

ROBERT TAYLOR
Tilford Winery & Farm – Kathleen, GA

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Interviewer: John T. Edge Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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[Begin Tilford Winery Interview]

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John Edge: All right; okay today is August 28, 2008. I am in--what--what town would you say I'm in?

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Robert Taylor: This is Kathleen, Georgia.

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JE: This is Kathleen, Georgia, not far from Warner Robbins and I'm with Mr. Robert Taylor. Mr. Taylor would you please tell me your date of birth?

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RT: It's 1952, the 8th--the 9th of April.

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JE: Okay; thank you sir, and the point today Mr. Taylor is to talk about you know what you do here in--in raising muscadine, scuppernong, making wine. And we begin talking. Just tell me what was your motivation when you began this?

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RT: Well I started out as a harvester. I had planned to be a grower for the wineries and that got a little bit rough because of transportation. So I had all these grape plants sort of like eight acres of grapes. So what I did instead of wasting the grapes I came up with this idea to making juice

and jellies and wine. And come to find out that you can do more with the wine than with the jelly so that's what started to move it from there.

We started out making 200 gallons a year when it first started, and as you worked the grapes and did the vineyard management, pruning back every year, so you had an increase in yield, so basically the thing I had to do is find a way to process those grapes. So we started out making wine, and from there we made organic wine; we don't have to worry about spraying fungicides, pesticides, and herbicides. So we did everything naturally. So the basic thing is the organic type of operation but we don't push the organic operation because you have to get certification. But basically the thing is all natural grapes and we process in a stainless steel drums and we do approximately 2,000 a year now from the grapes that--.

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JE: Two thousand?

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RT: Gallons of grapes--gallons of wine, so basically that's what we're doing. So this weekend we'll start our kickoff for processing the '08 wine. And so they--we used to--the basic grape would be the Magnolia, the Carlos, and the Noble; those are the wines they make. The Magnolia and the Carlos make the white wine; we use one--one grape to make the red wine which is the Noble. And it has all the nutraceutical properties that's in there that helps you with your health. So basically that's the thing that got me started with the grapes.

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JE: The nutraceutical properties interested you?

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RT: Yeah; the nutraceutical, basically if you have rheumatoid arthritis, any type of sleeping issues, if you drink the Muscadine wine it will tend to relax you and put you to sleep. Also the wine I make, you don't have any hangovers or headaches. And that comes from over say about 35 women plus, you know, and so it's a good wine. And also that inspired me to make wine--the Muscadine wine was that you can't find a good sweet wine in the country, so basically you want a basic sweet wine that's not too tart and not too sweet. So basically the muscadine is a good wine for that. And also muscadine is a native--native grape of the US, so it's--have properties that doesn't--you can't cross-breed it with the European grape which is the Vinifera grape so the basic thing that we use the Southern type grape which we call the muscadine which is in the rotunda folia family. And those--

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JE: And that matters to you to use a Southern grape?

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RT: Yes; because it's native to this country and actually I always tell people the muscadine is sort of like the catfish you know. They have--it's--it was presumed as a wild grape and it was hard to get to but once you put in that cultivator and stuff to cultivating it it's a very nutritious grape and it have a lot of properties; you can use the grape seed oil.

Even if the wine goes bad which will become acidity, the acidity which is a vinegar--vinegar wine, so the basic thing you have a natural process right there--vinegar wine which you can use for salad dressing and you can use it for marination. So there is nothing thrown away with the muscadine itself and then also you can use the--the skins and the seeds for other medicinal purposes. Most of the wineries are dealing with the skins and they making properties out of it they call the Purple Pill, whatever the case might be--the purple coloration and the skin the one that has the properties in it that they help you--have the phenols in them which break up the HDL in your blood and keep it from clotting. So basically you have great blood flow and that's the reason that most people drink the wine because of the fact that it opens up your arteries so you don't have arthritic pain.

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JE: Did you have family health issues or your own health issues that drove you toward this or--?

