open for a year, and exceeding expectations," Browning says. "We've got big plans."

Who knows? In a few years that white tower might be painted like a muscadine instead of a peach. **M**