

Wining and Dining

The northern Yadkin River valley yields a rich bouquet of vineyards and restaurants.

BY ED WILLIAMS

The hillside climbing before me boasts gnarly vine and nubile leaf. To my left towers a turn-of-the-century gristmill. To my right squats an American Indian teepee. I've joined a ferocious game of Wiffle ball with the staff of a creek-side restaurant. Meanwhile, my wife, Leslie, is hiking through a rhododendron forest.

It sounds like a dream sequence, but this scene is just a sample of the surreal serendipity coloring the Yadkin Valley wine region. Here, a river runs through the ancient Brushy and Blue Ridge mountains. This geology nurtures grape growing, wine making, and a growing agritourism industry.

Before our departure, our car is carpeted with maps and lists and sticky notes, none ever at hand when needed most. My wife asks only that we eat well, rest well, and meet good folk during our back-road jaunt through the northern crescent of the Yadkin River valley, traversing Surry, Wilkes, and Yadkin counties.

Grassy Creek and Black Wolf

From our home in Greensboro, it's 90 minutes west to the morning's first stop,

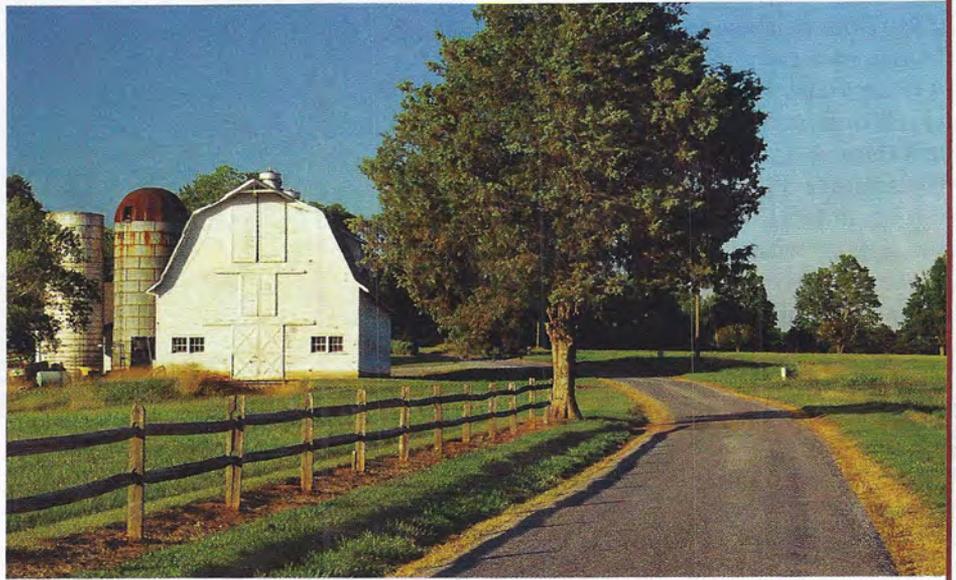
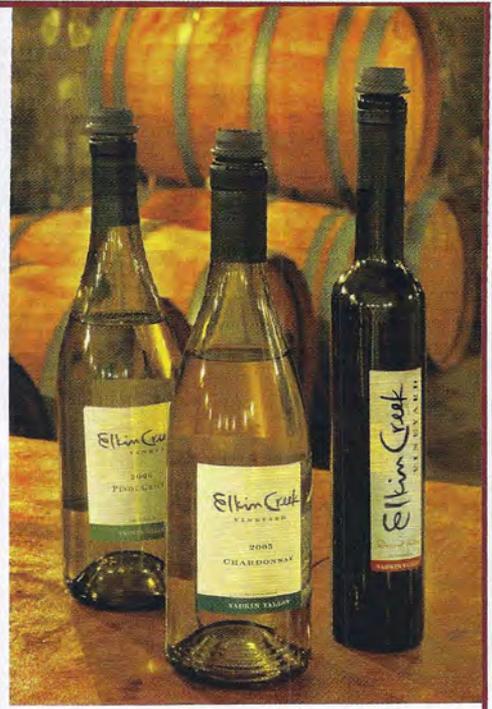
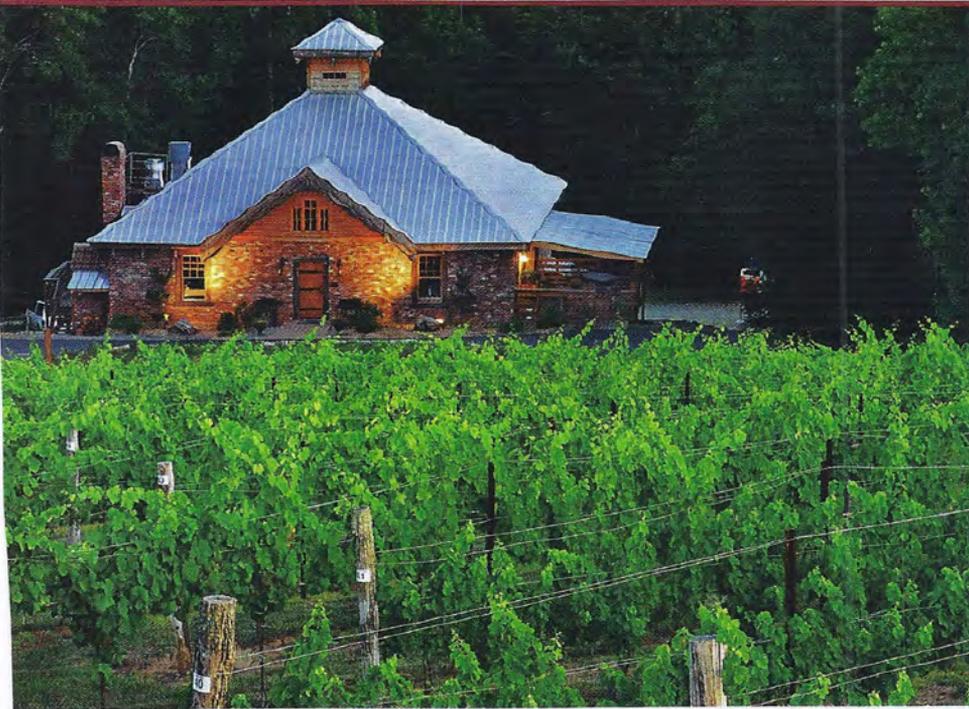
Grassy Creek Vineyard and Winery, north of Elkin. Lori Rice and Cynthia Douthit welcome us into Grassy Creek's tasting room, housed in a converted, red horse barn.

