



# Wines down South

2009-2010

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## TAR HEEL SANCTUARY

### *Wine And Wild Horses In The North Carolina Outer Banks*

By Doc Lawrence

John Wright grew up knowing he would never leave his land on the northern shores of the Outer Banks. The fertile soil grew cotton and food crops first planted by his ancestors from England who landed here in the aftermath of a shipwreck in 1860. Seven generations later, Wright's Family is still in coastal Currituck County. A combination of events took a toll on cotton and Wright experienced an epiphany. He was destined to plant grapes and make wine.

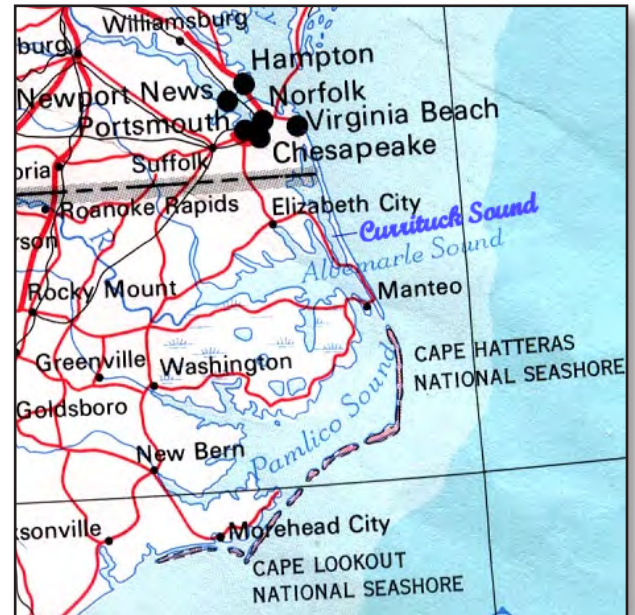
Prior to the insanity of Prohibition, North Carolina topped all states in wine production. Prohibition wiped the land clear of wine grapes.

Be thankful that these madmen didn't outlaw heirloom tomatoes.

After some intense post-graduate education, wunderkind Wright planted his grapes: vinefera, two hybrids along with grapes native to North Carolina, Muscadine and Norton, honoring his family's farming heritage. Sanctuary Vineyards ([www.sanctuaryvineyards.com](http://www.sanctuaryvineyards.com)) is the product of centuries of farming experience and a dedication to producing world-class wines in Carrituck County. The proof, according to my French friends, is in the tasting. I plunged in, sipping and pairing, and easily concluded that Wright's wines are premium and very food friendly.

## VACATION PARADISE

I joined a group of locals and out-of-towners to explore the Carrituck Outer Banks, about an hour-plus drive south from Norfolk. First stop was the perfectly preserved Currituck Beach Lighthouse with a formidable climb on the wrought iron circle of stairs rewarded by a breathless view. Another landmark across the way is the historic Whalehead Club, now restored to its original grandeur and home to wine and art events throughout the year.





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With a DNA matched to kindred horses of Spain, the Currituck wild mustangs are celebrities in the Outer Banks. These direct descendants from the horses introduced by the first Spanish explorers miraculously defy natural events like hurricanes and the encroachments of civilization. While protected, they remain endangered. Currituck's admirable Wild Horse Museum is dedicated to the herd's preservation.



Currituck has an almost never-ending series of celebrations beginning in April with the Corolla Island Spring Social at the Whalehead Club, conjuring up images from "The Great Gatsby." June is the family-friendly Wild Horse Days with a charitable mission to protect the wild mustang herds. Summer is the arts festival centered at the Whalehead Club, coinciding with the Knotts Island Peach Festival. Local groves produce acclaimed peaches, a prelude to the autumn gala, the Currituck Wine and Food Festival. Sanctuary joins other local wineries pouring wines and serving local food, drawing enthusiasts from throughout the country. (See [www.visitcurrituck.com](http://www.visitcurrituck.com) for more information.)

While the area is rural, it is very sophisticated and there are impressive amenities. Dinner at Mike Dianna's Grill Room in Carolla offered an eclectic mixture of local seafood with one of the finest steaks I've enjoyed anywhere. The wine list was extensive and the bottles reasonably priced.

## PAIRING TAR HEEL WINE

Rows of corn stand alongside Cabernet vines and migratory snow geese nestle among the Sangiovese, part of the acres of grapes in Sanctuary, home to an amazing assemblage: Syrah, Tempranillo, Viognier, Norton and the classic Muscadine. These grapes, according to Wright, ripen in the intense summer heat, tempered by cooling ocean breezes. The ancient sand dunes provide drainage and unique flavor to the fruit.



There are two acres of French hybrid grapes, Traminette and Chardonel, Old World grape varieties crossed with sturdier American vines that can thrive in Outer Banks growing conditions. The Traminette is kissing kin to Gewürztraminer, while the Chardonel is bred from Chardonnay producing wines with the similar character and flavors.

John Wright says that "the combination of good earth, sun and sky is what the French would call terroir. Ours is the Tar Heel version." North Carolina wine enthusiasts have much to boast about.

It was time to taste and pair and here was the real fun. Shrimp with a homemade roumalade sauce was

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delightful with glasses of Sanctuary white wines, particularly the Viognier. A fresh fish entrée teamed beautifully with the amazing Traminer and another menu selection of roast pork cooked with North Carolina herbs was served with Sanctuary Norton and Syrah. A memorable Outer Banks feast.

The Currituck County advantage is the seashore, salty clean air, nice people across the board, and all that makes North Carolina such a desirable vacation place. Some good news for those on a tight budget: this part of coastal America is very affordable. Beaches are unspoiled and accessible, fresh seafood is the norm and North Carolina-style barbeque with pronounced vinegar in the sauce is among the best.

A yet to be released bottle of Sanctuary Norton provided by John Wright was in my cellar. Temptation reared its head and it was uncorked. I enjoyed the deep garnet liquid with Korean style beef short ribs. John Wright's creation was up to the challenge, a near-perfect fit.

The Atlantic Ocean defines the Outer Banks. Alternately calm and tumultuous, it rightly dominates, providing the core of the Currituck adventure. Very little is developed and it should remain a pristine, highly livable destination for future generations.

