

TRACY ALLAN CHESSER
Chesser Island Winery – Folkston, GA

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

00:00:03

John T. Edge: All right; so we're working. This is August 25, 2008; I am in Chesser Island--I am at Chesser Island, Georgia just outside Folkston.

00:00:17

Tracy Chesser: At Chesser Island Winery.

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JE: And I'm with Tracey Chesser, and would you please tell me your given name and your date of birth?

00:00:26

TC: Yes; Tracy Allan Chesser, August 26, 1968.

00:00:31

JE: Okay; and I--we began our conversation a moment ago and I'll--we'll just start backtracking if it's good by you. I began by--we're sitting here at a table and in front of us are Suwanee Tawnee wine, a Chase Prairie Rosé, a Bugaboo Blue, and just a moment ago we were talking about Tracey's motivations for making wine at Chesser Island Winery. And he began telling me--.

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TC: Well I mean the motivations were--were twofold; one in the sense being a lawyer and not making anything and wanted to create something, so we started making wine; and the second motivation being to draw attention to this area. We have the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge within several miles of Folkston; we get 400,000 people out there a year and based on the demographics and the studies related to them, the question was presented if they were here and wanted to buy something would they? The response to that was yes. And then the question asked next was--what was there for them to buy? And the response to that was only 12-percent thought that there was anything worth buying. So the wine was done with specific Okefenokee labels to try to promote the area, present the Okefenokee in a positive way to these eco-tourists if you will and to show them there was something worth buying, taking home, and then telling their friends about and then hopefully they would come back down as well. So that 400,000--well they've actually done demographics on the swamp or studies indicating that it could handle 800,000 a year. Well to an area like Folkston that would be a huge economic impact and that's kind of the focus of that and I was trying to present the swamp in a favorable way.

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JE: And that idea of presenting the swamp in a favorable way is important to you; you have deeply family roots here.

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TC: Sure; the Chessers have lived in Okefenokee for approximately 150 years. There is an island in Okefenokee called Chesser Island that my great, great-grandfather settled on. They homesteaded and then my grandfather ended up building a homestead there that's still there. And they do tours out there and people that want to go see the way that they used to live years and

years ago are able to do that by visiting the area. And that's actually where my father and all of his siblings--there's a total of seven of them--were actually born.

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JE: And tell me the name of your forbearers that--?

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TC: Well it's Tom Chesser and his family; Tom and Ida Chesser are the ones that had the homestead out there.

00:03:05

JE: And that same homestead is what graces your label correct?

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TC: That's correct; we actually commissioned an artist to come in and do a rendition of the homestead and that's what we present on each one of our labels.

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JE: And one of the other things that I wanted to talk about was the choices of wines. The idea of using muscadine, scuppernong, using blueberry; talk to me about that.

00:03:29

TC: Well the whole--the whole goal of the winery again in promoting the area is to also use things that are grown in southeast Georgia. We could have cabernet grapes shipped in from California or--or get them elsewhere but the whole thing was it was homegrown, home-presented

and to showcase what we could make here. And what we do is--we do muscadine, blueberries, blackberries and we are experimenting with a new grape called Blanc DuBois.

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JE: And the idea of making the range of wines that you make are not hyper-sweet like many of us think of--Muscadine and Scuppernong being hyper-sweet. Tell me why y'all look toward some wines that are not so sweet.

00:04:14

TC: Well we do cover a gamut of different types of wines; we do have super-sweet wines which are--but they're finished in a port style so it has high alcohol levels to counter the sweetness as you would expect in a port. We have a middle grade sweetness if you will; it's the blueberries and it's for those that like traditional sweeter variety of wines. But we also have our Chase Prairie Rosé which is finished with about two-percent residual sweetness but it comes across a little drier than that because of the acidity from the blueberries and the muscadine. I wanted to present the muscadine as being a fruit that could stand on its own and then I added just enough residual sweetness that complimented the fruit but--but without hiding the muscadine character and I think that we've done that with the Chase Prairie Rosé.

