

From Vines to Wine: The Story of Duplin Winery

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When most people think of wine making, the first places to pop into their minds are California, Italy, France, and Spain, but what about North Carolina? Prior to 1909 North Carolina was the leading wine producing state in America. Due to prohibitionist or anti-alcohol citizens, a law was passed declaring North Carolina a dry state ("NC Winery History" par. 10). This meant that North Carolina was no longer allowed to produce any type of drinking alcohol. The dry act in North Carolina came ten years prior to the national prohibition of alcohol which was named the Volstead Act (Drew 19).

During North Carolina's reign as the leading wine state there were several wineries in operation. One wine company that happened to do particularly well was owned and operated by Paul Garrett and was named Garrett and Co. Mr. Garrett owned a total of five wineries in North Carolina and produced a wine called Virginia Dare. This was the best selling wine, foreign or domestic, in the United States during its time. After the fall of the North Carolina wine industry, due to prohibition, Mr. Garrett moved his company up north, first to Virginia and then to New York (Drew 17).

It took North Carolina a total of sixteen years to reopen its doors to commercial wine makers. In 1935 the North Carolina General Assembly permitted the manufacturing to take place legally once again (Drew 21). Soon a few wineries began to open, but just as soon as they could open their production they had to shut down. Mr. Richard Hartfield, owner of the now closed Onslow County Winery, said it was "better financially to merely raise grapes and ship

them to Virginia.” By 1968 all wineries that had opened in North Carolina shut down (Drew 22).

Researching

While researching the wine industry of North Carolina I came upon a photograph located in a magazine from 1977. The photograph showed two brothers loading grapes into a crusher. The first brother, Dan Fussell Jr., was on a John Deere tractor dumping the grapes into the crusher while the second brother, David Fussell, was standing on top of the crusher directing the dumping (Simpson 13). After careful exploration of the photograph a story was unearthed. The story showed the hard work of two country boys who put their heart and soul into a business that is typically run by the rich. Through the observation of the picture I dug deeper to find the origin of the winery and the story of how a few seeds and a lot of prayer brought these two brothers into the history pages of North Carolina.

Pruning the Vines

In 1972 two brothers by the names of Dan Fussell Jr. and David Fussell decided that they would call it quits with their gradually declining hog farm, but they didn't want to give up on their farming altogether (D. Fussell). David Fussell said that he along with his brother Dan Jr. "...always wanted to farm. You would pass a field and see that green grass growing and the corn coming up, and there was just something about being a country boy that made ya want to get your hands dirty" (On the Wings of Tradition). Soon Dan began to do research with the Department of Agriculture and North Carolina State University to find the best crop for the brothers to grow. During his research he discovered that North Carolina was once a colossal

wine state, and the Department of Agriculture told him that the “pendulum swings and that grapes were going to be the crop of the future” (On the Wings of Tradition).

That same year David and Dan planted 10 acres of grapes to start off their venture. What they found prior to their planting was that there is only one type of grape that grows in eastern North Carolina, and that is the *Vitis Rotundifolia* or more commonly known as the Muscadine Grape. Typically it takes a muscadine vine two to three years to produce a good quality crop, so the Fussell boys planted and then waited (J. Fussell).

After three hard years of keeping a constant watch on their grape vines, David and Dan were ready to harvest their prize. They had set up an agreement with one of the largest wineries in America. The winery was in New York State and it was named Canandaigua Wine Co. Canandaigua promised to pay market price for all of the Fussell boys’ grapes, but that same year, which was 1975, the grape market crashed from three hundred and fifty dollars a ton to one hundred and fifty dollars a ton. This sudden market plummet halted David and Dan from selling their grapes. The market was so low that the harvesting cost was fifty dollars more per ton than what Canandaigua was offering (Simpson 14). The brothers had to do something, but they did not know what.

Getting Their Feet Purple

After a while of thinking and careful consideration, Dan had a revelation. He decided that the best thing for him and David to do was to open a winery so that they would not have to throw away all of their grapes. At the time David was a school teacher and Dan was a self employed contractor in addition to being farmers. Both knew in the back of their minds that they

had no idea what they were doing, but as always they were going to put their best effort into their goal (D. Fussell).

The first complication that the Fussell boys ran into was the fact that they had no money to start the production. The initial planting of the grapes cost Dan and David a heaping thirty thousand dollars, which was all the money that they had at the time (On the Wings of Tradition). With no other options they went to the one person that they knew could afford to help them, their father. Dan Fussell Sr., or as known to the locals as “Jigs”, was a wealthy and well respected business man in the town of Rose Hill, NC. Dan Sr. owned a furniture store and mule shop on Main Street and he always had an eye for wise investments. Wanting to see his sons succeed, Dan Sr. gave David and Dan Jr. a twenty thousand dollar loan along with a warehouse that he owned (D. Fussell). From this point the winery was ready to start stomping its way into fortune, but there was another complication. They didn’t know anything about wine making.

