

Jewel Of The Blue Ridge Vineyard

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(Photo: Courtesy of Rachel Brownlee)

Chuck and Jeannie Blethen claim they are retired, but the humor in this is clear in their sprawling, self-established working homestead and vineyard. The welcoming couple own Jewel Of The Blue Ridge Vineyard, recently earning their titles as the first to successfully breed a cold-hardy Scuppernong, a white variety of the native Muscadine grape, which is very big news within the viticulture network and beyond.

A challenge to commercial breeding, the recently named Katuah Scuppernong is a valued discovery for this mountainous region.

We begin our visit on one of the coldest days of the season, with a warm welcome and tour of the Blethen's home, with its antique wood burning cook stove, hemlock countertops and refurbished family heirloom furniture, all of which the couple has built or restored themselves.

Standing in the kitchen next to the toasty cookstove, I ask Chuck about his grape-breeding journey since making Madison County home 8 years ago. It has not been a simple one.

The couple chose the property with grapes in mind. Both grew up on working the land and had a desire to be self-sufficient after moving here. Chuck's passion has always been grapes, and Jeannie holds a primary interest in all things gardening and agriculture. Additional to the vineyard, the two tend a vegetable garden, a flock of chickens, rabbits, Scottish Highland cows and two donkeys.

"I came to the area first, and when Chuck saw it, he fell in love with it too," Jeannie says. Why this particular piece of property? "The view and the south facing slopes, because we knew we wanted to do grapes," she says. The couple enjoy a nearly 360-degree display of peaks.

"Wineries and vineyards are long-term investments," Chuck explains. To become established, "It takes seven years, eight years, 10 years," he says, "But what we've done is a little bit different here." The couple maintains their "day jobs" outside of their efforts on the farm to help support the vineyard's growth.

"When we came here, I kept looking at these mountains, and I have traveled all over the world," Chuck says. "I mean, I remember traveling all over the planet and watching mountains like this, with the climate we have, covered with grape vines — Italy, Austria, Germany, France, New Zealand," asking the question "why aren't there grapes in Madison County?"

The likely answer is tobacco, the traditional primary cash crop for the region. "We have 19,000 people here, 25,000 tobacco farms — that tells you how important tobacco used to be," said Chuck.

But tobacco has been experiencing the end of its economic worth, leaving many with the question of what to replace it with. "When we first started, I got the idea of growing cold-hardy grapes," Chuck explains. "We found about maybe 65 varieties that were suitable for growing in this altitude and in these temperatures and so forth, so we put in some test plants around the counties, about 14 different kinds of grapes."



Chuck and Jeannie Blethen on a patio at their Jewel Of The Blue Ridge Vineyard in Madison County. (Photo: Courtesy of Rachel Brownlee)

Although many of the cold-hardy grapes they were experimenting with showed success, Chuck and Jeannie had not considered the Muscadine because of its reputation. >From their understanding of grapes, Chuck says, “they were not supposed to be here. But once we discovered them we kept hearing stories...”

Jeannie jumps in: “They were literally growing in the woods in Hot Springs.”

Why an interest in the Muscadine? “The Muscadine is a native southern grape,” Chuck explains. “It grows from Texas to Florida up to Eastern Delaware — high humidity, high temperature grapes.”

But Chuck said the extension service has always maintained Muscadines should not be planted in the mountains due to the extreme temperatures associated with higher elevations.

In terms of wine, Chuck explains why high elevation grapes are prized. He had witnessed grapes growing at an altitude of 8,600 feet in the Alps region of Italy, but these grapes have been climatized over the course of a century or two.

“I have also been to Mendoza states in Argentina, growing cabernet sauvignon grapes at 9,800 feet, and in most Argentinian wines they brag on the label about elevation because the characteristic of higher elevation means more ultraviolet radiation and thicker grape skin.”

Why would this be something growers are after? “The thicker the skin, the more color you can extract in the wine making process, and down there they make wines so dark it is almost like ink, it almost stains the glass — that’s how dark they can get the wines, because they are growing the grapes at such a high altitude,” Chuck explains. “For serious vinophiles, that’s a big deal.”

We talk about the character of a grape vine and what its seasonal process includes in terms of winter survival.

“Cold-hardiness means you have plants that will withstand the variations in temperatures like we have here in the mountains and still be able to survive and not just survive but thrive come spring,” Chuck explains.