00:05:03

JE: And you mentioned earlier this--this idea that--that in many cases when winemakers are using muscadine and scuppernong the--the hyper-sweetness can be used to hide flaws within the wine.

00:05:18

TC: Sure; I mean muscadines with their thick skins have a lot of phenols in them that are released if you ferment on the skins. But with the muscadines that we use they're pressed almost immediately after being picked so that it doesn't carry that harshness that goes--or the bitterness that goes with the phenols. And then we try to cool ferment it so it retains the fruity character and then just add absolutely the minimum amount of sugar at the end to compliment the fruit.

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JE: And how difficult is the cool ferment in the hot deep Georgia climate?

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TC: Well when you have 1,000 square foot cool room not that difficult. And I'll show that to you in a minute.

00:05:57

JE: We also talked about the--the difficulties of--of rainfall and humidity in--in this climate and growing vinifera grapes as well as others.

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TC: Right; the University of Florida is making a lot of inroads with inoculating certain vinifera grapes but the key to that is trying to pick a type of vinifera grape that is an early harvest variety such as the chenin blanc and you know our rainfall or our heavy rain usually comes mid part toward the end of July and it carries through the current day where we've had 13-inches in the last three days.

So if you're dealing with a bunch grape then you're going to be fighting the different mildews--downy, powdery, bunch rots, and thracknose at a much higher level and it's going to be a lot more difficult to control when you do have higher humidity and rain in the area. July down here is high enough humidity but it's not as bad as it is during the later summer, so we're able to control that with a spray program that occurs about once or twice a week.

00:06:56

JE: And you don't run into the same issues with muscadine and scuppernong?

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TC: No; they're--they're a looser variety. They also have a much thicker skin so they are accustomed to this type of area, so they grow freely and they're acclimated if you will to the high humidity and rain.

00:07:15

JE: And when I think about you know the wines that you make being products of this place, those wines, the muscadines and scuppernongs are true expressions of this place. They--they would have grown wild here?

00:07:26

TC: Well the scuppernongs would; we use varieties of muscadines that through breeding and release have transitioned into better grape--or wine varieties and those being the Noble, Carlos, and Magnolia and those are the three we really focus on. That's not to say you can't make good wine from other muscadine varieties but Chesser Island Winery--those are the three we really focus on.

00:07:49

JE: And of those which do you grow?

00:07:52

TC: We grow--well all three--Carlos, Magnolia, and Noble. Well we do get other varieties or--
or additional juice from Still Pond Vineyard in Arlington, Georgia.

00:08:04

JE: And when you spoke about the importance of--of kind of showcasing the--the--the
Okefenokee Swamp area and your own neck of the woods, why choose wine to do that?

00:08:20

TC: Well a lot of people enjoy wine. We may be in the Bible belt but a lot of people really
enjoy wine; it's something that people can buy and keep for an extended period of time whether
they drink it or showcase it and it's something that they can share with their friends. So given
those factors we felt that wine would be the best way to I guess allow them to carry a little bit of
the Okefenokee home with them.

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JE: Now did you come into this winemaking--well how long ago did you begin winemaking?

00:08:51

TC: 1999, so that will be about nine years ago.

00:08:53

JE: And did this come out of a long fascination with wine itself or where--where did this come from?

00:09:00

TC: Well I mean there was a number of people in the family that would make homemade wine. But I set about to try to do it a more I guess modern approach using cool fermentations, purchased yeast, and other I guess modern approaches to winemaking. And there's--there's a world of difference, and that's not to say people that make homemade wine don't do a very good job of it--they do. But it's all to the particular taste and my taste that I was focusing on was a drier style wine that focused more on the character of the muscadine and the sweetness of the wine.

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JE: And if--if that's your modern approach tell me about the historical kind of antecedents to yours within your family, other people in your family made wine?

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TC: Yeah; they did and I can't tell you how many times somebody has come up to me and they tell me how I'm supposed to make wine. And I--I always listen to them but it always involves burying the wine, and they say what you do is you get this five-gallon carboy and you put some Muscadine(s) in there and you put five-pounds of sugar--no more, no less--five-pounds of sugar. You shake it up, bury it; you bury it for three months and you go dig it up. So you know there's a story or process that involves burying the wine. I'm usually probably going--I'll listen to them

and give them the respect of hearing their story but I probably won't incorporate that in my winemaking.

