

# Backyard GRAPES

NO MORE THAN TEN MINUTES FROM HISTORIC DOWNTOWN LEWISBURG, WV, RESTING IN THE SHADOW OF MUDDY CREEK MOUNTAIN, YOU'LL FIND A QUIET LITTLE VINEYARD WITH CHARM TO SPARE. WATTS ROOST VINEYARD, OWNED AND OPERATED BY FRANK AND BARBARA TUCKWILLER, IS A FARM VINEYARD PRODUCING A VARIETY OF WINES FROM FRENCH-AMERICAN HYBRID GRAPES. ESTABLISHED NEARLY FIFTEEN YEARS AGO AS A RETIREMENT VENTURE, THE VINEYARD HAS ENJOYED ATTENTION RECENTLY FOR ITS AWARD WINNING WINES, AND IT SEEMS THE MOMENTUM HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN.

I visited Watts Roost Vineyard at the least logical time of year to visit a vineyard. The ground was covered with dusty snow, and the temperature which had been hovering in the teens made wandering the rows of twiggy, barren vines unlikely. However, there are a couple benefits to visiting a vineyard in winter, I've learned. It was the off-season and the Tuckwillers had more time to kick back and chat about the business of wine, and, more importantly, Barbara can make a mean bowl of venison chili, something I would have surely missed in-season.

I was welcomed into a warm guest house, affectionately named the Hen House, where bright folk art paintings covered each available wall. As would be expected, I was quickly handed a glass of wine and

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STORY BY: SARAH ELKINS  
PHOTOS BY: MARITA CUMMINS  
AND DON DELANEY  
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Left: Watts Roost Vineyard on a sunny fall day.

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we sat down to talk. Frank Tuckwiller was raised on the farm across the road from the present-day winery, but he left for college and didn't return until after retirement in 1997.

Barbara joked, "This is actually Frank's third life." Frank retired from the Marine Corps after twenty years including two tours in the Far East and two tours in Vietnam. While still in the military, through the GI Bill, he took night courses in air-conditioning and began his own business. In the mid-90s, Frank decided to escape the pressures of his Beaufort, SC business and made plans to come home to West Virginia. Thus began the search for what would become his third reincarnation. The Tuckwillers considered opening a microbrewery, but the cost and daunting licensing process had them researching wine-making in no time.

They purchased a 38-acre farm with an 1830 farmhouse from Frank's brother and embarked upon their early adventures in winemaking. That first year they planted cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay grapes and soon discovered those varieties would never be successful in the cool mountain climate.

Frank explained, "Grapes aren't just grapes. Each has its own idiosyncrasies, you know, as unique as people." The first challenge would be to find the perfect grapes for this Shenandoah climate and the loamy soil. French-American hybrids were just those grapes, and the crop multiplied from a front yard plot to 9 acres of thriving vines.

Of course, it wasn't that easy. There were other challenges along the way, namely the prosperous deer population. The first solution was to simply hunt the deer that insisted on harvesting the grapes for themselves. On the first evening Frank shot twelve

deer, and on the second, eight. It was futile. The discovery of a "deer fence" to keep the deer away from the neat rows of leafy vines made all the difference, and Watts Roost Winery was officially in business.

In that humble beginning, the Tuckwillers operated the entire winery, from manufacturing to public tastings out of the garage of the Hen House. The wine was produced in 130-gallon tanks which seemed enormous at the time.

As Mother Nature would have it, 2007 proved to be a wonderful year for wine, and Watts Roost Winery produced magnificent wines that would go on to win gold, silver and bronze medals at the Florida State Fair International Wine and Juice Competition in 2008. "May have been by hook and crook," Frank offered with a grin as explanation of their wave of success.

The 130-gallon tanks became 260-gallon tanks and finally 520-gallon tanks. The garage was bursting at the seams, and a new facility was imperative. On June 1, 2010, they opened the doors of a beautiful 3,600 square foot manufacturing and tasting facility, perched atop the hill behind their farmhouse and the Hen House.

