



Ready to harvest sustainable profits

Growers poised to create wine country in the Ag Reserve

By Agnes Blum
Writer for Conservation Montgomery

Growing up on his dad's farm, Robert Butz was surrounded by Montgomery County's bounty. Peaches? Sure. Apples? You betcha. Corn, wheat, soy, Montgomery County had it. But nowhere in sight were grapes that might become a nice glass of Bordeaux or a crisp Chardonnay. Now that Butz is farming the land, he hopes to change that.

Last spring he and his wife planted five acres of vines on their Windridge Farm in the hopes of selling them to local wineries.

The farm, located on Sugarland Road, sits in the heart of the county's 93,000-acre agricultural reserve. The reserve was created by the the county council in 1980 in an effort to promote conservation of rural areas and farmland. The reserve, which makes up almost a third of the county, runs along the county's northern, western, and eastern borders. Today there are more than 550 farms in the reserve, according to the county, and the majority are family-run.

The past 20 years have seen a boom in the wine industry in neighboring areas, especially in Virginia. Loudoun County has 27 wineries and Frederick County has seven, but Montgomery County is home to just one: Sugarloaf Mountain Winery.

That may be changing thanks to a new zoning amendment passed in July this year, which allows farmers such as Butz to grow grapes and sell them to someone else to make into wine. Previously, farmers could not sell their produce to be processed somewhere else, and not everyone who wants to grow grapes also wants to open a winery.

That change in zoning was much needed, said Jeremy Criss, manager of Montgomery County Agricultural Services.

"The county introduced it to recognize that the definition of a winery was somewhat restrictive, recognize how the industry functions," Criss said. "Normally, there's a lot of buying and selling between the producers of grapes in this area. We need many owners."

The change will strengthen small farms and the ag reserve in general, said Caroline Taylor, Executive Director of the Montgomery Countryside Alliance, a non-profit dedicated to promoting and preserving rural Montgomery County. Family farms can now add grapes to their roster of crops, Taylor said, and make some money selling the harvest to local wineries.

"Anything that promotes additional production of consumable products is a good thing," Taylor said. "It's expensive to grow grapes to start a winery. Really what will result is a family farm can grow grapes as well as having their CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). It's diversification."



Ag Reserve Photo: [Montgomery Countryside Alliance](#)



Photo: Montgomery Countryside Alliance

And diversifying can mean the difference between keeping a farm going or having to sell the land. Farming in Montgomery County has been steadily dropping in the last decade, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Montgomery County is not the easiest place to grow grapes. The humidity can wreak havoc on the fruits, and all the pests and diseases that attack garden roses also attack grapes -- black spot fungus, powdery mildew and Japanese beetles, to name a few -- making growing grapes organically in this region virtually impossible.

Butz says his farm uses an array of approaches in addition to a spray regimen, such as trellising the grapes for better aeration and plucking leaves so the sun can get through to dry the fruit.

“We use a number of tools,” Butz said. “While humidity is the problem, it’s also what could make wines here more rewarding. Just like strawberries grown here have character and complexity.”

Butz pointed out that one of the great wine regions in the world -- Bordeaux in France -- is relatively humid.

Sugarloaf Mountain Vineyard has had great success with the Bordeaux grapes it has grown. It has won awards every year since it began, such as the 2009 American Wine Society’s Commercial Wine Competition award for the winery’s 2007 Cabernet Franc Reserve.

Still, Montgomery County, and Maryland in general, lag behind neighboring Virginia in the wine world. There are 61 licensed wineries in Maryland, although fewer than that are fully operational. Virginia is home to 229 wineries.

There is no inherent reason that Virginia would make better wine country, Butz said, adding that Maryland has as good, if not better conditions. So if it’s not the terroir, what is it? “Virginia has done an amazing job helping people set up vineyards,” Butz said. [Editor’s note: *Terroir* is the French word that describes the unique combination of location, climate and soil of a piece of land (growing grapes) that give a unique flavor to the wine grown there.]

Virginia makes nourishing and promoting its wine industry a priority, said Kevin Atticks, executive director for the Maryland Wineries Association. The state doesn’t stop at helping wine makers set up; it offers support throughout the whole process, including promoting wine tourism.

“They do a better job. The investment from the state, Virginia invests over \$2 million a year, but the Maryland budget is zero,” Atticks said. “In Virginia, wineries are allowed. Period. There is no discussion at the county level.”

In contrast, some Maryland locales have been the setting for fierce fights between those who want to grow grapes and residents who are afraid of the noise and traffic that growth brings. Last year, after a contentious struggle with residents who were upset about the potential of increased crowds on rural roads, Howard County finally passed a bill allowing farm wineries.

Here in Montgomery County, the zoning change approved in July allows wineries in the agricultural reserve to host nine days of ticketed or cover-charge events each year without requesting special permission. That change in zoning, which left bruised feelings among some locals, can help growers offset some of the massive expense of wine-making.

“Stuff like that is very important to wineries. It’s a retail business,” Butz said. “There is no way a grower in Maryland can compete with a grower in Chile on a bottle to bottle basis, with zero cost labor, zero environmental regulation.”

Butz may be years away from sipping the first glass of wine made from his own grapes --including Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Bordeaux, Seyval and Chardonel -- but he holds out hope that this labor of love will deliver.

“I think it has promise. It’s ridiculously expensive, time consuming, labor intensive,” Butz said. “But if you do it right a productive vineyard can last 50 years.”