00:10:15

JE: What does the burying do? I mean what's--?

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TC: Well they didn't have cooling units back then, so the burying allowed the wine to ferment at a cooler temperature and out of direct sunlight and they were using clear carboys. They didn't have colored ones back then, so any time you have heat and light and being imposed upon wine you're probably going to end up with a bad product. So it was buried to keep it cool and keep it out of the sunlight.

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JE: And I would imagine too this was before it was legal to make large quantities of wine in your home, so it would have been out of sight.

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TC: Well it was out of sight but everybody is allowed to make 200-gallons of wine as the head of household every year and individuals can make 100-gallons and rarely--I don't know of anybody that is exceeding that on a personal basis.

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JE: But you are now.

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TC: I am but I'm licensed and then they get state excise tax, federal excise tax; you name it. Wine is taxed at so many different levels. It's you know it's a good source of local income for the community.

00:11:09

JE: With that in mind would you walk me through the--the range of products that--that y'all produce?

00:11:16

TC: We produce a--a rosé that's finished. That's the Chase Prairie Rosé. It's a combination of 90-percent muscadines and 10-percent blueberry. The blueberries is what gives the wine the nice rosé color that it has and the blueberry skins is actually a very good fruit to retain the color component of the rosé. Most wines that are made in the rosé fashion it's difficult for them to stay that color. And because it's so light and usually the bottles are clear, so they'll fade to a brownish tint over time--not the Chase Prairie Rosé. That's held up very well over exposure to light.

00:11:50

Next in the sweetness category on the distilled wine side is Bugaboo Blue. That's 100-percent blueberries; it's made with fruit that we source from around the Okefenokee. They're all rabbit eye variety blueberries. And it's finished a little sweeter at around four-percent residual sweetness and that's for those that don't want a real dry wine but don't want a syrupy sweet wine, and the blueberries have a very nice flavor to it.

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Moving up on the sweetness level we have Suwanee Tawnee and every one of these is named after some aspect of the Okefenokee and they carry a story on the bottle.

00:12:24

JE: Who came up with the names?

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TC: Me and the family; we'd get together and come up with the names--something that you know was whimsical because we don't take ourselves too serious but yet presents an interesting picture of the swamp enough to make somebody to want to read the label. And Suwanee Tawnee is finished in a port style; it's a combination of blueberries, blackberries, and some French oak, aged over about a nine-month period in a very, very hot barn. It allows the wood and the sugars to caramelize and it has a very nice port quality to it.

00:12:59

And then you have the sparkling wines; I don't know if you want me to give--

00:13:03

JE: Yeah; let's--let's go ahead and talk through those.

00:13:06

TC: Okay; the sparkling wines--we are as far as I know the--well I wouldn't--I can't say that anymore. North Georgia has got an individualist making some methode-traditionelle Champagne or sparkling wine. On the--the most driest level of our sparkling wines we have Okefenokee Brute. It's 100-percent muscadine and it's actually finished on the lower end of sweetness for the brute sparkling wine. It's .8 percent residual sweetness and moving up from that we have Jackson's Folly--no, we have Billy Bowlegs Blue. It's again 100-percent blueberry; it's at about four-percent residual sweetness and it's a red sparkling wine so you've got to be real careful with

that when you're celebrating with it. And moving up a little bit further we have Folkston Funnel Bubble; that is a combination of the 100-percent muscadine sparkling wine and honey that we source from around the Okefenokee. It's usually a galberry tupelo blend; it adds a nice little complexity character to the wine. And then we have another one that we're going to be releasing soon which is Fox Fire Cuvée Rouge--Fox Fire Cuvée Rouge; it's a combination of muscadines and blueberries and it's finished in an almost brute but on a lower end of the demising level.