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RT: Just back in 1999 I had lymphoma and I was out of work for over 15 months and while I was out I was experimenting with the--with the grapes and the wines. I made in the wine process while I was doing that and come to find out that I will sterilize the juice and as I was taking the juice and it sort of helped me with my cancers. So I--I will recommend that you know some of that so you know my oncologist said that was a great deal that you're doing that, so it's all natural. So we couldn't do anything to actually to pasteurize it so basically we had to heat it up, pasteurize it to--in order to ingest it into the system. And so it--it worked out pretty great. So with me having a health issue it helped me a whole lot and also I had other people that had health

issues. And they began to drink the juice itself and they had saw some improvement in their health after they drink the juice.

And basically the thing that you want to say--maintain your weight, lose weight; you can drink one glass of wine a day which is we say about four to six ounces, which will help your digestive track. If you have any type of digestion problem or circulatory problem, basically, the muscadine wine is a good thing for you to have. And circulatory is where, because most of the time people have heart issues, and basically that's what the in the phenols in the wine itself will break down into your system. It's all natural and it will help replenish your system as well.

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JE: So you--you started out making--pressing muscadine juice purely for the properties that it would offer and then you evolved into wine--?

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RT: Yes.

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JE: And tell me about that transition--why you--?

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RT: Well as I done more research and went to several seminars through the University of Georgia and Clemson University and University of Southern Mississippi, they had done research on about muscadine. And basically they was talking about the health issue and so as we done more and more research that they were looking for more and more people to produce muscadine

commercially. So basically I think that's what I done and so basically and they were looking at the basic properties that the muscadine have and--and most people want to put stuff in pills or whatever the case, but the best thing if you had a refreshment drink like the muscadine it will help you--actually it will help prevent cancer. And most of the people that's saying that if you could have some straight from the earth into the roots and through the vines, which is a natural process, meaning that these--the vines itself produce natural minerals into--well the manufacture natural minerals and which is come out into the fruit.

So the basic thing, those minerals that your body needs is to stay on course with the radicals--the free radicals and the--that's what you have to prevent cancer. The basic thing--that a little bit--the basic thing when we talk about wine most people think about the alcohol content. The alcohol content doesn't have to be that high in the muscadine to keep it but most people want it sort of potent. I have had people who have drinking muscadine that's on light medication and also people that have had diabetes. They--they have taken the muscadine wine and they have saw some improvement in their health as well.

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And also we do--we don't do any documentation. The only thing it's like testimonies. We don't record though because of the fact that we're not a--doing really research on it so the basic thing is just like people that we know talked about how the wine has helped them. And so those are things that help--push the project a little bit farther, so basically we're looking at producing over 100 to 200-some acres within the next three to four years to get this product out. So that's--that's what we're looking at right now.

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JE: And the--one of the things that I was trying to understand, the move from just pure juice to wine was--wine is more pleasant to drink, wine--?

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RT: Well your juices you're only getting one property. Your property, the most--your high contents of your property is in the skin so basic thing in the juice you only get the pulp juice. When you're doing the wine you get the pulp juice and the skin juice.

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JE: So the--the juice in contact with the skin is what--is--is an extra--?

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RT: Yeah; but you're getting two--you're getting two for one 'cause you're getting the skin juice and you're getting the pulp juice, only shows about half of that but the skin juice is more potent than the pulp juice, 'cause of the fact that the skin juice--this happens with everything; that's preserving it. For instance you can harvest Muscadine and you can put them in the cooler and they'll stay in there for about a good two--three weeks if you keep them at 55-degrees. So that's letting you know that--that the skin and preservatives--keep it at the right temperature, so that--yeah so the basic thing the property in the skin will preserve itself. So basically those properties in those skins get into your system and help preserve your skin as well. And--and **[Laughs]**--and basic thing that's the--the simplest I can put it.

00:12:00

JE: And do you have a history of--of muscadine and scuppernong raising and winemaking in your family that goes back previous generations?

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RT: One basic thing when was kids we went out in the woods and harvest--we won't say harvest; we climbed the trees and we picked muscadine(s) and we made--we had my mother and my grandmother made muscadine jelly and normally they would do probably about three or four gallons of muscadine wine and basically that was it you know. So basic thing the only problem we had was you had to climb the trees; we was at risk there. So now over the years we figured out how can we put these on the grounds so we can harvest them? So that's a little bit safe there.

