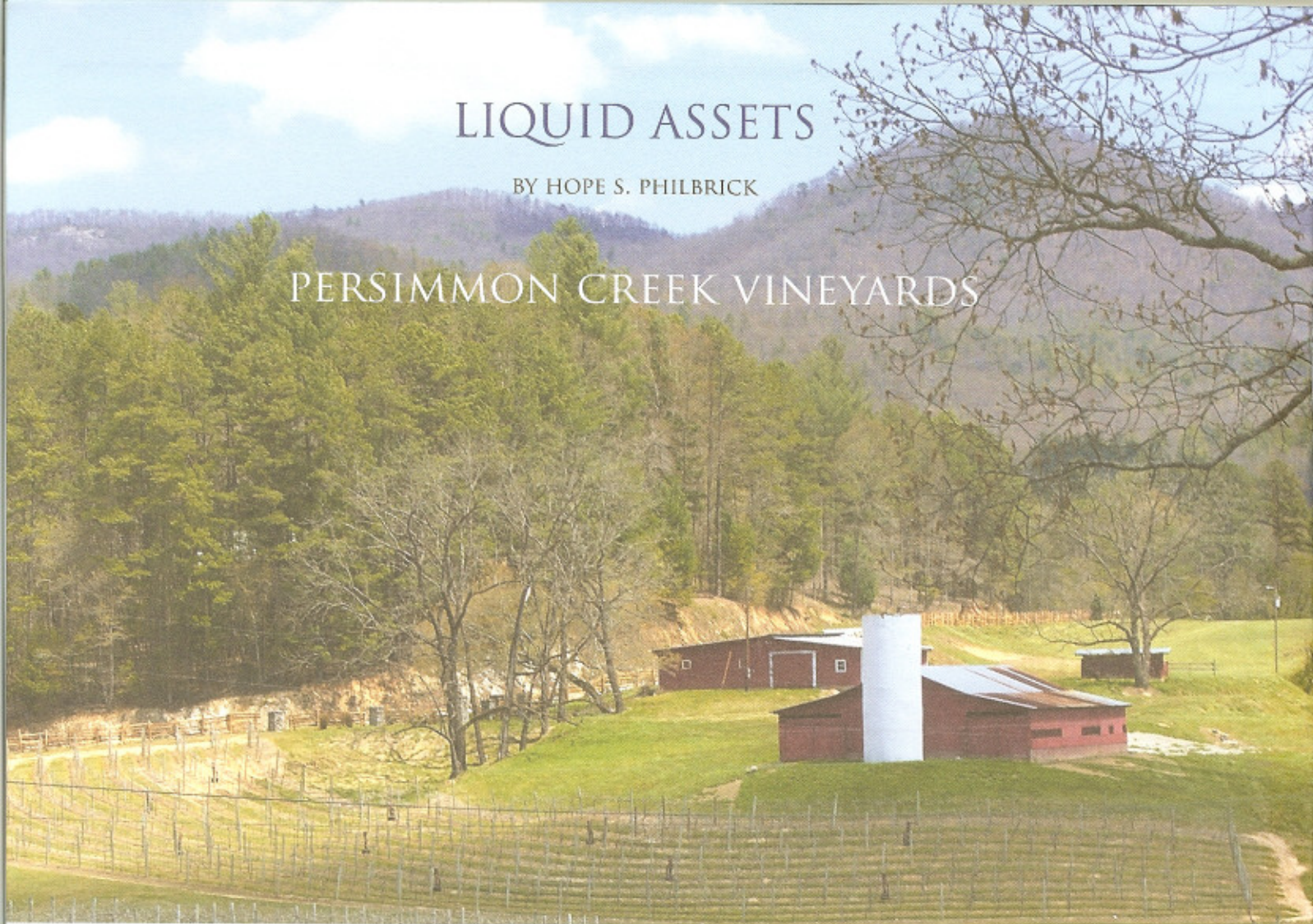


LIQUID ASSETS

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

PERSIMMON CREEK VINEYARDS



Staying up all night to monitor temperatures is nothing new to Sonny Hardman. It's something he's done as a doctor, as a parent of three boys, and as a farmer protecting his grapes. When temperatures dropped below freezing during the wee hours one pre-dawn this past April, Sonny was working in his Rabun County, Georgia, vineyards igniting heaters and powering up a wind machine to protect his budding crop. "To light all those heaters by myself is a slow, four-hour process," he says. "But timing is critical." Since moving air won't settle into frost and warmer air minimizes danger, he traded sleep to protect what will become the 2007 vintage of Persimmon Creek Vineyards wines. His shivering work will be rewarded come fall, when Sonny will harvest what he estimates to be 85 to 90 percent of his typical yield. It's a significant accomplishment, given the Georgia Department of Agriculture's report that the cold snap destroyed several crops in the state. "I can give a little sigh of relief," says Sonny. "But we're not out of the woods yet. We've had frost as late as middle of May up here. I've got to keep a close eye on the weather."