00:14:34

JE: And do those wines and the--the composition of those reflect what ya'll drink at home as well? I mean if you are wine drinkers yourself is this--you know do these reflect your own tastes or do these reflect your understanding of the market? How did you--?

00:14:53

TC: Well you--I mean if you made just the wines that you yourself enjoyed you'd probably starve, so you have to have enough spectrum in the wine area to cover something for everybody that comes in the door. If people like true, dry, sparkling wines we've got that covered. If they like dessert style, prosecco style sparkling wines we've got that covered, so we've got the range of the different wines covered. What we personally enjoy drinking is the drier sparkling wines and the drier distilled wines. So from that end--

00:15:24

JE: So what's in your--what's in your wine rack right now?

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TC: We have a lot of Robert Mondavi Reserve; we have some--some nice sparkling wines in a brute fashion; those are typically the ones that I enjoy or--

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JE: So the Mondavis are cabs or--?

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TC: They're the cabs; they also make some others. They make a nice merlot as well. But I really like the oaky finish to distilled wines and sometimes that doesn't translate very well in the Muscadine. So to that extent we don't make what we like but--.

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JE: Oh no, no; it's not a criticism. It's a curiosity. Let me put this thing on pause.

00:16:02

TC: This is my wife Melinda.

00:16:03

JE: Hey I'm John T. Edge; nice to meet you. I'll put this on pause.

[Begin Tracey Chesser-2 Interview]

00:00:02

JE: All right; I was asking about kind of how you taught yourself to make wine and you--I asked you if you had you know if you had read *Wine Spectator* magazine, or traveled to California, and you began to tell me--.

00:00:19

TC: Yeah; I mean in my line of work I'm an attorney and I get to travel a lot for witness prep, depositions, and I was in New York a lot and I was in California a lot. There's--there's a winery in every State in the US now so there would always be an opportunity to go by and see a winemaker somewhere. And for example in New York, when they find out you're from Georgia you're far enough away that they're not worried about you from a competition point of view, so they'll--they'll take you back. They'll talk about it. Nobody wants anybody else to make bad wine. So and they'll--they'll tell you things and they'll point you in the right direction. So from that and reading a lot about winemaking and you--you try stuff. Some stuff works; some stuff doesn't.

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JE: Tell me about one particular winemaker on one of your travels that--that was especially helpful or the visit was especially enlightening.

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TC: Well I mean I went to Mondavi Winery in California and they have a number of winemakers there. And they were very helpful. Mumm Napa, they have a number of sparkling winemakers there; they were very helpful. You know they'll take you in and show you the process. They're not going to tell you the yeast they use or the enzymes or anything like that.

They will tell you how long they leave it on the skins to ferment, what residual sweetness they finish the wine up at, and issues such as that and--and again, the rest of it you have to figure out yourself. And I started out the first five or six years trying to make wine like that. But the problem was I didn't have fruit like that, so my approach in the last five years or so has been to try to make the best wine that I can from the fruit--fruit that we grow. And every fruit is different. For example, blackberries--you're not going to finish that in a dry fashion. You're going to have to have a fairly high residual sweetness to cut the acidity. It's all malic acid. So with that in mind, you're not going to have a dry blackberry wine. Blueberries on the other hand, their acid profile lends it very well to a dry to semi-dry residual sweetness and provided that you know you handle the fermentation correctly that can be finished in that fashion.

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JE: And when you're walking into a winery you like you mentioned the Mondavi, are you going in as an everyday consumer or a wine tour or are you calling them in advance and saying I'm interested in making wine; can you help?

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TC: No; I called them in advance and they have been very receptive. Probably some of the smaller wineries have been more receptive and not necessarily in California. Now the sparkling wine--the smaller sparkling producers in California have tended to be more receptive such as Iron Horse and a few others.

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JE: I--I really admire Iron Horse's wines.

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TC: Yeah; the winemaker there is great and he's more than happy to talk equipment all day long with you and I apologize I can't remember his name. But I always call and tell him when I've had a bottle of Iron Horse and he's very receptive.

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JE: That's great and I like your idea that you know you're in south Georgia, in extreme southeastern Georgia and you're not a threat to California.

