

# Just Like Old Times: Wine making at Monticello Vineyards & Winery

**Florida's only organic vineyard is right around the corner**

Text and photos by Kitty Kerner

When you think about U.S.-made wine, Florida certainly isn't the first state that comes to mind. But it was here that the first wine production of the New World actually took place. French Huguenots tried to establish European bunch grapes in Florida in the 1560s, but soon they had to watch their entire grape harvest fall victim to Pierce Disease, a deadly bacterial infection. Florida's climate with its heat and humidity proved too much for the traditional European grapevines (*Vitis vinefera*).

The settlers found plenty of wild Muscadine grapes (*Vitis rotundifolia*), though, which are native to the Southeast. The almost perfectly round grapes with their thick skins are well adapted to Florida's climate and soils and are much more resistant to the various fungal and mold-borne diseases that can affect grapes in this area. In addition, Muscadines are highly aromatic and juicy, making them a perfect choice for juicing and wine production. Their thick, tough skins and large seeds have prevented them from becoming popular as table grapes, but if you develop a taste for that typical "crunch," you're in for one sweet treat!

Florida has eleven wineries, stretching from the Panhandle to the Caloosahatchee River, yet the Monticello Vineyards & Winery is the only certified organic one. Besides 18 varieties of Muscadine grapes on 10 acres, owner Cynthia Conolly grows other organic fruit

here, mostly sold on a U-pick basis. She runs her farm, Ladybird Organics, practically as a one-woman show, with only some seasonal and part-time help. "I used to subsidize the farm with my day job at the state, since it just wasn't enough for me to live on," Cynthia recalls. But this year she took the

ways. And I also plan on attending a lot of festivals and special events this season, to become more known locally."

The biggest immediate event for her is the annual grape harvest for the wine making, which usually takes places on the two weekends around Labor Day. Cynthia relies heavily on friends and volunteer helpers, who come and spend time in the field to help with the centuries-old process of wine making. "This year I have a lot of new vines that are carrying grapes for the first time, so it's going to be hard to tell exactly when they will ripen." Whenever the grapes are ripe you have to be ready — there's only a small window to do a lot of work.

Since Cynthia's wine-making operation is still fairly small (she bottled around 230 gallons of wine last year), mechanization is often an option. "It's not easy to find equipment for small wineries; most of it is configured for large commercial operations," Cynthia comments. That's why every year her small harvest crew has used a hand-cranked grape crusher and wine press with a lot of old-fashioned, hard labor. Last year, though, a water-driven bladder press was added, and this year a motorized grape crusher will help to make the process more efficient.

"Getting through this harvest is my biggest challenge at the moment," says Cynthia, and adds that she hopes to be better prepared this year. "Organizing a large crew of seasonal helpers and being the only person who really knows the entire process of wine making inside and out puts quite a burden on you." After a moment's thought she adds: "But this is also the time of year I enjoy the most. I get to meet new people and despite the huge mountain of work, it's a fun time."

If you'd like to be part of the time-honored experience of grape picking (plus enjoy all-you-can-eat organic Muscadines!) and look behind the scenes of a local small wine-making operation, consider helping out at this year's harvest. At the very least, you'll gain some hard-earned respect for small farming and locally made wine.



The rows are long, but with good company the grape harvest can be a pleasant chore.

plunge and became a full-time farmer and viticulturist. "I really love it," says Cynthia, although she concedes that the shaky financial situation is pretty scary at times. "My future rests on this crop and on how well I do with this upcoming harvest."

Marketing her product will be her main focus this year. Expanding the fresh fruit sales — to local health food stores, for example — is high on the list, as are starting a Web site for wine sales and getting more customers to visit the farm either to pick fresh grapes or to taste and buy wine. "I'm working on getting signs set up at the high-



Wine making the traditional way with a wooden hand-cranked press at the Monticello Vineyards and Winery

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**Join the Muscadine Grape Harvest  
at Monticello Vineyards & Winery!**

**August 27 & 28**, from 8:30 a.m.: red grape harvest  
**September 2 & 3**, from 8:30 a.m.: white grape harvest

**Sept. 3, 7 p.m.:** Wine tasting at New Leaf Market. If you have helped picking, this is the time to wind down and enjoy the "fruits of labor." And if you haven't, it is a great opportunity to try a local organic wine. Snacks provided.

**October 9:** Tour & wine tasting at Monticello Vineyards & Winery

**For more info**, contact Cynthia Conolly at (850) 997-7224 or email [clcfarm@aol.com](mailto:clcfarm@aol.com).

The winery is located at 1211 Waukeenah Hwy, Monticello. **Directions:** I-10 east from Tallahassee, exit #225. Go 3 miles north on US 19 towards Monticello. Turn west (left) on CR 259, the Waukeenah Highway. The farm is 1 mile down the road on the left and is marked with both a **Monticello Vineyards & Winery** sign and a **Ladybird Organics** sign. From Monticello, take US 19 south about 2 miles, and turn west (right) on CR 259.



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