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JE: And where was it that you grew up that this was taking place?

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RT: Well I grew up in Utica, Mississippi, a little small town southwest of Jackson, Mississippi and we farmed there. We had a 40-acre farm there and we had muscadine like in the--the wooded area. We had quite a few muscadine; we could pick 30 to 40-pounds of muscadine in the evening and like I said that was like snacks--they make great snacks and those is the great things we had back then. But that's the only history that we have but down through the years, and basic thing--that's what we'll just go with the history of making wine.

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JE: And--and when you--if--if you--is it your mother or father who made the wine occasionally?

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RT: Actually it was my grandmother; my grandmother made the wine and my mother would make jelly because they're from an older generation so the best thing they had natural sugar, so the basic thing that you can--when you're making jelly you use the--they will get the skin juice and boil it down, get the skin juice to make muscadine juice. You also could make muscadine syrup as well and so those are type things that they use there. But basic thing that was no different type technique more--no more than steaming the juice and cooking it down to--and let it cool down to a jelly. When you put the pectin -it has a natural pectin in it but then if you wanted to get it a little bit stiffer you will add the one that you purchase from the store to make a jelly. And basic thing that was it. You know like you would have muscadine jelly; you can put it on toast, bagels, even make muscadine bread and you also can make muscadine pie. I have seen several people use the muscadine pie but I never actually got into--.

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JE: Those whole pies, the people that are making--using the--they're using the slips, the grape skins?

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RT: Actually they--no; they use--actually they use the pulp to make the muscadine pie to get that. The basic thing they use--they process apples and--and the juice which makes the apple taste like the muscadine itself to give you some type of solid. But basic thing that's what they're using--they use there and also they will use the muscadine skin as well, especially the purple. They would use it back for dye if you wanted to dye something that color and you used it if you wanted a cake like a marbled cake, you used it, you--extract--the color the from the skin and put

it in whatever food that you're going to use--use it as food coloring 'cause it's a natural food coloring as well.

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JE: Now when you began making wine did you think about your grandmother and how she did it or--?

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RT: Yes; in a way but she basically boiled hers, but basic thing as a harvester you always have techniques. In order to get juice from--from any grapes they have to be crushed first and not pressed, so basic thing you have to get a crusher to crush them, so you crush them with hand and then you get a machine to crush them. That's when you--that's more a modern day time; back in--in their time they just boiled the juice out of the whole grape itself but the modern time you would crush the grapes to extract the two different juices. You would get the pulp juice and then you would get the skin juice. And basic thing you would let the juice sit for like two to three days on the skin and then you pressed--once you pressed the juice you would get all the juice out of the skins. And then you'd let it sit for a couple days and do it that way. But the pulp juice is a free-running juice when you send it through the press, you know once you crush it, so that's the only difference there.

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JE: And when you make your wine do you make a fairly sweet Muscadine or a fairly dry wine and--and why?

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RT: Well actually I make the majority of wines sweet but wine is made dry. Wine can go into the vat syrupy sweet; what happens there during the fermentation--fermentation stages that sugar is turned to alcohol so it becomes dry. So all wine is made dry; the basic thing you sweeten wine at the end of the process when you're getting ready to bottle it, so you sweeten it to taste but all wine is made dry. The fermentation takes all the sugar out and turns it into alcohol. Now if you want to preserve the juice from the--well you either pasteurize it through a hot process, a hot pressurization or cold pressers, cold pressurization meaning that it would be just like the day crushed it. So you would freeze it with all the--the enzymes, the wild yeast that would turn it--it would kill off all the bacteria(s) so it will preserve the wine itself and without putting anything in it. So that's how you make your juice; you use--send it through a heat pressurization or cold pressurization. And that way you don't have to have any additives in it, no more and cap it off and bottle it and go from there.

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JE: And then when you're sweetening at the end are you adding sugar or honey or--?

