



Wine co-op helps transition from tobacco while boosting agri-tourism

## *New life for an old town*



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In the picturesque farmland of historic St. Mary's County in Southern Maryland, a cooperative of wine-grape growers is working to build a new industry that can help take the place of a lost cash crop.

For centuries, the agricultural lifeblood of the county was air-cured tobacco. It grew well in the sandy soil and hot, humid climate and it provided a good living from as little as 30 acres. Fortunes were made from it. In colonial times, tobacco was Maryland's prime export, and its leaves even served as currency.

the small average size of land parcels raises the costs of cultivation and harvesting.

So, with the demise of tobacco, local farmers and rural planners have been searching for high-value cash crops that can take its place. One that offers some hope, interestingly, is catnip. Another is wine.

### Vines replace tobacco

Rich Fuller is a retired civil servant who worked at Patuxent Naval Air Station, on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay in St. Mary's County. He now volunteers at Summerseat Farm, a historic former tobacco plantation, owned by a nonprofit organization, near the county seat of Leonardtown. He's also president of the



*Facing page: Symbolic of the changes occurring in Maryland agriculture, an old tobacco barn provides the backdrop for a vineyard. Above: A site plan for a development that includes not only the co-op's winery (upper right corner), but a park with water access for kayaking and canoeing. USDA photos by Stephen Thompson*

But in 2004, the federal tobacco price-support system came to an end, and with it a way of life. The Maryland cigarette restitution, or "buyout," fund provided 10 years of payments, starting in 2000, to compensate farmers for the loss of their protected tobacco allotments and help them make the transition to new crops. St. Mary's County had the largest number of participants in the program.

Today, only one year before the buyout program begins to expire, tobacco has all but disappeared from the Southern Maryland landscape, with less than 100 acres planted in St. Mary's County. The auction houses that were centers of the industry and of cultural tradition are all closed. The only hint of the crop's former importance is the many curing barns now standing incongruously among fields of corn and soybeans.

But the trouble with corn and other grains is that they are low-value crops, requiring much larger acreages to be profitable. Corn yields are not especially high in the area, and

Southern Maryland Wine Growers Cooperative, an association of 15 viticulturists who are pioneering local wine production.

The cooperative was formed in 2007, after political officials from Leonardtown and the county came to a local group of winegrowers with an offer. They would provide funding and a building for a winery. In return, the winegrowers would help develop wine as a commercial industry — not just as a new livelihood for farmers, but also as a means of making the area more attractive to tourists.

Wineries have proved to be valuable tourist draws in nearby areas. In neighboring Virginia, wine festivals, tastings and vineyard tours draw thousands of visitors every year. Next door to St. Mary's, Calvert County, Md., has established the Patuxent Wine Trail, a tour of five vineyards.

As a tourist attraction, St. Mary's County has a lot going for it. It's only an hour drive from Washington, D.C., and boasts beautiful scenery and a historic past. It includes St.

Mary's City, the first capital of Maryland and the fourth-oldest English settlement in North America. It is also home to a number of other charming small communities. Old lighthouses, plantations, bed-and-breakfasts and small museums dot the landscape.

A sizeable Amish colony adds to the atmosphere, and the wide highway shoulders built for their horse-drawn wagons and carriages attract large numbers of bicyclists every year for the Amish 100 bicycle tour.

The building offered by the town for the winery is a former state highway department maintenance shop. It's located next to an undeveloped park, on the banks of a picturesque creek.

### Winery to anchor park/market development

Laschelle McKay, the town administrator, is supervising the renovation of the building and the development of the property. The plan is to make the winery the anchor of a beautifully landscaped park with a picnic area, nature walk, a demonstration garden and a canoe- and kayak-launching area. A canoe-tour company has announced plans to launch trips from the park, which McKay sees as a welcome complement to the winery (see illustration).

The park will complement other efforts by the town to draw tourists, including the redevelopment of the waterfront; the town originally served as a tobacco port.

Leonardtown boasts a number of restaurants, galleries, shops and a photogenic town square. It also hosts a number of special events throughout the year, including a county fair, a classic car show, crab and oyster festivals, an antique show, a bluegrass music festival and other events that could benefit the winery project — and vice versa.

McKay's current goal is to get the winery operating in time for this year's harvest in September. The landscaping and other construction will take a little longer. She seems proud of the cooperation between county, town and winegrowers in getting the project off the ground. "It's taken us years to get to this point," she says. "But it's finally coming together."

Bob Schaller, in charge of business development for the county and a close collaborator with McKay on the project, shares her satisfaction in the results of the collaboration. The county has put up \$535,000 and the town added \$35,000 for the winery, including the vats and other equipment. To develop the park, a grant of \$200,000 was obtained from the state, matched by \$200,000 from the town.

"We need to diversify our economic base, and agri-

tourism is one way to do that," says Schaller.

This isn't the first agricultural development project on which the county has embarked. The Loveville Produce Auction, also a recent county initiative, is located a few miles down the road. Operated by members of the local Amish community, it is used by more than 50 Amish farmers as a market for their vegetables, cut flowers, nursery plants, firewood, hay, and other products.

Schaller says the auction is succeeding in its goal of encouraging the development of agricultural cash crops to replace tobacco, as it is hoped the winery will do.