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TC: They're not--they understand that but when they find out that I actually make sparkling wine they're very interested in trying it. And I've had some great reviews and comments from those winemakers.

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JE: And--and in a way is there kind of a fraternity of winemakers that they want to assist you in this process?

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TC: Well again nobody wants somebody else to make bad wine. They will help you in the door but they're not going to sit you down, if you know what I mean. They're going to guide you along the way and then you've got to figure out the rest depending on your fruit.

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JE: And your fruit, we started talking about that--you grow how many--how many acres or what's the--what's the parcel of fruit grown here?

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TC: We have 40-acres here; not all of it is planted in fruit. We have a large portion of it in blackberries and in blueberries and Muscadine and a couple acres of Blanc DuBois. There's another section of property across from our house that we get some blueberries from as well. We source a lot of the blueberries from other growers around the Okefenokee because if you look on some of our labels you'll see product of the Okefenokee. If that's on there that means we got all that fruit from around here and when I say around here, I'm talking about the Okefenokee--there's about a five-county area that the Okefenokee sits in. And we try to promote the area by buying fruit from those growers.

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JE: So if it says product of the Okefenokee it's from those counties that are contiguous with the Okefenokee?

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TC: The five-county area correct.

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JE: And there is not a--an AVA, a wine--?

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TC: No; the--the AVA for us would be a product of Georgia. You know you can have a multi-county area be considered an AVA but our climate environment is no different than say Southwest Georgia really so you have to show some degree of distinction. Otherwise you're just stuck with the State. Do I have that on there--the muscadine was it maybe product of Georgia. So we designated it for that.

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JE: And tell me how your winemaking has evolved from your first attempts until now. You seem very confident in where you are now. Where--where did you start out?

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TC: I started out with five-gallon carboys and I think the first year we made wine, we made 12-gallons.

00:05:35

JE: And that was what year?

00:05:37

TC: Ninety-nine--we made 12-gallons and it kind of grew from there and right now we produce about 2,000 cases a year.

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JE: And when you started out in '99 with those few cases what were you making?

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TC: Blueberry--it was 100-percent blueberry. We were growing blueberries; we had a bumper crop one year and rather than just let them fall off the bush we decided to harvest them and see what happened with the wine.

00:06:00

JE: And was that the catalytic event, the bumper crop, or had you already been pondering winemaking? Was there--?

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TC: Well as a lawyer again I was wanting to make something and I was trying to figure out what to make. And it just seemed to come together with the wine, the Okefenokee, and kind of jibed and you know we've just steadily grown from there.

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JE: One of the more difficult things for small winemakers is getting their products in--in the hands of consumers. How has that been for you?

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TC: Well we handle it from two different ways. We are a retailer of wine; we have a small retail shop that the locals come by and people that visit the swamp stop by.

00:06:38

JE: That's here on the premises?

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TC: It is and we're also a wholesaler--I think we're one of two--one of two wineries in Georgia that also have a wholesale license. So we can send it to retail shops around the state if we so wish and we also have a distributor. Gusto Brands is in West Georgia, metro-Atlanta and we distribute through them in those markets.

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JE: And was that a difficult process to put all that in motion, but I guess perhaps as an attorney that made things a little easier?

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TC: Well look; I mean there's--there is a lot of paperwork just from a winery point of view much less a reporting point of view. I think there's 18 forms that I fill out every month between the wholesale, retail, excise tax, the whole approach; it's somewhat of a daunting task. The lawyer side of things makes that a little easier but it still takes a lot of time. Now from a wholesale--getting a wholesale license that was somewhat difficult but you know over time we achieved that. And I think that's why a lot of people don't wholesale is because all the hurdles that you have to jump through to do that. And once you sign up also with a distributor you can't wholesale in those counties that you get the distributor. And so once you assign a territory that's pretty much written in stone for quite sometime.

00:07:53

JE: And you mentioned earlier in our conversation--the kind of family history of winemaking and the like or regional history of winemaking, people burying carboys in the ground. Did you

have any--and you mentioned that in a kind of general fashion. Were there any particular members of your family that did make wine?

