



Wines down South



WINE AT THE DAKOTAH

Glory Of The Grape In The Sunshine State

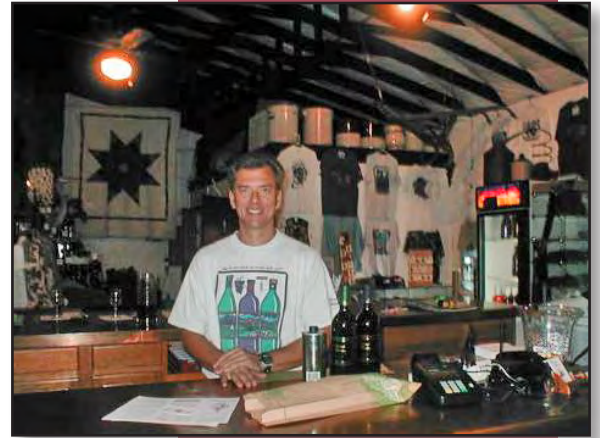
By Doc Lawrence.

Mark Twain couldn't invent Max Rittgers. With a love of things natural and advanced winemaking skills, he comes with a mane of Albert Einstein-like white hair and penetrating eyes. After his first compelling story, you decide to stay a little longer. Along with his son Rob, Rittgers founded and operates Dakotah Winery in rural Florida's Chiefland about 100 miles south of Tallahassee and serves guests his muscadine wines in a room filled with Native American creations and folk art near wine barrels and fermenting tanks.

"These are fine wines," Rittgers told me during a stopover sponsored by Original Florida (originalflorida.org), the agency devoted to promoting Florida's little-known treasures like the nearby natural springs, the largest concentration of aquifer-fed fresh water springs on the planet. "But we don't pretend to make California style wines." Dakotah's own varietals, according to Emory University educated Rittgers, an Irish-American native of South Dakota, are muscadine, one of the fruits indigenous to the South that folklore says Desoto and Ponce de Leon had made into wine.

Although Dakotah produces mainstream wines like chardonnay and merlot, quintessentially native Florida muscadines are the stars, in contrast to oranges that were introduced by immigrants. Musadines still grow wild in the South, don't mind heat and humidity one bit and with the expertise of a self-taught winemaker like Max Rittgers, make delicious wines from sweet to bone dry.

Florida is not a new kid on the wine block. Lakeridge Winery in Clermont near Orlando is a major producer of muscadine wines and one original claim to fame, Blanc Du Bois, a white hybrid grape made into an Alsatian-style white wine in Florida, Texas, Louisiana and New York. With more than six thousand sustainable vines producing quality fruit destined for wine bottles, Rittgers is in very good company.



Rob Rittgers





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At 33 feet above sea level, Dakotah Winery fronts storied Highway 19 west of Gainesville. Look for the windmill, the yard art and the inviting sign that says, "Free wine tasting," a signal to stop, park and begin one of the most interesting journeys in Florida. An accomplished storyteller, Rittgers' massive vineyard and rustic tasting room adjoin a backyard spring-fed pond filled with rare Japanese fish and colorful wood ducks. Rittgers conducts a tour laced with Native American lore and will take you into the winemaking room after a fascinating visit to his crystal clear pond. His vines produce organic fruit and are protected from weeds by grazing sheep that he admits add "some helpful fertilizer."

The Dakotah Vineyard features seven different varieties of grapes, an Audubon bird sanctuary and an antique windmill. The tasting room is named The Store. It's also a museum and retail shop loaded with pieces of Americana including Civil War artifacts, a collection of Indian arrowheads found on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, flags, costumes and a certificate authenticating Rittgers' Irish citizenship. Yes, wines are for sale.

As part of the tasting experience, ebullient Max tells captivating wine stories. The generous sample of his semi-dry muscadine wine is a prelude to some other delights ranging from dessert sweet to the dreamy port and sherry, all handcrafted with subtle earthiness common to all native wines.

Winemaking came from ancient farming cultures. Closely tied to the soil, local wines paired comfortably with community cuisine. Industrialized, adulterated wine is as far removed from wine's intended purpose as a silk purse from a sow's ear. If you appreciate tradition and a commitment to place and authenticity, you will love Dakotah Winery. It's a near-perfect stop for tourists and a one-tank drive from big cities like Atlanta.

I have been to wineries in every nook and cranny of America, some in remote areas in the Ozarks, on the banks of the mighty Missouri, in the lovely German and Comanche town of Fredericksburg, Texas, in the coastal plain of Statesboro, Georgia and on top of majestic Mont Eagle in Tennessee. Each winery has at least one exceptionally interesting person who stands out.





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Years ago, Max Rittgers' found his new direction. Stop by and chances are he'll share his remarkable story.

There is an added benefit in a visit here. Fanning Springs State Park, Manatee Springs State Park, Hart Springs Park, Ichetucknee Springs State Park, Poe Springs and Ginny Springs are within a comfortable driving distance. Buy a few bottles of wine from Dr. Rittgers and enjoy an evening in your cabin after a memorable swim or kayak excursion.

Dakotah's tasting room has a railroad coal stove with the inscription, "If I am good, please tell someone about it." Everything Max Rittgers collects, produces, protects and pours is good.



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