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RT: Well the basic thing we do we would use cane sugar to sweeten it or we use the juice and sweeten it back 'cause the juice is actually syrupy sweet and you--so you also can sweeten wine with juice as well. So basic thing we're trying to do a natural process without adding additives like even though the cane sugar process to--and it makes a great sweetener but if you use the juice, it will sweeten as well and again like I said it's all natural because you sweetened with the juice with the juice that came from the one thing and you're just adding it back into that.

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JE: So is--which are you doing now? Are you doing a little bit of both or--?

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RT: Well we do both; we--we do both right now.

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JE: And does that vary based upon the bottling? Is there one bottling that you have that is--that is straight sweetened with juice?

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RT: Well all of them--all of them are the same; basic thing is--is certain batches that we would do and do it that way. Basic thing we're like--we try to move it faster again because most of the time if you have a young wine you would have to let it age. Otherwise their fermentation to go through; you have to kill off the bacteria to stop the fermentation, otherwise it will continue to ferment until all the sugar is out and that's when the bottles pop. The basic thing, if you let it sit for about a year or more all the fermentation will stop and all your bacteria can kill off. That's when you go in and re-sweeten it and bottle it and that's when you get your--your fine wine there.

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JE: Did you drain it of sediment at that point too or--?

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RT: Well we rack it; yes we--we don't do any filtering. We found out that when you rack it several times it--it has a--a natural curing state, so the basic thing you just continue to rack it--you mostly rack it about like five times and that's much better than filtering because when you filter it you fill out all your minerals out of the wine, so you just have a--a good clear refreshing drink. That's all you have but you won't have anything that have of these properties in it--pharmaceutical properties in it. So basic thing if you don't filter it you--you can retain those and those things that you'll b drinking the wine for. So normally if you see a little wine that you can shake up a little sediment in it that's good. But if it's thick like mud that means that that's quite new, so basic thing that's when we go to the racking process to clear all the must out and do it that way.

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JE: And for you and for your customers who buy this how much of this is about the--the health giving properties of muscadine and how much of it is about the pleasure of drinking you know a drink that your grandparents would have drank?

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RT: Well basic thing that most people drink it for relaxation but now people will drink more wine for their health reasons because of the fact that they was trying to stay away from a lot of the pharmaceutical things that they're taking because the people want a natural process; so basic thing, the people that drink for more than their health than pleasures now.

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JE: And--and that's changed in the past five years; yeah?

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RT: Yeah; yes actually if you go across the country you'll see wine in all the groceries now. At one time back when my grandparents' time they didn't have--they had separate stores.

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JE: Still do in Mississippi. *[Laughs]*

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RT: So now you look at the groceries, so it began to evolve that you can drink wine and someday--we're in the Bible Belt so the basic thing that you could buy wine at a winery on Sunday, so basic thing that they have wine--all the wineries if they want to be open on Sunday they can be open from 12:00 to 4:00 and--and they can come out and get wine. You can't consume it but they can you know taste it, purchase it, and take it--take it back with them and do it that way.

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JE: And tell me about your--your efforts to sell your wine. We're--we're sitting at your home now, a lovely white clabbered home with pool alongside and your workspace behind. Do you do most of your business out of here, out of these spaces?

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RT: Well actually this--this is the winery, and the winery is sitting out and like it's in a 30 by 40 with a 60 by 60 walk-in cooler, so we do all the processing here. And we market from the Internet. We've been all across the country doing wine tasters and basic thing that's the way we

market. We do not have a distributor right now 'cause of the fact that we don't have the volume that they want but basic thing that we try to have enough so we can keep our customers satisfied is what we do here.

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JE: And so when you say Internet, so these are--these are people that are finding you by way of the Internet and you ship out to them?

