

‘Magnificent’ vineyard in Perrin’s blood

By **Bonny C. Millard**

[Print](#) | [Front Page](#) | [Email this story](#)



Connie Perrin started Richland Vineyards with her husband, Tony, who died almost two years ago.
-- Bonny C. Millard | The Ledger

The grapevines are still brown and bare as they wait for spring, but the work at Richland Vineyards doesn't stop for winter.

Connie Perrin has been working these grapes with her late husband, Troy, for more than 20 years. The vineyards now belong to his children, who purchased the farm from the estate, but Connie remains involved and shares her years of grape growing to help them as they learn the business.

“I’ve got a new title for myself – I’m a grower emeritus,” she says, smiling. “I’m passing my knowledge on as best I can. It’s just too hard on me to be out here in the wintertime and up here every day doing the work. I’m not physically able to anymore.”

Connie serves on the Tennessee Viticulture Advisory Board that advises the Tennessee Department of Agriculture on the state of grape growing and production. She was appointed by the governor and has two more years on her term.

Over the years, the vineyards have gotten into her blood. The farm’s shop has purple counters. She wears a purple sweater with matching wineglass earrings. She’s named the farm’s six large tractors: Vinny, Bubba, Clip Clop, Tracky, Cubbie and Mighty Moe.

Her hands have almost become too arthritic to properly handle the pruning shears she’s used for years to prune the vines back during the winter months. And though she’s passing the torch, it’s clear the grapes and their vines are still close to her heart.

“When it’s blooming or when it is growing, it’s just magnificent. When the grapes ripen, you can smell them. You walk through here, and you just get so hungry because you smell them. You can

smell them all over the vineyard. That's when all the animals come too. They know when they are ripe."



"When it's blooming or when it is growing, it's just magnificent," Perrin says of her vines.
-- Bonny C Millard | The Ledger

Troy Perrin's death in May 2013 is still painful, but the memory of what they built together is joyful. Connie shows a bottle of the last wine, a 2012 Black Muscadine, that Troy made and the special label that she created to remember him with.

"There is a lot of memories to the farm and the parties we had. We used to have a party in the fall we called it our "Grape Friends," she says of the other growers and other wine lovers who came to the gathering. "...Sometimes we'd have as many 150 people here. We'd set up tables out in the barn, and everybody brings wine."

The vineyard, named for the Blaine community where it is located, was started by Troy Perrin in 1987 when he bought the farm from his family after his parents died. The home where he grew up is still on the property. Connie explains he planted eight acres of American grape varieties.

She and Troy Perrin met in 1991 and were married five years later. Gradually, they added land and varieties, including some European grapes such as Vinifera, Chardonnay and Touriga Nacional.

The vineyard has about 17 acres, but Perrin said they've lost several acres of plants because of late winter freezes after the vines have started to bud.

During the most productive years, the farm had a banner crop of 180 tons of grapes, but Perrin said that was a particularly good year. The normal range of production is between 30 and 40 tons annually.

At one time the farm was the fifth largest vineyard statewide, but now it is about tenth in size, she says.

The weather can create monetary losses, but there's also the anguish of losing grapes.

Related Articles

- [The wine that saved a vintage downtown landmark](#)
- [Roy's events take wine, travel, even chocolate to new audience](#)

“You baby the grapes along, you see them bud out, and you get excited as they grow. Then you see them either rot away or the vines suffer. Like in the wintertime, when it comes a late freeze, the vine doesn't even bud out or it kills the buds after they bloom.”

During a drive through the farm, Connie points out the vines of different varieties including Niagara, Steuben, Campbell's Early and Golden Muscat, and the row of Concord grapes that were the last ones her husband planted before he died.

She offers trivia such as how the Niagara grapes are the ones used by Welch's to make white grape juice. She recalls the brutal late winter of '93 that decimated many vines.

“I've got pictures at home. It looks like a blow torch had been taken to the vines...because some of them had actually set little berries. All of it turned black overnight.”

Each acre is dedicated to a particular variety, she adds, and the more heavily used grapes have two acres. The grapes start coming in August, and the harvest wraps up by late October with the maturation of the Muscadine grapes, of which there are seven types. However, the work is year round.

“I work in the summer heat and the winter cold,” she says. “Every winter you have to prune off the dead growth and do a lot of renewals and trim off the berries.”

In the summertime, the mowing takes eight hours, and spraying takes three to four hours, and it must be done weekly.

“You have to spray. In our East Tennessee climate, we have so much humidity and so many diseases from that humidity that we have to spray about every week with fungicide to fight the diseases. We have a few insect pests: June bugs and Japanese beetles are a few of them, and the stink bugs. There's a new fruit fly that's very damaging to the vines so we have to spray for that.”

Troy and Connie Perrin did most of the work themselves with Troy driving the harvester, and Connie doing the pruning. They would hire a crew to help with the picking when the grapes were ready.

The grapes are sold to Blue Slip Winery in downtown Knoxville and to the Collier group that includes several area wineries. Richland Vineyards also has a robust business of people who come pick their own grapes to make homemade jellies, jams and juices. The pickers return year after year, some traveling from as far away as Virginia and Georgia.

“We've had people coming for 20 years,” she notes.

For a short time, Richland Vineyards became a farm winery that was able to sell wine made by Blue Slip from their grapes. Locals would stop in to buy a bottle of their wines.

“We had a farm winery open for a few months when Troy was still alive, and when he passed, I had to close it because everything was in his name. But we had a real good business built up. A lot of the local people came and bought from us.”

Now his children are continuing their father’s legacy with the vineyard and becoming third generation farmers.

“The children will carry on,” Connie says.