

The Grape Escape

A snapshot of six wineries in Georgia's "Napa Valley"

By Alan Sverdlik and Cindy Klinger

The grapevine is climbing the jagged foothills of northeast Georgia, covering fields of red clay with a leafy carpet and luring Mercedes and Beamers to places where only pickups once dared to roam.

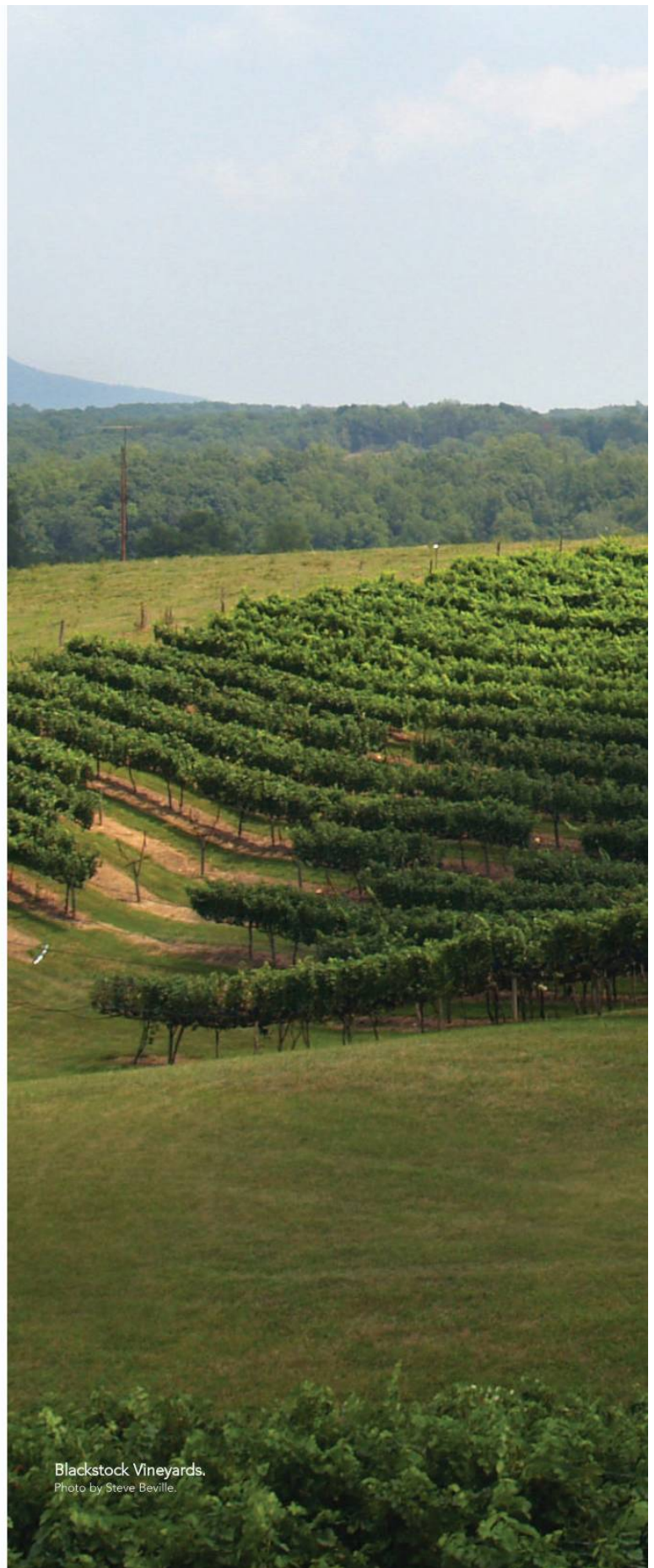
"The wine industry outside of California, Washington, Oregon and New York tended to be a very small cottage industry, almost a home industry, one step beyond a hobby," says Leon Adams, author of "Wines of America." "I'm happy to report that most of the southern states have blossomed with vineyards and wineries. In Georgia, they've crossed that fine line from pastime to small business."

The latest estimates value the state's winemaking sector at somewhere between \$15 and \$20 million, still miniscule when contrasted with "Big Wine," as it's called in northern California's wine-growing region. Those numbers do not reflect the hospitality dollars generated when Chardonnay-sipping tourists stay over and dine in destinations like Lumpkin County, which vintner Doug Paul, who founded Three Sisters Vineyards outside Dahlonega, describes as Georgia's Napa Valley.

Considering the dry passions of religious conservatives, who approve of grapes as long as they're not fermented, the state's devoutly conservative highlands may seem like an unlikely locale for Georgia's nouveau viticulture. But there is a long tradition in the state of making home wine, usually from the gooey sweet scuppernong or muscadine, both native grapes. "That's what people remember—their aunt's or uncle's or grandfather's muscadine wine," says Mildred Carver, a regular at the tastings hosted by the Persimmon Creek cultivators in Clayton.

An obscure historical note that rarely gets ink in the wine press suggests that Georgia was one of the first areas to attempt viticulture. In the 1700s, the British Crown sent indentured servants to the southeastern corner of the state to start a wine-producing colony to compete with Europe's Madeira region. Unfortunately, the vines wilted.

Centuries later, wine tastings (most cost \$10 and include between five and eight pourings) have become a prestigious social event for prosperous and sophisticated Atlantans, many of whom travel an hour or more to attend the wineries' weekend soirees. As any veteran restaurant goer knows, there is nothing novel about wine tastings or winemaker dinners per se, since both were inte-



Blackstock Vineyards.
Photo by Steve Beville.

mountain life