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RT: Basic thing these are--go out on--and they go out onto the sites and they will see the wine out there and they will order. And the basic thing, the wine that we make it doesn't have any other type fruit added. Most other wines they've added either peach, strawberry, or blackberry--whatever the case. This would be 100 percent muscadine; there is no other fruit added in and that's why we're trying to stay pure muscadine instead of adding peaches or whatever the case--flavor might be because we wanted a true muscadine and that's one that we want for our health reasons, you know because like I say when you're adding all the other stuff. The muscadine has a taste that you will never forget. If you start drinking the Muscadine wine you won't drink another type wine you know--so because of the fact that the properties that it has and you'll probably go out and look for the type wine. Once you taste this wine you'll probably go out and try to compare it to other wines but you won't be able to do that.

JE: And--and what do you call your bottling--your wine?

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RT: This is--the wine--the winery is Tilford Winery.

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JE: Tilford?

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RT: Yeah; Tilford Winery. That's the name after my father.

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JE: Is it his first name?

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RT: Yeah; his first name is Tilford Taylor and he's just past last--actually a couple months ago but we did it in his honor and actually we released a label back in '04. We've been making wine over 15 years plus but we didn't want to tease the market so basic thing we had enough wine in '04 and we released the label so we've been moving ever since and--and the business sustained itself. So everything has been--been great; you know we don't have any unique marketing techniques no more than people call and say hey we'd like to come out. We'll give you a tour. At the moment this is--we're using this building here which is the 30 by 40; within the next three to four years we'll have a 100 by 60 overlooking the vineyard, so basic thing because we want people to see the vineyard and also come to the winery. And they'll have an understanding how stuff is done more so than one place.

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JE: Is there--the--the grapes that you're growing, are these some that--that were on this property before or these--did you inherit or did you plant or--?

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RT: No; everything was from scratch--everything we do--we do our own propagation because of the fact that you can't get true vines if you go to a nursery. So basic thing you have to buy at least about 10 to 15 true vines and then you propagate from those true vines and you know what you have and that's what basic thing that we do and basic thing, like I say we propagate like 2,000 or 3,000 vines a year and we also sell the vines as well also, the you know--to other people that wants to create vineyards there.

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JE: And the--the--the totality of your vineyards are in the area back behind your--your--your winery; is that--?

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RT: Yeah; actually we have three locations in the area. They're in--we have one in Houston County; we have two in Crawford County.

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JE: Of the vineyards?

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RT: Yeah; yeah so I have other things. Basic thing we use the one in Houston County and the area here for our tourists and stuff like that. The other we use for--for production and basic thing this one is for production as well but basic thing, this is the one close by close to the winery so if you want to take a tour of the winery we can take you down to the other vineyard as well and

you could taste the grapes and then you also can taste the wine as well. But within the next few years we'll try to have all that together, so you can walk out into the vineyard from the winery. Where we're staged at now we do have a few vines out from the winery that you can go out and taste the grape as well; and that's what we have here now.

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JE: And you, on this date in August, it's about time to pick?

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RT: We're actually two weeks behind production because of the fact that we had the storm came through last week, so we weren't able to get started, so the basic thing we'll start actually Saturday morning, start out '08 harvest this year. So it probably will take probably about three weeks to harvest and once we're finished that we'll still have some other to scrap 'cause now we pick like twice--twice from the same vineyard because all the grapes don't get ripe at the same time.

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JE: And the totality of acres in production that you'll be picking come Saturday is how many-- how many acres do you have in total?

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RT: Okay; we have a total of 60 acres in the area, and basic thing like I said we have--the one we'll start on Saturday will be one of the smaller plots which is a 10-acre plot and the other one like I said the total we have is like 60, but it's steady growing, so that's what we're looking at right now. We're trying to stay with the old cultivar. They have several cultivars that people use

different wines but we found out the old cultivar makes the best wine and those are the ones that have the--the best--the best properties to make the best wine and yeah; we do it that way.

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JE: And I realize this is in essence your second full-time job in doing this. You work at Warner Robbins Air Force Base. Is there a time that you see in the future when you'll retire from there and take this on--?

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RT: Yes; we're looking at a couple years out. This--this is a full-time job and we'll have three guys are working full-time with the winery; that's what they do. They go out and do the vineyard management and they also help harvest and take care of the wine as well, so basic thing that we already have a staff in place to--to take care of when it needs to be taken care of. But it's not a one-person operation.