Soon Dan began exploring how to make wine by reading books, talking to the locals, and visiting the only other winery in the state, Deerfield Vineyards. After several weeks of investigation Dan and David made their first batch of wine which they named Carolina Preeminence. Carolina Preeminence got the rating of “drinkable” by a lot of the locals, so David and Dan strived to perfect their recipes. They began to work on several different wines instead of just one. Scuppernong, which was derived from the oldest wine recipe in the United States, along with Nobel and Rosé soon became favorites of all of the visitors to the winery, which David and Dan decided to name Duplin Winery after the county in which they lived. The Fussell boys now had the respect of the wine connoisseurs, but a small stir turned into uproar among the citizens of Rose Hill (J. Fussell).

Liquid Sin

Because of their wine production David was asked to resign his position as Headmaster of Harrell's Christian Academy as well as his leadership role in the local Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship chapter (Maley 45). One of David's sons, Jonathan, loves to joke around and tell customers at the winery that the family was "Southern Baptist, but they had to convert to the Methodist denomination after the winery opened" (J. Fussell). David's eldest son Dave Jr. also recalls fighting the other local kids over where his family was going to spend their eternity (Maley 42). Over the last three decades the community has begun to respect the winery because of the tourism it brings, but Jonathan says there are still some locals who don't appreciate his family selling "liquid sin" (J. Fussell).

Hogwash

As the winery grew David and Dan decided that it was time to expand from their little retail shop, and move into the grocery stores. As the picture from the North Carolina archives suggests, the Fussell's had no need to be fancy because they were just country boys. So they washed the manure off of their old hog trailer, loaded it full of wine, and headed off to Raleigh to try to impress some business men (J. Fussell). David later recalled that "everyone in the building came out shaking their heads and saying they have seen a lot but this is the first time they have ever seen anybody bring them wine in a hog trailer" ("Our Heritage" par. 5). After a successful trip, Duplin Wine soon became a state wide name (J. Fussell). In 1978 the Fussell brothers decided to sell the farm and focus on their wine making. That same year Dan sold his share of the company to David. Dan says that he sold his share because he is a mechanical mind, and when the winery started becoming more business oriented instead of mechanical he decided

he was no longer needed (D. Fussell). In 1983 David once again took out a loan from his father in the sum of five hundred thousand dollars. This began construction on a new and larger factory (Maley 45). Dan Fussell Sr. now tells visitors to the winery that, “when you consider we are using buckets for a wine pump and our own bare feet to stomp the grapes, the word ‘factory,’ just doesn't seem to fit” (“Our Heritage” par. 1). A year after the new production site was built the winery boasted a production of 47,000 cases of wine. This was a huge number of cases considering they produced only 20 cases in their first year (Marley 45).

Uncorked too Soon

The winery’s success grew each year until 1985. In 1985 the Supreme Court ruled that the wine taxes would be raised in North Carolina. This decision greatly hindered the wine production industry, and it almost crushed Duplin Winery (Drew 23). Desperate to see his dreams survive, David went back to teaching school in hopes of supporting the fading winery. During this time his wife, Ann, took over most of the daily operations at the retail and at the factory. For many years the winery struggled to keep its head above water, and took until 1995 for the winery to get its next breath.

Fine Wines Get Better with Age

In 1995 60 minutes aired a report on how red wine is good for keeping the body healthy. This report sparked a wine craze that had been buried for centuries. American researchers took what the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to Timothy, “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses,” (The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible, 1 Tim. 5.23) and found a natural source to prevent 60 known diseases. After this study, which was called the French Paradox, wine business all across the United States picked up.

Later that year the Campbell University School of Pharmacy started investigating the Muscadine grape and wine, which is native to North Carolina. In 1996, Campbell released its findings which stated that the Muscadine grape had the highest level of antioxidants of any other fruit or vegetable in the world, and was twenty times more potent than typical French red wines (Rhodes). This research was the answer to a prayer that David and Dan had sent over twenty years prior. The winery was now on the upswing of the pendulum.

Get to Stompin'

The winery once again picked up business and the juice started flowing like the mighty Cape Fear River. People wanted muscadine wines and Duplin had just the stuff for them. With business booming David started up a company called Resveratrol Inc., in 1998. The main purpose of the new company was to focus on the health benefits of the grape. With the business just starting and the wine industry exploding David had no time to focus on Resveratrol, so he asked his brother Dan to run it. In 2001 Dan began researching and developing products out of the Muscadine grape, and found a gold mine filled with seeds. Dan began freeze drying and crushing seeds, and soon had developed a natural antioxidant supplement made out of the Muscadine which he named NutraGrape. In 2002 Resveratrol Inc. was renamed NutraGrape and the business skyrocketed right away. Now after four years NutraGrape is selling grape seed capsules and body lotions made out of the byproducts of the Muscadine grape (D. Fussell).

After three decades of hard work and determination, the Fussell boys have turned their vines into the oldest winery in North Carolina and the largest winery of its kind in the world. In 2005 the Fussell family celebrated its one millionth case by having four generations of Fussell boys bottle in front of a crowd of three hundred people at Dan Sr.'s old warehouse. Along with

this, Duplin winery now has a production of seven hundred and fifty thousand gallons of wine annually, and the juice is not stopping there (On the Wings of Tradition).

When David and Dan started their grape growing they had no idea that they would be the founders of Duplin Winery. They never had intentions of being famous. They were just simple country boys with a few seeds, a lot of prayer, and a John Deere tractor, who got trapped into the history pages of North Carolina.

Fig. 1 Dan (tractor) and David (crusher) Fussell loading grapes into a crusher (ART1)

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