



Kix Brooks

The country music superstar talks Tennessee, wine and music. BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

With more than 30 million records sold, over 23 No. 1 hit singles, 41 Top 10 singles and more than 75 major industry awards, Kix Brooks, who for 20 years partnered with Ronnie Dunn as country music's highest-selling duo Brooks & Dunn, is a dominant force in the music industry. Now again working solo, the singer/songwriter also hosts the syndicated radio program American Country Countdown, serves on the board of Vanderbilt Children's Hospital, is the local spokesperson for Monroe Harding Children's Home, is the father of two children and has recently leapt into the wine industry as a founding partner of Arrington Vineyards. We talked to the Louisiana native about making wine and the unique spirit of Tennessee.

Your Hillbilly Dixie album has a song titled "Whiskey Do My Talking." When did wine become the vocabulary?

I'm from Louisiana and I think everyone from Louisiana likes to drink—it's kind of the state sport. Twelve years ago I just started ordering better wines at restaurants and it got to where I could tell the difference. The more I drank and studied wine, the more I got into it. I love wine. And once I met somebody that knew how to really make good wine, I decided it might be fun to get into it.

What led to Arrington Vineyards?

I met Fred Mindermann at church. He has a home not too far from mine and has vineyards there. He'd met winemaker

Kip Summers at another Tennessee winery, Beachaven. He and Kip became friends and played around making wine—Kip is a great winemaker and has won a lot of medals. In 2004 they found the land where we are currently located and approached me. I went out, took a look at it and we partnered up.

Why Tennessee?

I live there. If it were in California I could just visit it now and then; that wouldn't be much fun. My understanding is that before Prohibition, Tennessee was the third largest grape-growing state in the nation behind California and New York. The climate and the land I think give Tennessee a lot of potential.

What's Arrington Vineyards' wine style?

When people think 'Tennessee wines' they tend to think of sweet fruit wines and that's not what we do. We do have a fun raspberry wine that we sell a tremendous amount of, but it's the only one not made from grapes. We tend to pull more from the classic California-style of winemaking. Our wines are typically dry.

If you wrote a song about grape farming would it be a tale of heartbreak?

It would be upbeat. The weather has cooperated so far. We had too much rain at the end of the season which caused some rot but maybe to the tune of 10 percent, so compared to other things that can happen to crops it wasn't a devastation by any means—not nearly as bad as the freeze a few years ago. It's just one of the problems of growing fruit in this area, but there are problems growing fruit everywhere.

What's the current status of Arrington Vineyards?

Well it's just rocking and rolling. We had a huge year in 2009 and sold over 11,000 cases and are looking to grow some more. We have 14 different kinds of wine, including a new port. We crushed over 500,000 pounds of grapes this fall. It's a real challenge for a new winery owner to have to try and project growth because this is a product that's not ready for three years—this year we make wine for 2013. The future is yet to be seen.

As someone who has traveled extensively, what do you see as unique to the spirit of Tennessee?

I think Tennessee is probably the friendliest state you can ever imagine. I hear from visitors all the time that folks in the grocery stores will start up a conversation like they've known them forever.

I've been coast to coast and can't tell you there's a prettier state. Tennessee is an extremely diverse state. There's Memphis delta country, Nashville has its country music heritage, in middle Tennessee you have a combination of hills and valleys and beautiful overlooks, the Blue Ridge Mountains you have to see to believe—if you're traveling through Tennessee on the road you have to keep your eyes open for sure.