00:08:11

TC: Yeah; I mean I had a grandfather that made wine on both my maternal and paternal sides. It's not something that--that they made more than five-gallons a year but they dabbled in it. Times were difficult back then and I guess if they wanted some wine they were either going to make it or do without, so--.

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JE: And did that--you know in developing this product did that inform your work?

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TC: No; it--that didn't have a bearing on it. I mean if anything--anything you know the thought of burying wine you know that's--I mean I knew there had to be a different way from that and again not--not to criticize that way. If that's the way you do it--fine, but I wanted to take a different stylistic approach that I thought that--that could be achieved by making it in a different way.

00:08:59

JE: All right; well let's pause.

[Begin Tracey Chesser-3 Interview]

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JE: So I was asking why no one else was making sparkling wine from muscadine?

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TC: Well I mean it's my opinion that it's just a lot of labor intensive work associated with each bottle. You--I mean you could approach it from a bulk process where you put it in the tank and you tank ferment it and then you bottle it under pressure, but we don't do that. We do it in the metho-traditionalé which is the same way they make it in champagne where each bottle is fermented in that same bottle in which it's ultimately sold in. And to make that my last count was there's at least 21 points where you touch--actually touch the bottle and do something with it in the process before it's finally sold. So it's very labor intensive; there's a lot of ways that you can go awry if you will and not end up with a product that you're--and that your consumers are totally happy with, so--it's just a lot of work.

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JE: And talk--take me through those steps; I mean I know we'll go look at that process but take me through your process from grapes coming in to--to bottle.

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TC: Sure; you--you get the grapes in. You have to crush the grapes and depending on the type of wine that you're going to make you immediately press. If it's the white wine you want to go ahead and press them off the skins, the phenols, the color; if it's a red wine you leave it on the skins and let them ferment for an extended period of time--whatever that may be. Then you have to rack it off of that; you've got to get rid of the leaves and that's about three different processes

there where you're letting the solids in that wine settle to the bottle and then you're racking it off that to get a clean wine. We do on our distilled wines a very light filtration because we want as much of the natural fruit flavor passing through as possible. On the sparkling lines you have to do a sterile filtration before it goes into the bottle for the secondary ferment because you don't want anything else competing with the yeast or competing with the flavors that you're trying to extract during the secondary fermentation.

00:02:12

So then you put it in the bottles for the sparkling wines to undergo the secondary fermentation. You put in a predetermined amount of sugar, the amount of sugar that will give you the atmospheres of pressure that you want it to be at for the sparkling wine. Your proseccos are at a lower pressure; your traditional Champagnes are traditionally around six to seven atmospheres. So there's a lot of pressure there. And you want to add a few other aspects and yeast to it that gives it that flavor, that crisp clean yeasty dry flavor. And then it's just a matter of waiting about three months for it to go through the secondary fermentation and you have to move those bottles and put it in a--a riddling format. That is that you're allowing the yeast that's in the bottle to settle to the bottom and then you want to slowly move it to the neck of the bottle--bottle. And then at some point in time you have to disgorge that and then after you disgorge it then you have to put some type of closure on it. You have to add those [sides] to it, close it up, and then let it sit for another six to eight weeks. And then at that point in time you can label it and put the foil on it, and whatnot.

00:03:21

JE: And we often times think about this happening somewhere in Epernay or Reims and you're doing this--what's the facility like where you're doing this?

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TC: Well you have to have a cool room; the temperature is a must. You want it to ferment at a low temperature. You want it to go through a slower secondary ferment which is temperature controlled. When you riddle it you want it I'd say around 32 to 34-degrees because champagne is basically the liquid that has dissolved gas in it, and the warmer liquid is the quicker it dispels that gas. And the champagne making process--you want to try to keep as much of that gas in liquid form as possible so you do that by operating under very cold temperatures.

00:04:06

JE: And you're doing that here alongside the pool room which we sit now?

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TC: Right; the--the winery is a building that's located not far from our pool house if you will and it's got the cool room and it's got the equipment and everything that's associated with that.

