

The Fussell family and tens of thousands of sweet wine fans have turned North Carolina's Duplin Winery into the biggest muscadine operation in America. The impact on the region's agricultural profile is pretty big, as well.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JAMIE COLE

If muscadine grapes could talk, they might sound a little bit like the Fussell brothers of Rose Hill, N.C. ¶ The native Southern grapes would definitely have an accent, for instance. Like the Fussells, they would be honest about hard times. And they might be a little bit defensive. ¶ See, the muscadine is the Rodney Dangerfield of grapes. It gets no respect.



Taken on its own merits, it's hard to imagine why the mighty muscadine—also known as the scuppernong—needs a defense. It's a tough grape. The fruit itself is twice as big as that of the European varieties more common in wine culture (pinot, cabernet, chardonnay, etc.), and though all grapes contain high levels of resveratrol, the anti-oxidant, in their skins, some studies have shown muscadines to contain 6 to 10 times more than other varieties. The thick-skinned grape has evolved and thrived in the Southeast; in fact, the oldest surviving grapevine in North America, the 400-year-old "Mother Vine," resides in North Carolina and is, naturally, a scuppernong.

Still, some folks look down their upturned noses at sweet wines. "The industry in California has done a good job of promoting dry wine as the sophisticated thing to drink," says Jonathan Fussell (left), who with his older brother David (right) took over the family business, Duplin Winery (www.duplinwinery.com), from their father, David Sr., several years ago. "We sort of use that lack of respect as motivation for what we do," David says.

The Fussells earned their thick skins through some lean times. When David Sr. left the education profession in the late 1960s to farm—something he had always wanted to do—he started out, like many of his neighbors in Duplin County, in the hog business. One neighbor who started around the same time, Wendell Murphy, went on to earn his fortune with Murphy Family Farms, part of the Smithfield Foods empire. On the Fussell place, though, things turned out just a little differently. "Back then," says Jonathan, "your hog house and lagoon weren't separate. So one day Dad is cleaning out the hog house, and he falls into the lagoon." That was enough to sour David Sr. on the hog business. "So Dad says, 'I gotta do something different,'" Jonathan recalls.

Enter the sweet muscadine.

David Sr. and his brother Daniel planted 10 acres of grapes in 1972, planning to sell the fruit to a winery in New York state at a nice return. "They were gonna get \$350 a ton, which was a pretty

/// Acreage in estate-planted muscadine: **47 acres** /// Total acreage in production for Duplin Winery, including contract growers: **approx. 1,800 acres**

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