

The Napa Next Door

Don't be too envious of our California cousins; the North Georgia wilderness teems with great winemakers

TEXT AND IMAGES BY HOPE PHILBRICK

If you love wine country, but you don't want to bother with airport security and long flights, then North Georgia may be the destination you seek. And September's grape harvest season is a great time to go.

"When we're harvesting, we don't turn away volunteers," say John Ezzard and Leckie Smith; along with their spouses, they are co-owners of Tiger Mountain Vineyards & Winery in Tiger, Ga. "Some people come every year, trying their personal best to pick more than they did the previous year," Smith says. "If you want to help us pick grapes, all you need is enthusiasm and comfortable shoes. If you've got purple work clothes, wear them," she adds with a laugh.

Husband-and-wife teams seem to be doing quite well in North Georgia. Sonny and Mary Ann Hardman own Persimmon Creek, a 55-acre estate with a winery located underneath a French country farmhouse in Clayton. Their first vintage Riesling took a bronze medal at the 2003 Atlanta Wine Summit.



Frogtown Winery winemaker Jordan Fiorentini

Uncharted Terroir

"It's a new industry here," says Jordan Fiorentini, winemaker for Frogtown winery, located near Dahlonega. Fiorentini holds a master's degree in winemaking from the University of California, Davis. "In other places, like California, all the regulations, laws and mentalities about wine are already set. Here, it's an open book," she says. "It's exciting."

Frogtown occupies 57 acres of a former pig farm. Twenty-eight acres are planted

with 15 grape varieties incorporating three different trellis systems. The winery, which sits underneath a two-story tasting room, is a three-level, gravity-flow facility that processed 127 tons of grapes last year.

"Seventy-seven tons were sold to other wineries; 50 tons were crushed and made into wine here," says Frogtown owner Craig Kritzer. "We're sold out this year."

Looking to the fall, Kritzer says, "The likelihood is good that we'll be harvesting through the end of September. Cabernet Sauvignon, Marsanne, and Roussanne mature late in the season. At that same time, we might have some whites that are almost through fermentation."

Care To Stay Awhile?

All eight members of the Wine Growers Association of Georgia (WGAG) offer harvesting experiences like those offered by Tiger Mountain and Frogtown. Others are Habersham, Château Élan, Crane Creek, Persimmon Creek and Wolf Mountain. BlackStock Vineyards does not have a winery, but offers tours and appointments for amateur winemakers who want to pick their own grapes.

If you want to visit some or all of the

wineries in North Georgia, you're probably going to need a place to stay. Glen-Ella Springs Country Inn, conveniently located in Clarkesville, is a frequent stop-over for wine enthusiasts. The inn was originally built in 1875 and is listed on the National Historic Register. It fell on hard times in the 20th century, but it reopened in 1987 after extensive restorations by owners Barrie and Bobby Aycock.

While each room contains modern conveniences like phones with data ports, you won't find a television, and you'll be gently (and routinely) reminded to pamper the pipes and go easy on the appliances to avoid tripping a circuit breaker. The owners will also point out that the walls are neither soundproof nor airtight.

"Every old building has its quirks, and ours is no exception," Bobby says.

At Glen-Ella's restaurant, chef Chris Bolton offers a frequently changing dinner menu of southern and continental dishes. Signature entrees include pecan-crusted filet of mountain trout, herbed rack of lamb and jumbo shrimp in low-country gravy over fried parmesan grits. Barrie often serves breakfast buffet-style in the dining room or on the terrace overlooking the garden.

If you go to Glen-Ella, make sure to explore nearby Minnehaha Falls. Other recreation options include horseback riding, touring art galleries, and visiting with Glen, the inn's resident cat (who assumes you came to see him). You can also see historic towns and, of course, visit the wineries.

Rustic Luxury

If you like the idea of seclusion, but you prefer more modern accommodations, try The Lodge at Smithgall Woods

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Guided Wine Harvest Weekends In Georgia

This September, Connect With Wine (an Atlanta-based organization dedicated to wine education and appreciation) offers an exclusive look at Georgia's burgeoning winemaking industry. Each weekend will give 30 participants unparalleled access to vineyards and chats with winemakers. Stay Sept. 10-12 at Glen-Ella Springs and tour Tiger Mountain Vineyards and Persimmon Creek Vineyards for \$799 per couple. Or stay Sept. 24-26 at the Lodge at Smithgall Woods and tour Frogtown Cellars and Habersham Vineyards for \$999 per couple. For details or reservations, call Connect With Wine at (404) 784-7696.

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If You Go...

Glen-Ella Springs Country Inn

1789 Bear Gap Road
Clarkesville, Ga.
(706) 754-7295 or
(888) 455-8896
www.glenella.com

Rates: \$135-\$210/night

Restaurant: appetizers, \$3-\$8;
entrees, \$19-\$25; BYOB

From Atlanta: 94 miles

From Birmingham: 243 miles

From Charlotte: 187 miles

The Lodge at Smithgall Woods

61 Tsalaki Trail
Helen, Ga.

(706) 878-3087 or
(800) 318-5248

www.smithgallwoods.com

Rates: \$190-\$479/night, with a tax-exempt portion of the rate directed to the Smithgall Woods Foundation

From Atlanta: 85 miles

From Birmingham: 232 miles

From Charlotte: 200 miles

* Wineries from this story are listed in the calendar on page 65.



The garden at Glen-Ella Springs Country Inn

“If I can get folks [to come] down the road, I can get them back here to stay.”

— John Erbele, general manager at The Lodge at Smithgall Woods

in Helen, Ga. A former private estate, this wilderness retreat offers upscale service and gourmet cuisine within a 5,555-acre preserve managed by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Five mountain cottages with 14 guest rooms can accommodate up to 28 guests; that averages out to almost 200 acres per person.

After a long day on the wine trail, you could see what's on cable TV at night. But most guests prefer a warm bath in the rustic bathroom before tucking into a comfortable bed and falling asleep to the lullaby whispered by a nearby creek.

Meals at Smithgall Woods are included in the room rates. Chef and lodge manager Mac Parks creates multi-course dinners with a regional flavor, incorporating herbs and vegetables from Smithgall's garden and from local farms.

You can even go catch-and-release fly fishing. Guests toss fish food into the seemingly empty Dukes Creek and watch trout rush to the surface. And spectacular Dukes Creek Falls is a one-mile, relatively easy hike away.

“If I can get folks [to come] down the road,” says John Erbele, general manager, “I can get them back here to stay.”

The same might be said of North Georgia. Lucky for us, it's an easy drive.

Hope Philbrick is a freelance writer because she doesn't think work and fun should be mutually exclusive.



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