00:04:23

JE: And talk to me a little bit about this kind of family complex where I sit now.

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TC: Yeah; well you're sitting in basically the pool house. We have done tastings here and do tastings here for large groups. But the real operation is the winery itself which encompasses the cool room, the retail side where we actually sell the wine and storage facilities for things that are associated with the winemaking.

00:04:44

JE: Well let's go take a look at that.

[Begin Tracey Chesser-4 Interview]

00:00:02

JE: Talk to me about using local ingredients and the import of that. You mentioned tupelo and galberry honey as being a part of some of the wines.

00:00:10

TC: Right; and--and our goal is to--to make a local wine made from local--locally produced products whether they're the fruit or the honey and not many people know that the Okefenokee used to be one of the largest honey producing areas in the US before it became a National Wildlife Refuge. As a matter of fact one of the islands out there is actually called Honey Island because it had an unusual high number of bee hives with honey production there, so--and we can't use 100-percent of one particular honey because the tupelo and the galberry come in at the same time and you can't tell the bees not to go to one and--as opposed to the other. So it's a nice blend; it gives a nice complex structure to the Folkston Funnel Bubble and we're just happy to use anything that local folks make here and incorporate it in the products.

00:00:59

JE: And where in--in looking around your property, the--describe for me the--the topography here. We're surrounded almost entirely by pine trees.

00:01:10

TC: Pine trees, Georgia is the only state where the pine--the pine industry is the number one gross domestic producer. And Charlton County is the second most pine tree populated county in the State. My brother is a forester; my dad is a forester; most of my friends are in the forestry business; we grow pine trees and we're just trying to diversify a little bit the winery aspect to show that we can do something other than pine trees to I guess buffer any recession in the pine tree industry, kind of like what we're going through now with the housing market the way it is.

00:01:51

JE: And in terms of incorporating local ingredients are there other things you're exploring? Right now you use blackberry, blueberry, muscadine, other--?

00:02:01

TC: Blanc DuBois and we have actually entertained and experimented some with a mead which is a honey-based wine. We've gone so far to make a Madeira--not a Madeira but a mellomell which is a combination of honey and a fruit to produce a wine. We've made some blueberry and tupelo galberry wine together; the problem with that is they usually have to age about four years before it gets to a point where it's agreeable. *[Laughs]* That's work in progress.

00:02:39

JE: And when we were over in the retail center of your establishment you showed me the display cases and you're making those yourself?

00:02:46

TC: Right; I wanted--that's correct. We make those here at the winery. One of the main ways that--you know people don't realize it but the Okefenokee is comprised of 30-plus islands, a half

a dozen prairies and a number of different lakes. And the way that the early settlers were able to get from island to island was by pulling a flat-bottom boat. We've incorporated--it's a six-foot tall flat-bottom boat that stands upright and we use that along with the Chesser Island Winery logo on it to display our wines at retail locations.

00:03:21

JE: And you're building those yourself?

00:03:23

TC: Yes.

00:03:24

JE: And we went through the--the riddling room for your--for your sparkling wine and talk to me a little bit about what I saw. I saw what looked like glass racks.

00:03:36

TC: Right; what we have in there now is all of the wine that we have--all the sparkling wine is now going through its secondary fermentation in the sense that it's--the base wine has been made. That's been sorrel-filtered; yeast and the appropriate amount of sugar to give the number of atmospheres and pressure that you want in the end product have been added, and it's going through that secondary ferment at a controlled temperature of around 65-degrees. And when we get ready to disgorge that we'll start inverting the bottles to allow the yeast that has developed in that bottle through the secondary ferment to slowly work its way to the neck of the bottle so when we pop the cap or disgorge it all the yeast is shot out and then we can add the dosage back to it and bottle it and let it rest and sell.

00:04:24

JE: And every piece of that is taking place on your property back behind your house somewhere between the pool house and your house.

00:04:31

TC: Yeah; that's correct. [*Laughs*]

00:04:35

JE: And your family--tell me about your family involvement in this. Your wife works with you as well?

