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Feature: McRitchie Cider

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Apple of Their Eye

Black Limbertwig, Grimes Golden, Newtown Pippin, Roxbury Russet. The names of heirloom Southern apples roll off Patricia McRitchie's tongue as she recites the 20 or so varieties that she and her husband, Sean, train up trellises at their winery in the Yadkin Valley of North Carolina. Alongside the five acres of grapevines that line up like soldiers on the hillsides around their tasting room, 500 dwarf apple trees offer up their fruit to McRitchie Winery & Ciderworks.



The McRitchie estate vineyards are farmed using sustainable methods on three discrete vineyard sites. (Photo: McRitchie Winery & Ciderworks/JSinclair)

In addition to producing some lovely, clean, crisp wines—like their best-selling Ring of Fire, a fruit-forward Bordeaux blend of Merlot, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc—the McRitchies craft small batches of hard, sparkling cider. “It’s always been in my mind to make cider under my own label,” says Sean. “After all, producing cider is just winemaking with apples instead of grapes.”

As any winemaker will tell you, good wine requires sound rootstock—and Sean McRitchie claims clusters of that. He grew up in McMinnville, Oregon, where his father was the first paid (non-owner) professional winemaker in Oregon at Sokol Blosser. As a teenager, Sean worked in the wine cellar, washing out tanks, racking wines, and performing other chores. “I found working in the wine industry to be fun, interesting, creative work,” says Sean. It seemed inevitable when he caught the bug himself.

Sean aged his winemaking skills at Domaine Chandon, a renowned French producer of sparkling wines in Napa Valley, for eight years before wandering off to work in vineyards in Germany, Australia and the Alsace region of France. Eventually, he landed back in Oregon. From there, in 1998, Sean and Patricia moved to North Carolina to oversee the construction and planting of the nascent Shelton winery and vineyard in Dobson.

It was a far cry from the renowned Willamette Valley wine region in Oregon to the Yadkin River's humid basin, where the most productive grapes are the muscadines and scuppernongs native to the Carolinas. “We came to North Carolina for this project because we’re adventurous,” admits Sean. “And the Yadkin Valley reminded us of what Oregon was like back in the 1980s. There was more space to chart your own path.” And, several years later, that is exactly what they did.

In 2004, the McRitchie's planted their first vines on the 23 acres of land they purchased in Thurmond, North Carolina, 12 miles north of Elkin. The winery followed two years later, and the tasting room opened in 2007. Here, the couple realized their vision of, as Patricia puts it, “creating our own intimate style of winery focusing on sustainable farming methods and the best quality products we can source.”



*Sean and Patricia McRitchie grew up in Oregon and Washington wine country.
(Photo: McRitchie Winery & Ciderworks/JSinclair)*

You could be pulling up to someone's rural home when you enter the driveway to the McRitchies' tasting room off Highway 21. If you're lucky, Fiona, the family's affable black lab mix, will meet your car and lead you, her tail wagging, into the small, natural-light-filled tasting room. Inside, at the long farm table or the small counter, Patricia herself will guide you through a tasting of McRitchie wines and ciders.

The process of making cider mimics that of producing wine. After selecting the apples from a mélange of heirloom and hybrid varieties that the McRitchies source completely from North Carolina, the fruit is ground in a press. Sean then ferments the juice from each type of apple separately in

stainless-steel tanks for two to three weeks. All the juice is filtered before being blended. "We do a lean, dry style of cider, without added sugars or flavorings," notes Sean, a self-proclaimed purist. "Ours is an apple-forward, wine-style cider." He produces only about 3,000 gallons of cider a year, which, like McRitchie wines, are distributed only in North Carolina.

The only winery in the state to make both wine and hard cider, McRitchie Winery & Ciderworks turns out both a dry and an off-dry cider (the latter and sweeter of the two has only 1.5% residual sugar), and plans to make a pear cider this year. "Our cider is a clean, subtle expression of apples," says Sean, who likens his sparkling libation to the sharp, clear cider produced in Brittany, France.

Their timing is fortuitous, as cider is on the rise. A beloved beverage in America's early days, cider became the darling of colonial dinner tables after it was discovered that apples grew better in the New England soil than did the grains required to make beer. By the middle of the 18th century, the average resident of Massachusetts was downing 35 gallons of cider a year. Sadly, cider's popularity fizzled out in the early 1900s as beer-loving German immigrants made their way to the Midwest, where grains flourished. Today, however, cider is enjoying a comeback. In 2012, cider sales jumped 60%, capturing the attention of large beverage producers.

So, as apple season peaks and holiday festivities approach, why not share a celebratory toast with friends and family by raising a flute of sparkling cider, McRitchie style?

McRitchie Winery & Ciderworks

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336-874-3003. www.mcritchiewine.com.

For more about Yadkin Valley wineries and places to stay, contact: visitwinstonsalem.org.

Cider Pairings

A food-friendly beverage, cider complements a wide array of dishes. Here are some of Patricia McRitchie's favorite pairings:

- North Carolina barbecue (pulled pork and vinegar-based sauce) with McRitchie Hard Cider (semi-sweet)
- Herbed roasted turkey and apple-sausage stuffing with McRitchie Dry Hard Cider
- Cider-braised pork loin with McRitchie Hard Cider
- Charcuterie and cheese plate (including hard cheeses like Manchego and English cheddar) with McRitchie Dry Hard Cider
- Baked Brie with fig preserves and McRitchie Hard Cider
- Egg, ham and cheese breakfast casserole with McRitchie Hard Cider