An entire family feels such commitment, even if the other members remain tucked in warm beds. "Having a vineyard is not a romantic ideal," says Mary Ann, Sonny's wife of 15 years. "It is plain one hundred percent exhausting. When Sonny was up it was hard on the whole family. The stress was palpable." What makes

it worthwhile? "It's an incredible experience for our children and us. It's integrity, commitment, and pure passion. And for our children it's time together with their dad to learn and participate. They see Persimmon Creek Vineyards' wine as 'our' wine as a family."

Seeing this family of five so entrenched in the life now, it comes as a surprise that grape growing and winemaking weren't always part of some Hardman Master Plan. "There was no big game plan," says Sonny. "I started college with a major in horticulture and landscape architecture. I didn't do that. (He is a full-time practicing physician and owns Hardman Pathology and Dermatopathology in Athens, his hometown.) "But looking at pictures of vineyards and how they were constructed with the lay of the land always just fascinated me. When I graduated from medical school and moved back to Athens and actually started making a little bit of money, I thought maybe I could have a little vineyard somewhere." He spent two years researching grape farming and searching for property.

How did Mary Ann feel about the prospect of a vineyard? "I was sort of distracted," she laughs. By the time they purchased the 10-acre tract of land that launched Persimmon Creek Vineyards, the couple who'd met on a blind date had been married several years and had three sons: Mitchell, now 13, and the 'twin torpe-

Photograph by Hope Philbrick

does' Brigham and Hamilton, now 9. "The twins were about a year old when we bought the first part of the property," says Mary Ann, who by then had stopped teaching kindergarten to operate a part-time calligraphy business in addition to working as a mom. "It was Sonny and Mitchell coming here on weekends to do this. I was at home with the twins. It was a great father-son thing."

"We did it all ourselves," says Sonny of the initial planting in 2000. What began as 10 acres has grown to 110 acres. "This used to be all one big farm, but developers started carving it up. I was just petrified that I had no control over what was going to happen next door, so I kept buying little tracts. We have literally pieced together the old farm."

Today's success owes to hard work and bit of good luck. While Sonny was placing posts, a laborer on a nearby construction site walked by. "He asked if I needed any help. I said, 'Sure.' That's when he told me that he'd spent ten years in Mondavi's vineyards," Sonny recalls. "Gabriel taught me a lot about vineyard management, little nuances that only people who actually work in the vineyards know. He gave me endless amounts of knowledge." Gabriel has since passed away, but one of his cousins continues to work with the Hardmans, just one lingering effect of that coincidental meeting.

Four grape varieties grow on the Hardman estate: Seyval Blanc, Riesling, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot. The cool climate dictated rootstock and clone selections. "Rabun County has the second highest rainfall in the country," says Sonny. "And when it's not raining it's oftentimes cloudy and fairly humid," conditions that make it "impossible to practice true, one hundred percent organic farming, but we're moving as far in that direction as we can."

"Mitchell is a keen environmentalist," adds Mary Ann. He suggested fueling smudgepots and farm equipment with biodiesel and we did. Ladybugs and sulfur applications help reduce the amount of fungicides needed. Trimming leaves and pruning vines helps control yield. "We produce about two and a half tons of grapes per acre," Sonny relates. "A lot of people will produce six tons an acre, but I think over time it creates stress on the vines."

"The garden element is very important to us," he continues. In addition to grapes, the Hardmans grow cucumbers, carrots, green beans, potatoes, corn, pumpkins, and squash. The vegetables end up on the family table as well as in restaurants like the acclaimed Five and Ten in Athens.

What started as a hobby has become a winemaking business with annual production of 2,000 cases. "I planted the vines thinking, 'One year I'll have to have a winery,'" says Sonny. "But the soil here is so rich that the vines grew much faster than I'd planned." Winery construction was pushed forward a year and half to accommodate a first vintage in 2003. A former horse barn was torn down for a new structure providing overnight accommodations for the family plus a winery and tasting room. As production continues to increase, Sonny estimates that a larger

winery will be needed within the next five years.

Winemaking was not a huge hurdle for Sonny, who found unexpected synergies between it and his professional training. "Winemaking is exactly what I learned in medical school: microbiology, chemistry, biochemistry. The formulas are the same. It really is interesting. I didn't know until I got into this and started learning about the yeasts, fungi, and molds that occur in the vineyard that a lot of them are cousins to the ones that affect humans. The treatments are obviously very different," he laughs. "But winemaking is not that difficult based on the schooling I've had."

As a winemaker, Sonny's philosophy is to use as little technology as possible. "I compare it to medicine because one of the hardest things for any doctor to learn is to know when not to do something. The initial response is to order a test or do something, but oftentimes the most important thing is to step back and just let it run its course. I apply that same philosophy to winemaking. I let the wine sit and open barrels as little as possible. I strive to create as natural a wine as possible." All Persimmon Creek Vineyard wines are 100 percent varietals.