After stumbling upon the success in the wild, Chuck proceeded to reach out to those in the viticulture field to confirm what he and Jeannie were seeing. Sure enough their discovery was validated despite all the doubts.

“We waited until fall, went out and picked some grapes from the patch we had found, came home and Jeannie made some pies and preserves, and took it over to the extension office.”

After confirmation from the extension, it took Chuck six months to convince the viticulture world his discovery of a cold-hardy Muscadine was not only growing but thriving in the mountains of WNC. Afterward he and Jeannie began breeding and

planting in earnest.

Then it wasn't until four years ago he and Jeannie began the long process of breeding a cold-hardy Scuppernong, the white variety of Muscadines, after the seeds from wine-making were dispersed and began sprouting on their property that following spring.

Skeptical about the vines — Chuck insisted grapes are like apples in that they don't breed true from seeds — Jeannine went ahead and transplanted the seedlings to pots to see what happened. Of the 100 volunteers, 50 had the cold-hardy gene, returning after the winter. Of these 50, Chuck planted them once again around the county.

After several years, when the vines began to flower, Chuck could identify three of the 50 as self-pollinating. This was the grape they were looking for. Those three self-pollinating vines marked the beginning of their current efforts and have since been used to painstakingly breed the Kautah Scuppernong, available for sale this spring.

As we talk, it is clear Chuck and Jeannie take pride in not only honoring the past but preserving the future of Western North Carolina through the work they do. Chuck sees his cold-hardy Scuppernong — which he has named the Katuah Scuppernong, due to its birth in the Katuah bio-region of western NC (Katuah is the old Cherokee name for the southern Appalachian Mountains) — as a possible replacement crop for tobacco, encouraging local tobacco farmers to plant some vines each year for eventual income in years to come.

The challenge is, unlike tobacco, which can be planted in the spring and harvested the same calendar year for profit, grape vines take years before they produce enough to be a cash crop. But Chuck believes these grapes have the potential to become a secure replacement regardless. Because they are native, his Katuah Muscadines grow without the common viticulture interventions. Muscadines require no spray, no watering and no fertilizer.

Walking through the vineyard, Chuck points to his commercial grape varieties and says in the summer months they are literally weighted down to the ground with molds and disease. He tells his students to look to the remainder of the vineyard planted with native Muscadine vines and notice the difference. The native species do not succumb to the pests and diseases common to popular cultivars.

Currently in the process of converting from an organic to a biodynamic vineyard, the couple maintain a swath of flowering perennials along each row of grapes to encourage beneficial insects and add extra health to the vines.

Now a teaching vineyard, the couple devotes their time to passing on their knowledge to visitors and students, walking them through the vineyards and giving lectures on why this particular grape holds such a promising future.

A toast to its success.

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Chuck & Jeannie are founding members of the French Broad Vignerons, a group of grape-growers and wine makers in western NC who meet monthly to share their knowledge of wine making and grape growing. Chuck is on the board of directors of the North Carolina Muscadine Grape Association and is the western regional director. He also hosts a weekly radio show on community radio in Madison County called "The Mountain Grapevine" that features interviews with the movers and shakers in the viticulture industry in WNC.

Information about the availability of the Katuah Muscadines and Katuah Scuppernongs is available on the Jewel of the Blue Ridge website, www.JeweloftheBlueRidge.com.

JEANNIE'S MUSCADINE GRAPE-HULL PRESERVES



Jeannie's muscadine grape-hull preserves. *(Photo: Courtesy of Rachel Brownlee)*

4 pounds (2 quarts) Muscadines or Scuppernongs

1 box Sure-Jell

3 tablespoons lemon juice

7 1/2 cup sugar

Wash grapes. Slip skins from grapes and put in a separate pot. Bring pulp to a boil; simmer 5 minutes, Rub pulp through strainer or put through food mill to remove seeds. Coarsely chop skins. Combine deseeded pulp with skins and simmer 15-20 minutes or until skins are tender being careful not to scorch. Refrigerate overnight. Next day, dissolve Sure-Jell in grapes. Add lemon juice. Bring to a hard boil, then add sugar at once. Boil hard for 1 minute. Remove from heat. Stir and skim 5 minutes. Pack in hot sterile jars. Makes 9 half-pints.