After chardonnay and merlot, we're introduced to Klondike Farm Guernsey Red wine, curiously clothed in a milk bottle. The antique bottles are imported from Italy, and the collectible testifies to the former dairy farm/creamery next door where Golden Guernsey once kick-started a chocolate milk favored by locals.

Grassy Creek Vineyard's 200-acre estate also houses Klondike Cabins, once the family retreat of textile icon John Hanes of Hanes Hosiery.

Rice and her husband, Derrill, have preserved the log cabins for business retreats, weddings, reunions, and romantic getaways. She sneaks us a quick tour, and we know that our next weekend getaway will be here. The cabins' rustic, hunting-lodge ambiance includes all modern amenities.

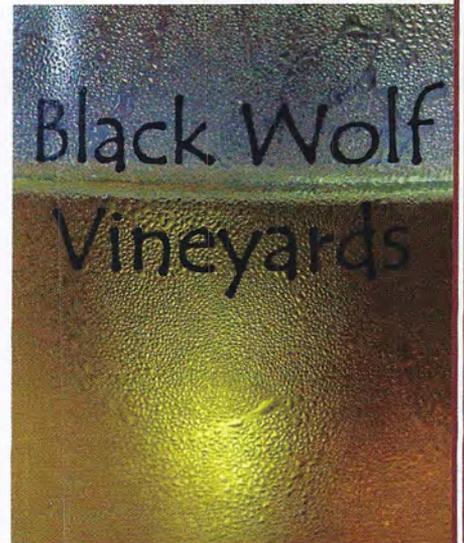
Our next stop is Black Wolf Vineyards for a late lunch. The Wolf's Lair restaurant is a sprawling log cabin with walls festooned with stuffed animal heads. Stuffed wolves prowl a



Top: Established in 2000, Elkin Creek Vineyard and Winery produces six varieties of wines.

Middle: Using antique bottles and a converted horse barn, Grassy Creek Vineyard and Winery honors the former creamery located next door.

Right: Located at the highest point of the vineyard grounds, Black Wolf's tasting room continues the log-cabin ambience of the restaurant.





Following a delicious dinner prepared by Jesse Williams (below) at The Kitchen (left), just walk across the footbridge to spend a peaceful night at Frog Holler Cabins (bottom).

second floor balcony, and photographs of wolves are everywhere.

Owner Dana Theis once raised wolf hybrids in Randolph County, selling them through *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. He bought the vineyard property in 1991, inheriting 3,000 vines from a home winemaker. Theis chose to save the vineyard and expand it to service a restaurant he hoped might draw food and wine enthusiasts.

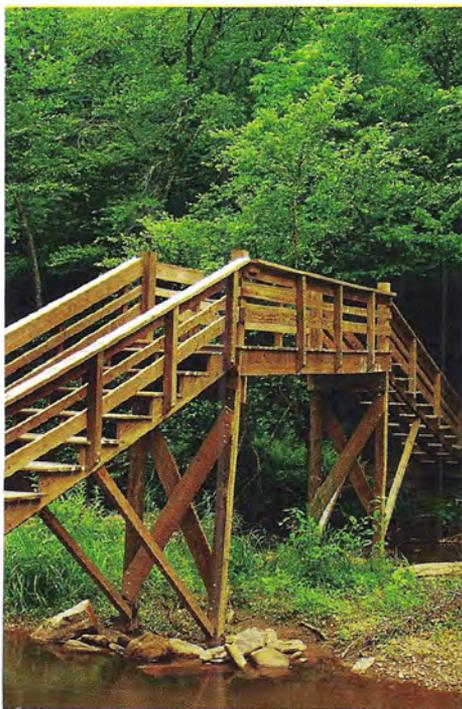
In that, Theis has succeeded. Leslie and I sample flights of three reds and three whites. I came for the heralded Black Wolf Chambourcin but leave with the Blue Moon White, a semi-sweet white for summer's humidity.

At home on Elkin Creek

At 3:40 p.m., we climb a gravel drive to Elkin Creek Vineyard, a mile outside Elkin. If you weren't looking hard, you might miss it. Nonetheless, this vineyard-winery-restaurant has tongues wagging, so folks look hard.

We arrive at the vineyard with a few hours to relax before our dinner at the on-site restaurant, The Kitchen at Elkin Creek Restaurant, and it's here that the surreal game of Wiffle ball takes place. After the game, we leave Elkin Creek to locate our lodging — Frog Holler Cabins, two minutes away across Big Elkin Creek.

At the cabins, we enjoy wine on the deck overlooking the swirling eddies



and waterfalls below. There's a hot tub here, but if we get in, we'll never get out for dinner.

Our reservations are for 6:30 p.m., but Elkin Creek's owner, Mark Greene, has other plans for us when we arrive. He whisks us to a private tasting in a cool barrel room to sample wines influenced by Italian heritage.

We top off with Sangiovese — and off we go to Jolly Mill upon Greene's invitation.

Jolly Mill, an early 1900s grain mill, today sits silent. Greene can point

fondly to the spot where a dam once corralled the surging Big Elkin Creek waters heaving life into the mill.

