



Try a few sips of local wines at Running Hare Vineyard's tasting pavilion.



Cabernet Sauvignon grapes at Perigeux Vineyards & Winery.

TOBACCO ROAD LEADS TO WINE TRAIL

Story by Barbara Elizabeth Graf and Photography by Robert Tinari

Southern Maryland's agricultural roots — entwined for centuries with the roots of the tobacco plant — run deep and wide. Agriculture formed the foundation of a colonial economy in Southern Maryland more than 300 years ago. Powered by the English crown's desire for tobacco in the 17th century, tobacco plantations sprouted up all along the tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay, which provided access for vessels to carry the product to England's ports. Tobacco became the currency of the Chesapeake in the absence of coin or paper money during the colonial era, establishing agriculture as not only an occupation, but also a way of life for Southern Marylanders. This commodity remained the region's economic bedrock until the latter part of the 20th century when demand for the crop dwindled.

From tobacco to grapes

The early 21st century brought about unprecedented changes to Southern Maryland's agricultural landscape as the tobacco era came to a close. Some farmers opted to participate in the Maryland Tobacco Crop Conversion Program popularly known as the "tobacco buyout" that was implemented in 1999. As a condition of the tobacco buyout, farmers who accepted payments, which were based on former tobacco production, agreed to maintain their property in agricultural

production for their lifetime and transition from growing tobacco to other crops.

The years after the tobacco buyout have brought numerous agricultural ventures to Southern Maryland farms. Viticulture — the cultivation of grapes and grapevines — is one growing choice that is on the rise throughout the region. Brought about in part by the shared vision of former tobacco farmers and a new generation of entrepreneurs seeking to make a positive contribution to the

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The Port of Leonardtown Winery features 10 new stainless steel fermentation and aging tanks.



Wine barrels at Fridays Creek Winery in Owings.

WINE TRAILS



Tim Lewis, owner of Cove Point Winery, pours grapes into the crusher.



Rich Fuller, president of the Southern Maryland Wine Growers Cooperative, prepares to crush the group's first grapes as Leonardtown Mayor J. Harry Norris looks on.



Cove Point Winery is a micro-winery with a small experimental vineyard.

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regional economy, while preserving the traditions of an agricultural way of life, grape cultivation and wine making in Southern Maryland represent a promise to the future.

"Former farming soil is beneficial to growing grapes," said Richard Fuller, president of the Southern Maryland Wine Growers Cooperative. The group is comprised of 15 members, including former tobacco farmers, military veterans, businessmen and professionals representing varying levels of experience in grape cultivation and varying sizes of vineyards. "Most members have an acre," said Fuller, adding that members are growing a variety of grapes, including whites such as Chardonnay, Vidal Blanc and Viognier, and reds such as Barbera, Cabernet Franc, Chambourcin, Merlot and Sangiovese.

St. Mary's County wine grape growers took advantage of a government grant and training program created in 2005 to encourage development of the wine industry in Southern Maryland. The "Southern Maryland Growing Grapes for

Wine Program," administered with tobacco buyout funds by the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission in coordination with the Maryland Cooperative Extension, provided up to 50 percent matching funds for bulk purchases of grapevines that were chosen from a set list based on Southern Maryland growing conditions, according to Fuller. Program participants also attended seminars and workshops geared for Southern Maryland put on by the Maryland Cooperative Extension. "The program was really super," said Fuller. "It was a catalyst to get started. Many of our members got their grapes through it and took the training sessions."

From grapes to wine

Fall in the vineyard means harvest time. It is an exciting season for all wine grape growers, but this fall is especially significant for members of the Southern Maryland Wine Growers Cooperative. "This is when we'll find out if it's all worthwhile," said Fuller, who, along with other coop members, has been instru-

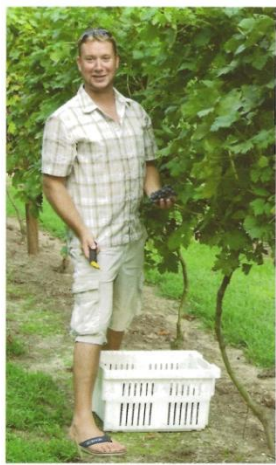


Solomons Island Winery uses fruit from other growers to make a variety of fruit and wine blends.



