

'Grape Expectations'



Another vintage year expected for Yadkin Valley vines

By JASON REAGAN

Don't expect too much winter wrath on the grapes of Yadkin Valley.

Experts predict a relatively productive growing season for Valley vineyards as long as Old Man Winter doesn't return in the spring.

Due to relatively dry conditions last summer and into early fall (perfect for growing grapes) and a not-too-cold winter, the vino forecast should match 2010's vintage harvest.

"Winter has been fine as far the vines go," said Gill Giese, a viticulture instructor at Surry Community College.

But an early thaw could uncork an unwelcome meteorological hazard.

"The only danger [for Yadkin vineyards] would be if we get a warm spike in mid-April and it freezes again," said Rick Conley, director of the viticulture department at Appalachian State University.

"That kind of winter injury can be quite devastating," he said, adding it's too early to make long-term crop forecasts.

UNWELCOME DROPS

For most winery owners, the greatest threat to their precious crop falls from the sky.

"The more rain you have, the worse it is," said Matthew Mayberry, owner of Brushy Mountain Winery in Elkin. Increased moisture dilutes the sugar levels in the grape which can make for a sour crop.

"If you have a drought like we did in 2007, the wine crop is excellent," he said.

Most Yadkin Valley wine grapes --- about 70 percent --- are in the French *vinifera* group; just the right variety to thrive in the loamy, dry soils of the valley.

As winter sets in, the buds, which sprout in the summer and early fall, remain dormant and, unless temperatures drop to record sub-zero digits, are typically unaffected by snow and ice.

"It looks really good," Conley said. "It was a very productive season," he added. "It was dry and that's always good for grapes."

FINE FOR THE VINES

Several factors come together to continue making the valley "good for grapes."

Due to the geography of the Yadkin Valley, most west-bound storms are diverted north of the region when they hit the Yadkin River Basin and then miss the vines.

Conley said the Yadkin region has less than 180 rainy days per year; a key requirement for growing healthy grapes.

The success of the Yadkin Valley American Viticulture Area (North Carolina's first federally approved AVA) not only stems from the soil and ideal climate but also grows better every year due to a vital knowledge base.

Surry Community College, located in Dobson, as well as Appalachian State University in Boone, both offer top-rated viticulture and enology degree and certificate programs. By the way, viticulture is the study of grape-harvesting and cultivation while enology covers all the other aspects of wine-making.

Even as experts uncork new ways to keep Yadkin grapes happy, perhaps it's not inappropriate to remember the words of Robert Louis Stevenson.

"Wine is bottled poetry."

If that's true, the Yadkin Valley may just produce hundreds of pages of sweet, succulent sonnets this year.

