

# Jewel of the Blue Ridge Vineyard: Living with Grapes

BY HANNAH FURGUIELE

It is no accident that Chuck Blethen and his wife Jeannie chose to build a home and locate their Jewel of the Blue Ridge Vineyard (JBRV) on a southeastern hillside in Madison County. The Blethens have 30 years of experience with organic viticulture, specializing in the growing of cold-hardy Katauh muscadine grapes, and they know the importance of the early morning sun and the value of living with grapes.

“I love living with the grape, to see the life cycle of the vines as they grow,” Chuck Blethen says. “Annual spring pruning makes it a very hands-on crop, and I relish watching each year’s crop grow from microscopic blooms to full size fruit.”

As they transition to biodynamics, a type of organic agriculture that supports high yields and healthy land, knowing the cycles and season

is vital. Unlike traditional grapes grown with pesticides and herbicides, or even organic growing methods that employ organic counterparts to traditional means, biodynamic viticulture sees the vineyard as a sustainable living system and aims to keep a balance through careful attention and soil preparations.

One of the key elements in biodynamics is known as “horn manure” and requires farmers to bury a cow’s horn filled with manure during key times in the season. At JBRV, the Blethens incorporate compost and manure from their chickens, rabbits and Highland cows who happily graze on green hilly pastures.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Madison County was the leading producer of burley tobacco in the country. The Tobacco Buyout in 2004 was a watershed event that reshaped

the landscape and the community, requiring farmers to diversify and change or give up farming altogether. Blethen believes that while grapes don’t produce as quick a turnaround as tobacco, they may be one piece in a complex solution to moving mountain agriculture forward.

“We have been working with several folks to get firm data on vineyard production here in the mountains,” he says. “Our preliminary results indicate that we should be able to have a comparable crop value per acre. That would make these special cold-hardy

muscadines a good alternative for local farmers.”

In Western North Carolina, farmers have traditionally planted fertile bottomlands and sent livestock up hills to forage on brush and mast. Early growers discovered that grapes grown on steep, rocky hillsides produced better wine. The stress of trying to thrive is actually a key ingredient to a quality wine grape.



Jeannie and Chuck Blethen. Photo by Hannah Furgiele

This makes Madison County’s steep hills a perfect fit.

The Blethens completed renovations on a new teaching facility this year, and look forward to sharing the space with students through workshops. Students will have opportunities to learn through hands-on practice in the teaching vineyard. In the greenhouses they will witness the patience required in breeding grapes and hear of the great success the couple had in developing the first ever cold-hardy Scuppernong Muscadine from the seeds of grapes they picked and planted in 2011. After succeeding with the Katauh Muscadine, a red variety, they were determined to try for a Scuppernong, a white muscadine.

“I knew that someplace in those 400 pounds there had to be at least one cold-hardy grape seed,” says Blethen. “In the third year, when they started blooming,





*Vines in the greenhouse*

I was so excited I grabbed my magnifying lens and went out in the field. I'll never forget the moment I was sitting there thinking to myself, I am now seeing something that nobody else has seen—a cold-hardy scuppernong muscadine."

The Blethens invite visitors and students to their classes, where they discuss everything from planning

and planting a vineyard to pruning vines and making value-added products. Offering careful guidance that comes from years of experience—planting, observing and learning—they are excited to cultivate the next generation of winemakers and grape growers.

*Learn more about vineyard visits and workshops at [jeweloftheblueridge.com](http://jeweloftheblueridge.com) or by calling 828.380.9066.*