Photographs in this rambling haunt show kids frolicking in the waters that moved the mill that ground the grain that fed a hungry countryside.

Greene may be one of the last Renaissance men — a former banker and restaurant owner turned farmer-carpenter-entrepreneur, turned who-knows-what-else-next. He passionately embraces a today — and a yesteryear — he might trap, if not in a bottle, then

in this dusty, musky, cobwebbed mill, where machines are lovingly labeled to tell how it all once shook, rattled, and rolled. One day, I'll ask why he stays in that teepee under animal-skin rugs with his tom-tom and single-malt scotch. But that's a tale for another day.

Returning to The Kitchen, we encounter an elderly woman sitting on the restaurant's steps, gazing into the hillside vineyard. "You made the world a prettier place," she tells Greene.

"That," he confides, "is the greatest compliment I've ever been paid."

The Kitchen's menu is wildly eclectic. Usually, I'm embarrassingly un-adventurous, but tonight I impulsively order honey-lacquered rabbit, with a starter of seafood ceviche.

Leslie waggles an eyebrow: "Raw shrimp? And then Thumper?" She starts with asparagus-truffle risotto, finishing with brick-oven chicken and succotash.

Chefs Jesse Williams and Robert Schriver are craftsmen. Waiter Hugh Hampton's banter adds to a revelry lubricated by Elkin Creek's Pinot Grigio. When I look up, it's 10 p.m., and I'm not sure where the time's gone.

Armed with a flashlight, we trek across the creek, the crisp night air inviting us to fire up our hot tub.

Frog songs

I awake at 7 a.m. and return to that hot tub. A breeze sings through the tree line, creek crashes rock, and birds are in symphony. I could soak



Built in 1848 and located in the heart of the Yadkin valley wine region, the Rockford Inn is the perfect place to spend a restful night after a day of wine tasting.



if you're going

Grassy Creek Vineyards and Winery
and Klondike Cabins
235 Chatham College Circle
Elkin, N.C. 28621
(336) 835-4230

Black Wolf Vineyard and
Wolf's Lair Restaurant
283 Vineyard Lane
Dobson, N.C. 27017
(336) 374-2532

Elkin Creek Vineyard and
The Kitchen at Elkin Creek Restaurant
318 Elkin Creek Mill Road
Elkin, N.C. 28621
(336) 526-5119

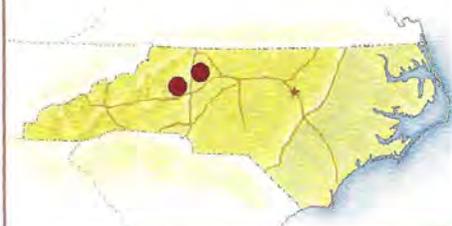
Frog Holler Cabins
564 East Walker Road
Elkin, N.C. 28621
(336) 526-2661

Shelton Vineyards and Harvest Grill
286 Cabernet Lane
Dobson, N.C. 27017
(336) 366-4724

The Rockford Inn
4872 Rockford Road
Dobson, N.C. 27017
(800) 561-6652

Stony Knoll Vineyards
1143 Stony Knoll Road
Dobson, N.C. 27017
(336) 374-5752

For links to the websites of the businesses featured in this story, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on "This Month's Issue."



After tasting the chardonnay at Shelton Vineyards (top), enjoy a light lunch outdoors at the Harvest Grill (above).

in the hot tub forever, but I've got maps to read and lists to check off.

At the appointed hour, John Litschke, owner of Frog Holler cabins, pops in. "How was your night?" he asks.

Litschke and his wife, Teresa, have day jobs shooting documentaries for the likes of HGTV and UNC-TV. Frog Holler is their year-old, sideline business: two 20-foot by 20-foot cabins, quaintly appointed with gas fireplaces and kitchenettes.