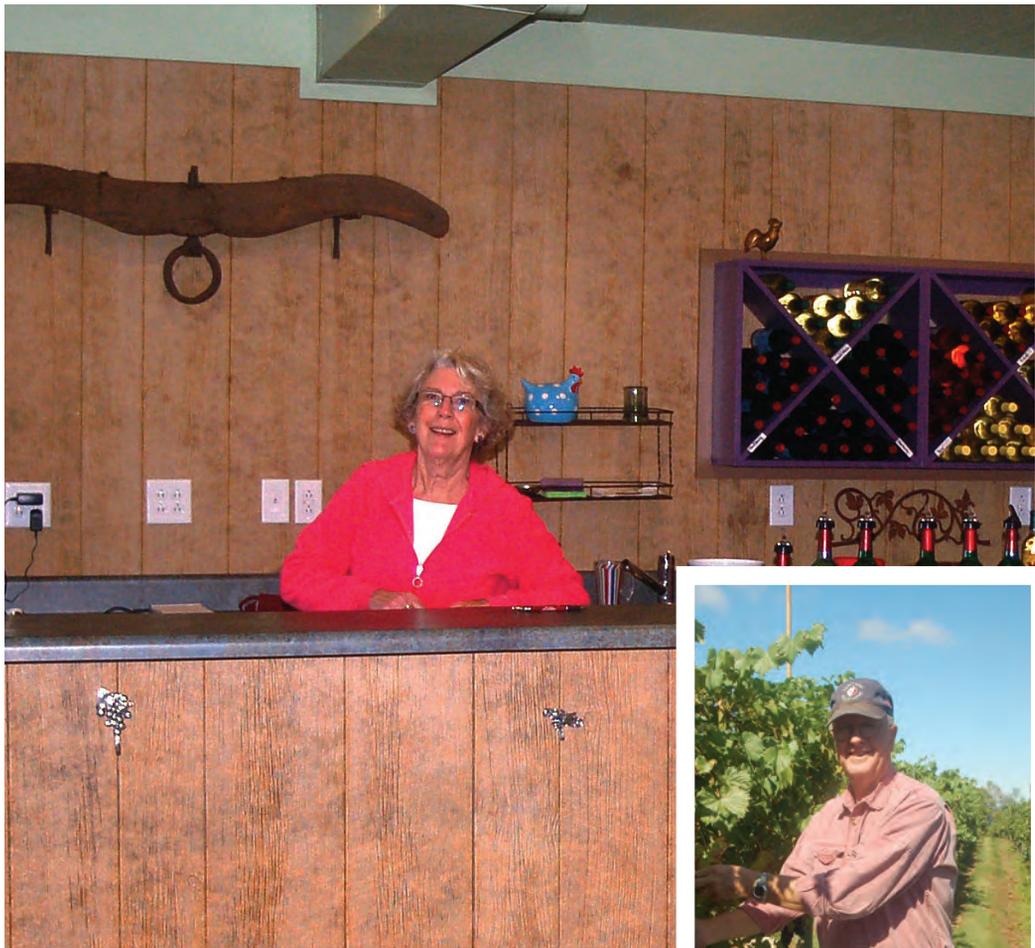
We jumped in Frank's truck to drive the short distance to the top of the hill to see the winery. I stepped out of the snowy cold into a large bright room with rows of shiny steel tanks. Masking tape labels displayed the names of the wines aging inside. One tank at the end of a row was wrapped in what appeared to be some sort of insulated sleeve.

Frank tapped the contraption with a hand and laughed, "This would be your standard king-sized Wal-Mart electric blanket." The peaches inside this particular tank were fermenting and would become the first batch of



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Opposite left, clockwise from upper left: Bottles of Sweet Charlotte prepared for shipping; Tuckwiller displays a large varietal during harvest season; the vineyard now stretches across 9 acres.



*“In the Marine Corps you can only talk to Marines about the Marines; in the air-conditioning business you talk to people in the air-conditioning business, but in the wine business you can talk wine with anyone”*

Watts Roost peach wine due to hit the market by summer 2011. Besides the wines made from grapes grown on the farm, Watts Roost has made a name for itself with its top selling blackberry and elderberry wines. Blueberry wine will also be introduced for the first time this summer.

At the far end of the room was a counter set up, it seemed, for a high school laboratory. “I flunked chemistry in college,” Frank said, “I should have paid a lot more attention.” The science of winemaking is precise, the winemaker always seeking the perfect pH, sugar and acid levels.

Of course, it’s important to note the winery is anything but dormant through the cold months. Two full-time employees and two part-time employees work in the facility, tending the tanks and bottling the wines for sale. This year there is much less work to be done. A late

hard frost in May of 2010 killed the buds of all the vines on the farm. The winery is expected to produce only about 40% of typical production. A risky business indeed, but it seems Watts Roost is still reaping the awards of their 2007 vintage, and all is still well.

Frank pointed to a tall narrow machine standing amongst the tanks. “This, he boasted, “is the finest piece of equipment we have.” It was a semi-automatic corker that could cork 550 bottles per hour. He explained that with the manual corker they’d previously used, he could only bear to operate it for about 5 minutes.



Top Left: Barbara Tuckwiller behind the counter in the tasting room, Top Right: Frank Tuckwiller examining grapes on the vine, Right Middle: Frank Tuckwiller with the tanks, Bottom right: The grapes begin the fermentation process

“I had to hire a 25-year-old just to get the wines corked,” he admitted.

The manufacturing facility led directly to the smaller tasting room. Here Barbara’s cheerful flare for folk art was again evident. The rough-hewn plank walls were hung with bright paintings. A tasting counter stretched along one end of the room, and on the wall behind the counter hung a yoke that had been found in the old barn on the property. The ironwork on the yoke was hand forged, presumably there on the farm generations earlier.

The winery and tasting room are open to the public Thursday through Saturday from 1p.m. until 6p.m. Any visitor will receive a tour of the grounds and facility and can taste anywhere from 8 to 10 wines for \$3.

The tasting fee also includes a Watts Roost wine glass. I would argue the best way to enjoy this wine is in the tasting room on the site of the vineyard with the rolling hills and adjacent farms encircling you. Of course, you can find these wines locally all over Greenbrier County and throughout the rest of the state at an ever-lengthening list of locations.

After my tour of the winery, we returned to the Hen House to sit down for dinner. We poured ourselves glasses of the Muddy Creek Mountain Chelois and enjoyed the chili. The Tuckwillers have happily fallen into the wine business and have made Watts Roost Vineyard one of those gems of the Greenbrier Valley.

And, they quite enjoy their most recent line of work. Barbara and Frank joyfully revel in the fact that they are able to share their wine at festivals and have the pleasure of spending the afternoon talking to such interesting people as a flight crew from Ghana, a Business Economics professor and a beekeeper, all in one busy afternoon.

“In the Marine Corps you can only talk to Marines about the Marines; in the air-conditioning business you talk to people in the air-conditioning business, but in the wine business you can talk wine with anyone,” Frank explained.

If only to myself, I lifted my glass to the magic of places like Watts Roost Vineyard and to a fast approaching spring and no late frost.

For more information on visiting the winery or picking up a bottle at a shop near you, visit [www.wattsroostvineyard.com](http://www.wattsroostvineyard.com).

## *In vino veritas*