Chambourcin grapes at Running Hare Vineyard.

mental in bringing about the opening of a winery as a public/private partnership in St. Mary's County. The Port of Leonardtown Winery, located in a former State Highway Administration building on Newtowne Neck Road, is equipped with 10 brand new stainless steel fermentation and aging tanks that accommodate a total of 5,800 gallons. "These are state-of-the-art tanks," said Fuller, pointing out the stainless steel jacketing that allows control of heating and chilling during processing. A separate aging area holds several dozen American oak and French oak barrels. Visitors will be able to view the stainless fermentation tanks and oak aging barrels through large windows placed in the wine tasting room where a video will continuously display vignettes of St. Mary's County vineyards. "We expect to open to the public in the spring of 2010," said Fuller, adding that coop members, under winemaker Patrick Isles' direction, have been busy crushing the winery's very first harvest. "We expect 30 tons of grapes" for the 2009 harvest, said Fuller.



Chris Apple volunteers to help harvest the grapes at Perigeaux Vineyards & Winery.

The Port of Leonardtown Winery is a collaborative effort that was initiated by St. Mary's County with a feasibility study in 2006. "They put some funding aside to help start up a winery if it turned out to be worthwhile," said Fuller. In 2007, area wine grape growers formed the cooperative to work with the St. Mary's County government and make the project a reality. By providing a building and managing renovations, the town of Leonardtown has been an active partner in the project, as well as the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission, the Maryland Cooperative Extension, the Maryland Agricultural & Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation and the Maryland Winery Association.

The Patuxent Wine Trail

Although viticulture and winemaking commenced in Calvert County nearly a decade ago, it is a surprise to some that Calvert County is home to five vineyards with operational wineries that produce Southern Maryland wine for local tasting

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FOLLOW THE PATUXENT WINE TRAIL



Montepulciano grapes being cut off the vine at Perigeaux Vineyards & Winery.

Southern Maryland's Patuxent Wine Trail, which meanders from Owings in northern Calvert County to Solomons Island in the south, showcases an ever expanding variety of award-winning wines.

COVE POINT WINERY

755 Cove Point Road, Lusby, MD 20657
410-326-0949, www.covepointwinery.com
Open Saturday and Sunday from noon to 5:30 p.m.

FRIDAYS CREEK WINERY

3485 Chaneyville Road, Owings, MD 20736
410-286-9463, www.fridayscreek.com
Open Thursday through Monday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

PERIGEAUX VINEYARDS & WINERY

8650 Mackall Road, St. Leonard, MD 20685
410-586-2710, www.perigeaux.com
Open Saturday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Open weekdays by appointment.

RUNNING HARE VINEYARD

150 Adelina Road, Prince Frederick, MD 20678
410-414-8486, www.runningharevineyard.com
Open from April to November on Saturday and Sunday from noon to 5:00 p.m. Open December through March on Sunday from noon to 5:00 p.m.
Open weekdays by appointment.

SOLOMONS ISLAND WINERY

515 Garner Lane, Lusby, MD 20657
410-394-1933, www.solomonsislandwinery.com
Open Tuesday through Sunday from noon to 5:00 p.m.

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and statewide sales distribution. "Many people don't know we're here," said Michael Scarborough, owner of Running Hare Vineyard in Prince Frederick, where six miles of vines cover an eight-acre Tuscan-inspired vineyard one mile off of Adelina Road.

When the group of Calvert winemakers approached Calvert County Economic Development in February and asked for help in establishing a wine trail similar to those in Virginia and Western Maryland, Joyce Baki, tourism specialist, made it happen. "It's a destination concept," said Baki, who provided marketing assistance to promote Southern Maryland's new Patuxent Wine Trail to both locals and out-of-town tourists. "It's not just to do the wineries; it's also to bring tourists to visit other attractions. They come and they will eat someplace and spend the night in our hotels and discover all of the attractions we have in the county."