The cabins are just minutes from wineries, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and Stone Mountain State Park. I love that it's only yards from a fishing pond, walking trails, a swift creek, and a restaurant.

So how, I ask, did Frog Holler Cabins get their name?

"I'm surprised you didn't hear them," Litschke says. The frogs enjoy riotous nights down by the fishing pond. I must have been sleeping so hard that I missed the festivities.

People today, Litschke muses, somehow miss "just sitting around, doing nothing. We're not a B&B. We don't cater; we just leave key in door. We provide peace and quiet. People need to re-educate themselves how to slow down."

After a relaxing morning, we head for lunch at Shelton Vineyards, a stunning estate on former dairy land that impresses from its front gate to its back

crush pad. We grab a light meal here at the Harvest Grill Restaurant — French onion soup and crab cakes with Shelton's Riesling and Syrah. Intimate outdoor patio seating overlooks vineyards and immaculate gardens and picnic grounds. What I like most is that at the Harvest Grill — as at Wolf's Lair at Black Wolf and at The Kitchen at Elkin Creek — the menus are expansive, the food is artfully prepared, and the prices are a bargain.

Wine and weddings

We head east, crossing the rippling, rocky Yadkin River. Our next stop is Hannah and Doug Holyfield's porch at the Rockford Inn. This 1848 country home near the tiny historic town of Rockford opened to guests in 2004. Locals bragged so much that we stopped to snoop. The Holyfields graciously invite us in. Their three guest rooms are romantic, and I particularly like how a chardonnay vineyard beckons outside.

Soon we're off to see an old friend, Van Coe, owner of Stony Knoll Vineyards. His farmland has been in his family since 1896. Once home to tobacco, five acres of chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, Syrah, cabernet franc, and Niagara now grow here "to preserve the land [and] keep it in agriculture," Coe explains.

I'm awed by Coe's meticulous vineyard, not just row by row, but vine by vine. From a beautiful tasting room, inspiring symmetry outside greets me.

Stony Knoll Vineyards has become a hot spot for wedding photographers. So Coe finds himself growing grapes, making wine, and, on the side, hosting wedding parties. "Our economy needed diversification. This is good land use," he says.

That kind of thinking is breathing new life into the Yadkin Valley's rural countryside. This is true at Grassy Creek, Black Wolf, Elkin Creek, Shelton, and at Stony Knoll vineyards — all within 10 to 30 minutes of each other in the Elkin-Dobson area.

Inching onto Interstate 40 and battling the bustle into my city, I think of how each of the vineyards we've visited makes the world a prettier place. 🐾

Ed Williams lives in Greensboro.



NORTH CAROLINA'S AMTRAK®
Your connection to Raleigh, Greensboro, Charlotte and the Northeast.

bytrain.org

Senior discounts for 62 and older. Kids 2-15 ride half price. Seats are limited. Other restrictions may apply. CarolinianSM and PiedmontSM are operated as a partnership between Amtrak and the NC Department of Transportation. Amtrak is a registered service mark of the National Railroad Passenger Corporation.



**Cooper-Payne
Tree Farms, Inc.**

**From the mountains to the coast,
your source for cold-hardy palms,
desert plants, specimen trees,
shrubs & conifers**



- Cold-hardy palms suitable for the Piedmont and coastal areas
- Specimen quality Japanese Maples, shade and ornamental trees and shrubs
- Large evergreens including Norway Spruce, Deodor Cedar, Cryptomeria, etc.
- Historic property landscape restorations

Landscape Design and Installation available.

Sat. 9am-5pm, Sun. Noon-5pm & by appointment

919-801-0211 cooper-paynetreefarms.com

I-40 to Hillsborough exit 261 • Go south for about 1/8 mile
Turn right on Davis Rd • Approximately 3 miles take a left
into Brittney Creek subdivision on Remington Run.
2400 Davis Road is the first driveway on the left. The
property is surrounded by white rail fencing.