00:30:02

JE: It looks far too big to be a one-person operation. Are those folks family or are those friends or--?

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RT: Basically they're--they're friends, and like I said--and we try to get educational tools to the surrounding areas, show them how--how grapes are made you know muscadine--we try to educate the people about the muscadine itself because normally when you mention muscadine people might say you mean scuppernong and scuppernong is a variety and basic thing that's a--we're trying to get onto people that say scuppernong is a--is a variety of muscadine and we're

also teaching that the muscadine is a grape and that's sort of like--sort of like coming around slow because people look at grapes in clusters. The muscadine do grow in--in a cluster like the regular vinifera grapes. So they're just a little bit--only they get ripe individually so you have to pick them individually so that's what you normally see in the stores.

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JE: And you don't pull down a cluster of muscadines; you're picking individual--?

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RT: Correct--correct.

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JE: And--and do you find--do you find that--that you know as the South changes, as we have new immigrants that come into the South and transform the South as people move from the country to the city do you find that people--that muscadine for a while had fallen out of favor that people had neglected the muscadine? Or has it always been with us?

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RT: The Muscadine actually been always with us but you had to find a market for it and that market has come around real fast. I always tell people the muscadine you have to go back to the catfish in Mississippi. You know we grew up on the farm where you went down to the creek; this time of year you--you can get all kinds of catfish because they was in the mud hole. But they all would taste mud but once you started to taking that catfish out of the environment and putting them in a clean environment so you had seafood, so now everybody want--they crave for catfish so the same way with the muscadine. Once you take them and put them in a cultivar and manage

them they become more tasty and they become more available. And that's--that's what makes them more popular. And also the muscadine can only be grown in the Southeast of the United States, so that's a natural--this is a native grape to this area. So that's a big plus right there; so the basic thing, you won't be able to get this grape anywhere else. It might grow but as far as production it won't grow anywhere else because if you put it in a place where it's too cold or frost too late or too early it will wipe out your whole production. So the basic thing you have to be within a good area within the Southeast.

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JE: And that becomes an advantage for you in terms of marketing and other things. This is a local food; this is very much a regional food--?

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RT: Yeah; it's more for a regional food, plus local, and like I say you have the muscadine-- actually--actually started getting ripe--you can start harvesting some--the fresh fruit you can start to harvest them the first week in August and that operation goes--can go all the way up to mid-October, so you will have muscadine grapes for that time span in there. So that--that's what you will look at there; so they have different varieties that begin earlier and then you have some variety--variety that in late, so basic thing you have enough to cover that whole span. And you will have some. Also if you harvest them you can freeze them and eat them frozen in the wintertime but if you just want them for fresh fruit they'll last three to four weeks if you keep them the temperature at 55-degrees there.

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JE: Well they're hardy and they've been with us for a long time.

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RT: Well they'll be with us and normally once you give people an education and teach them about muscadine if you travel on the interstate you can see the muscadine vines. And it's sort of like unique when people say oh let's grow a muscadine vine. But if you travel on the highway or the interstate you can look over on the right-of-way there on the fence line and you'll see muscadines hanging from the tree. You'll see the vines; you won't see the grapes but you'll see the vines there. And that's one of the things that you want to educate people about the recognition of the muscadine itself. So you can tell that for all, and--but I don't recommend them stopping on the side of the road there and trying to harvest them because the snakes and then traffic hazards and stuff like that. But basic thing you want them in a controlled cultivar to--to harvest them and they're not that hard to grow.

Like I say several years ago I took a vine to Memphis, Tennessee, to a great aunt and the vines were never pruned; they're about 60-feet one way and 60-feet the other way. And so the whole neighborhood had scuppernong in their backyard. You know they didn't prune them so nobody didn't worry about them, so but they all had grapes in the area there from that one vine, and so I thought that was pretty unique there.

00:35:19

JE: Well thank you for sharing your stories with us. Let's take a little walk around and I thank you for your time.

00:35:25

RT: Oh okay.

00:35:30

[End Tilford Winery Interview]