As they do with parenting, Sonny and Mary Ann run Persimmon Creek Vineyards as a partnership. Sonny takes on the vineyard and wine production while Mary Ann handles marketing and distribution.

"These wines are all like my children," says Mary Ann. "I want to shepherd them along a good path, to good homes that really care for what is in the bottle and the passion that went into creating them."

Mary Ann's marketing philosophy is "what grows together goes together. I'm really into local sustainable agriculture and



Mary Ann and Sonny Hardman

Duluth

FALL FESTIVAL

September
29th and 30th

*A weekend of
Fun • Food • Entertainment
and Arts & Crafts in Historic
Downtown Duluth*

**FREE ADMISSION
FREE PARKING
FREE SHUTTLE**

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

SATURDAY

9:00 AM Booths Open
10:00 AM Festival Parade - Roads Closed
11:30 AM Opening Ceremony
12:30 PM Music & Entertainment Begins
6:00 PM Booths Close for the Day
8:00 PM Concert on the Green

SUNDAY

8:00 AM 5K Road Race - Roads Closed
9:00 AM Booths Open
10:00 AM Worship on the Green
12:00 PM Music & Entertainment Begins
5:00 PM Festival Ends

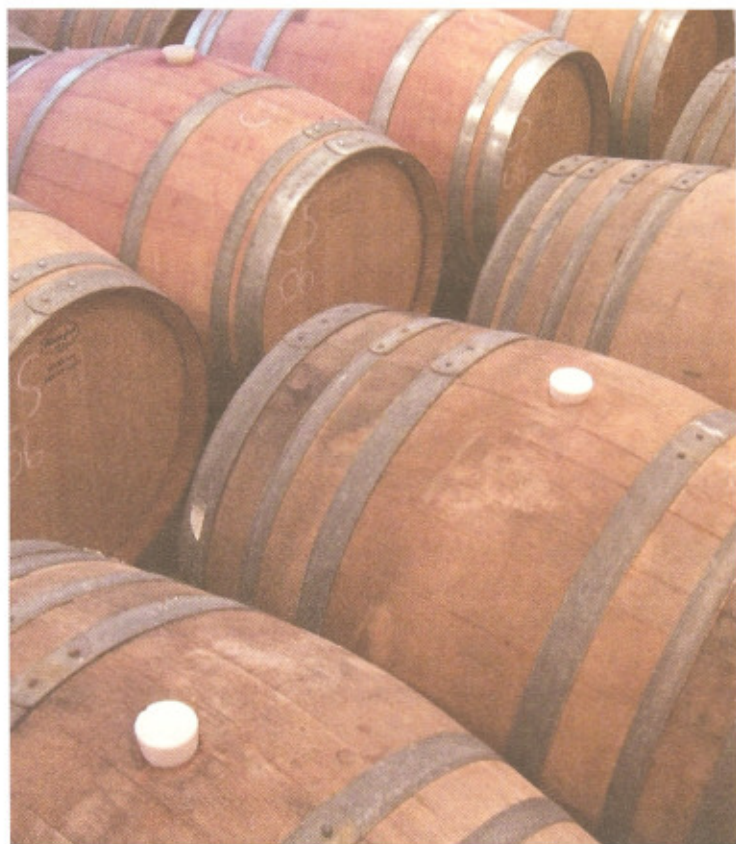
**For More Information:
www.duluthfallfestival.com**

viticulture—not because it is a trend right now, but because it is holistic symbiosis to have locally raised, grass-fed beef or Georgia shrimp served with a local wine. Why serve it with a wine from France, Italy, or Australia if there is one grown locally that is *quality and matches in the pairing?*”

Persimmon Creek Vineyard wines are available in a growing number of top-rated restaurants, including Bacchanalia and Five Seasons Brewing in Atlanta and The Cloister on Sea Island. “The biggest challenge has been to get people to understand that [quality grapes] can be grown in Georgia to render quality wines,” says Mary Ann. “I’m still working on [overcoming] stereotypes about Georgia wine.”

Marketing and distributing for the winery, raising three children, and managing two houses and a 110-acre farm is exhausting, she says. “Persimmon Creek Vineyards has taken over my life. But it has been an incredible blessing to our family in a number of ways. It has united our family together in a joined effort. Farming and the chores it involves is good for our boys. They are not always thrilled with that, but they are expected to contribute. The work builds character and is transferable to other experiences in life. I hope people find when visiting the vineyard that it is special. The wine is grown with love.” ☘

Persimmon Creek Vineyards
81 Vineyard Ln.
Clayton, GA 30525
(706) 212-7380
www.persimmoncreekwine.com



Photograph by Hope Philbrick