### Co-op experimenting with varieties

With the infrastructure taken care of, the co-op's side of the bargain is making the winery work. Each member has contributed a \$2,000 stake and pledged to help run the facility. A \$2,000 investment may not seem like much, but most of the members have up until now been little more than hobbyists, some growing only an acre or two of grapes. For them, going "professional" is a big step.

The vintners did the research and located a source for the winery equipment, but there remains the problem of how to find grape varieties that will grow in local conditions and produce a decent wine.

"This isn't the easiest part of the world to grow wine grapes," Fuller says. "There are a lot of varieties that just don't work. Syrah vines just die. Riesling grapes grow, ripen and then rot immediately. Cabernet Sauvignon vines grow really well here, but they continue to grow late in the fall, and then freeze and die back to the ground when the cold weather comes.

"So, it used to be that people who grew grapes here used hybrids that did well in the climate, but didn't make the best wine," Fuller

continues. "They just got used to the way the wine tasted."

The hot, humid climate also encourages insects, various kinds of fungus, and other pests. Fuller says that precise and timely application of crop protectants is vital for a successful harvest. An untimely rain can disrupt the application schedule and lead to losses. Summerseat farm is currently trying out 15 different vine varieties supplied by the University of Maryland's Cooperative Extension service in a search for the best compromise between hardiness and flavor. All of them must be grafted to resistant American rootstock to survive soil pests. The types that seem to work out best, Fuller says, are those from Italy, including the popular Sangiovese grape,



Co-op members Gerald Byrne, Carolyn Baldwin and Rich Fuller inspect one of Byrne's vineyards. Growing grapes successfully in the region requires vigilance against pests.

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Calif., has tendered an offer to the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Santa Rosa, Calif., for Humboldt Creamery's facilities in Fernbridge and Stockton. Its offer was selected from a number of bids submitted to the court during an auction in mid-June.

The creamery is presently owned by a cooperative of about 40 dairy farmers, while Dairy Farmers of America holds a 25-percent stake. Humboldt also has a facility in Los Angeles, for which bids are being sought.

The company's financial problems became apparent when the former CEO Rich Ghilarducci abruptly resigned last winter. It was then discovered that the company had \$60 million less than the board had thought.

According to an article in the *Times-Standard* newspaper, the creamery's bank could still bid on the assets using credit it is owed, and had not agreed to the sale to Foster Farms as of early July. ■

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## Wine

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used as the main ingredient in Chianti.

"There's nothing wrong with a decent Chianti," he says. "In any case, we won't be turning out wines in the \$60- to-\$70 range. More the \$10- to \$20-a-bottle kind — fun wines."

Much the same way the local Amish farmers help each other out, the co-op members take a communal approach to their business. Member Carolyn Baldwin, an experienced wine-grower, offers advice on disease prevention.

When member Gerald Byrne planted a new vineyard, Baldwin, Fuller and other fellow members turned out to help. "I had to be helped up at the end of the day," chuckles Fuller.

Fuller and his collaborators hope to see a picturesque winery in a gracious park, where canoeists, boaters and tourists can relax after seeing the sights and enjoy a refreshing glass of wine.

## Commentary

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production has increased from 4,500 pounds per cow in 1930 to more than 20,000 today.

This dramatic surge in productivity has been driven by the adoption of modern production and business management practices on the farm, and the ongoing development and implementation of new agricultural technology. These advances have allowed us to expand productivity while protecting the environment, preserving precious resources for generations to come.

## Telling our story

The story of American agricultural productivity is impressive, but ironically it remains largely untold. American farmers are an independent and humble lot, not given to beating their own drum. The fact is, if we'd seen this same kind of progress in the auto industry, we'd all be getting 100 miles per gallon — and we'd have heard plenty about it.

One of the ironies is that as we have learned to do more with less; only about 2 percent of the U.S. population is directly engaged in production agriculture. That means there are fewer people to tell this story. It's no wonder that there is a lack of public understanding about the issues that are critical to our industry.

Today, the discussion of agricultural issues is often driven by well-intentioned people who allow opinion, emotion and even nostalgia to fill "the information gap." As a result, even safe, proven technologies have encountered opposition.

Dr. Norman Borlaug, father of the green revolution and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, put the situation into perspective. Dr. Borlaug believes technology can enable us to feed 10 billion people. But in his words: "The more pertinent question is whether farmers and ranchers will be *permitted* to use this technology." This is a troubling observation, given that 70 percent of the needed increase in global food production will have to come from advancing technologies, according to the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO).

To protect the ability of producers to use safe, proven technologies, those of us involved *in any aspect* of agriculture — producers, cooperatives, agribusinesses, industry organizations, government agencies, academia — must work to educate the public and policymakers about our industry.

As we work to realize the opportunities and meet the challenges ahead, I believe the most important step we can take is to tell our story. Education and understanding can drive public opinion and policy decisions that directly affect producers. It's our responsibility to ensure that these judgments are based on sound science and accurate data — not fads, emotion, politics or social agendas. ■

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Hopefully they will buy some bottles of wine to take home.

"We're counting on selling 80 to 90 percent of our wine at the winery, and some more at local festivals and so forth," he says. "For a winery of our size, we wouldn't be able to make enough profit selling our product at wholesale prices, anyway." He foresees selling to a few local retail outlets, but

"more for publicity purposes," he says.

Schaller, McKay, and the local governments are betting that the winery's customers will also stop by to enjoy local restaurants and patronize other businesses in a revitalized Leonardtown and the surrounding area. It may seem a modest goal, but if successful, it could mean new life for an old community. ■