00:04:41

TC: My wife is the co-owner of Chesser Island Winery and she's the brains behind the organization if you will. She does most of the marketing and she's a lot more people oriented than I am if you will. But you know everybody in the family--whoever has time available they're always more than willing to assist if I need help and I frequently do need help. I mean this is a big operation for one person, so the family does help out.

00:05:09

JE: And your wife's name is--?

00:05:09

TC: Melinda--M-e-l-i-n-d-a.

00:05:13

JE: And you have children and do they help as well?

00:05:15

TC: No; they don't.

00:05:20

JE: [*Laughs*]

[Begin Tracey Chesser-5 Interview]

00:00:02

JE: That's interesting; so we talked about the way that some of your efforts might help with tourism here in--in and around the Okefenokee, but there's also a sense that--that this work can help people see the value in the place that they live and the place that they grew up. Is that a part of this?

00:00:22

TC: Yeah; and then that's what we're trying to do. I mean everybody has a sense of place and you can either look back on whatever your sense of place is favorably or unfavorably. I think the--the place that I live is a wonderful place, you know and I want to share some of that with people that visit here. And you know not only do we have the Okefenokee but there's--there's a lot of good people that live here. And I just want to I guess relay to the people that do visit through here you know how much I like it, how important I think it is, and how much I think they would enjoy to visit it. And if you look at it from an eco-tourist point of view, I mean those--that's the--the group of people that spend a lot of money when they visit a location. The

Okefenokee is worth seeing; it's part of the National Wildlife Refuge and I think if people came here, gave it a chance, looked at it, and enjoyed it, they would see the sense of place that I appreciate about this.

00:01:17

JE: And perhaps the first way they're introduced to this concept is looking at a bottle of Chesser Island Winery seeing the--Chesser Island Wine, seeing the--the tin roof building on the front and thinking I want to go to this place. I want to see--.

00:01:33

TC: Sure; and--and most people that visit the Okefenokee they only get a glancing glow. The US government only allows a handful of people to actually go out into the Okefenokee every year. What people don't realize is again there's 30-plus islands out there; there's lakes, there's prairies and every one of those lakes, every one of those prairies was named for a reason. Bugaboo Island--it got that name because of something that happened there; Billy's Island you know--our wine is named Billy Bowlegs Blue. He was the last Seminole Indian Chief to leave the Okefenokee; Suwanee Tawnee--you know the--the--all of these labels are done for a purpose of trying to communicate something that the average person is not going to get to see by just casually visiting the Okefenokee. If you delve into what's out there you'll understand there's you know hundreds of years of history in the making and it's all got a cool story behind it.

00:02:26

JE: So what was the Bugaboo?

00:02:28

TC: Bugaboo Island was named because in 1878 I believe there was these two trappers that got stranded because of the storm. So they made it to Bugaboo Island, set up camp, and as the storm approached they kept hearing this awful noise that was coming from the center of the island. It was a Haney or a Bugaboo if you will, as they called it, and for almost two decades nobody else would go to the island because of the stories they relayed about that. Well eventually somebody got brave enough in the early 1900s to actually go out there and they discovered that there had been two trees that had grown together and any time the wind blew it rubbed them and it made an awful noise. They still called it Bugaboo Island after that.

00:03:14

JE: What's next in terms of--in terms of naming wines after places around here? What's the next project?

00:03:20

TC: The next project is Fox Fire Cuvée Rouge. It's a blend of Muscadine and blueberry made in the traditional sparkling wine method. It will be finished in a brut to a demi-sec and Fox Fire is just a fancy word for--you know what it is John--swamp gas. So--but you know the color of swamp gas that it translates well into the color of the wine that it, so most people don't realize Fox Fire is swamp gas.

00:03:54

JE: Naturally occurring phenomenon?

00:03:58

TC: Right; a combination of decomposing plant matter reacting with oxygen to create a glowing light.

00:04:04

JE: Thanks.

00:04:08

TC: You're welcome. [*Laughs*]

[End Tracey Chesser-Parts 1-5 Interview]