While tourism is a priority, Baki, who grew up in Calvert County, recognizes the significance of maintaining the area's agricultural heritage. "Vineyards and wineries allow us to keep the land as agricultural," she said. "Three out of five of Calvert's wineries were previously farms—it's important."

Officially rolled out to the public in May, the new Patuxent Wine Trail connects Calvert's five wine establishments from Fridays Creek Winery in northern Calvert County to Solomons Island Winery in the south. The wine trail provides a gratifying feast for the eyes as well as the palate as visitors experience captivating scenery from rolling farmlands to water-side vistas, and sample award-winning vintages that entertain the simplest to the most sophisticated tastes.

Travelers of the Patuxent Wine Trail who choose to begin the tour in the north will find a converted 1920s tobacco barn at Fridays Creek Winery, which is situated on three acres off Chaneyville Road in Owings. Along nearby Fridays Creek, 12 acres of vineyards, planted in varying stages since 2001, supply the winery with such grape varieties as Chambourcin, Petit Verdot, De Chaunac in red and Cuyuga, Traminette and Chardonnay in

white. In all, Fridays Creek Winery, which opened in 2006 by the Cleary family, produces more than 15 wines from grapes grown at the vineyard and from grape juice imported from New York and California.

Proceeding south on the wine trail to Prince Frederick, Running Hare Vineyard is nestled within a stunning private setting of 300 gently rolling acres. What began as a hobby for owner Michael Scarborough in 2002 when he planted 100 vines, became a business enterprise in 2008 when Running Hare opened its vineyard and winery to the public. "My philosophy is to grow what I can grow well and to source in grapes or juice from all over the world to make available the best wines," said Scarborough, who cultivates Chambourcin, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc grapes at the vineyard, and also produces Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay and Sangiovese in the winery.

Moving farther south to Mackall Road in St. Leonard, Perigeaux Vineyards and Winery is Calvert County's first estate winery, according to Mark Flemming, who co-owns the business with John Behun. Planting their first vineyard on 22 farming acres situated between St. Leonard Creek and the Patuxent River in 2002, the business partners released their first vintage for sale to the public in 2006. "We would not bottle and sell until we were ready to use our own estate grapes," said winemaker Behun. After releasing their first vintage, the business partners planted a second vineyard, purchased an additional five acres and now have eight acres under vine. They recently opened a brand new 1,400-square-foot winery on their property where fine Bordeaux-style wines and blends, including Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Zinfandel, Chardonnay and Pinot Gris, are specially hand crafted in small lots only from the vineyard's own estate grapes.

Reaching almost to the southern tip of Calvert County in Lusby, Cove Point Winery on Cove Point Road is situated a short distance from Cove Point

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Lighthouse, Maryland's oldest operational lighthouse. Opened in June 2004 by Tim and Sheryl Lewis, Cove Point Winery is Southern Maryland's first. A micro-winery with a small experimental vineyard, the winery produces wines from out-sourced grapes and fruits. "We are the largest local purchaser of local Southern Maryland fruit," said Tim Lewis. "We buy grapes and other fruit from St. Mary's and Calvert, as well as from all over the state and even out of state." With an aim to please the non-drinker of wine as well as the connoisseur, Tim and Sheryl Lewis produce more than two dozen different wines and fruit-wine blends that include varietals not widely available, such as Symphony, Blaufrankish and Vignoles.

Continuing south, Patuxent Wine Trail travelers will complete their winery tour one mile from Solomons Island at Solomons Island Winery, situated on the shores of Hungerford Creek in Lusby. Opened in 2004 by Ann and Ken Korando, the winery's nine-acre property features a petite vineyard that grows Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon vines. The winery predominantly uses fruit produced by other growers in order to make a wide variety of wines and fruit blends, including Watermelon Rose, Strawberry White Merlot, Blueberry Pinot Noir, Black Raspberry Merlot and others. ♦

For further information on the Patuxent Wine Trail, visit www.patuxentwinetrail.com.

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