THIA CONNOLLY, owner/operator of Monticello Vineyards & Winery, displays some of her red and white wines, made from grapes grown and processed right on her Waukeenhah Highway farm, Ladybird Organics. (News-Press)

Winery Here Sees Growth

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Think California's got the market on fine winemaking in the United States.

Think again.

Florida, it just so happens, has 13 certified wineries. And one of these is right here in Monticello.

Monticello Vineyards & Winery, located about a mile west of US Highway 19 on the Waukeenhah Highway, produces an array of light and fruity wines that range from semi-sweet to dry, in both reds and whites.

Better yet, the grapes are organically grown, handpicked and processed right on the 50-acre farm, possibly better known as Ladybird Organics.

Certified since 1992, the operation has been quietly producing and selling organically grown grapes to health food stores, restaurants and via direct sales to the public for more than a decade.

But now that her operation has grown and evolved into commercial winemaking, owner/operator Cynthia Connolly is looking to promote her limited production of wines more actively.

Connolly herself makes for an interesting subject.

A Michigan native with a Masters Degree in English education from FSU and a Ph. D. in agriculture from the University of Iowa (she was the first women to graduate in agricultural education in this country), she has traveled the world extensively and worked for various governmental agencies, including the Florida Legislature and the United Nations.

She purchased the Waukeenhah Highway farm in 1989, while working at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture in Columbia. Ever since, she has been living and making her livelihood here via the implementation of organic farming principles, which she calls the agriculture of the future.

Organic farming essentially eschews the use of chemical sprays and fertilizers. To be certified organic by the US Department of Agriculture, the farm must meet certain requirements.

The vineyards is a perfect example of Connolly's philosophy of natural and holistic farming, where one component of the operation goes to supplement another, creating a system of circles that virtually make the operation self-sustaining, Connolly's ultimate goal.

Begin with the grape leaves and grape skins or pulp that are left after the harvest and winemaking. These so-called waste products go to feed the worm colonies (for lack of a better word) that Connolly grows in specially designed containers - one of several moneymaking operations that she runs on her farm.

The worms process the leaves and grape skins and produce what is euphemistically called castings, a nutrient and microbial rich compost that Connolly uses to enrich her grapevines and that she also sells to the public in bags or in bulk, along with the worms.

"Processing vegetable waste through the worms' guts does more than enrich the soil," Connolly says. "It also suppresses disease, has natural hormones to stimulate germination and you can use it as a tea to spray the plants. It's the secret to the vineyards' success."

But back to the winery, the focus of this article. Although Connolly's vineyards have been producing grapes since 1992, she didn't get into serious winemaking until 2000, as her expertise in the process and the production of the grapes increased.

The winery, in fact, is the latest evolution of her plan to make the farm sustainable and self-sustaining. Hence, her earlier experimentation with the growing and marketing of rye, wheat, oats and organic vegetables, the latter of which she plans to continue producing on a limited basis in the future.

"I have had to refocus as operations have proven unsuccessful," Connolly explains.

Although not commonly associated with Florida, winemaking is in fact a natural to the state, Connolly says. She points out that grape growing and winemaking in Florida actually preceded those operations in California.

What happened is that the imported
Spanish grapes didn't fare well here, she explains, and the Spaniards failed to discover or appreciate the value of the native muscadine grapes. Hence, the migration of grape growing and winemaking west, specifically to California.

"Muscadine wine is such a treat," Connolly says, singing the praises of the indigenous fruit. "It has bouquet and distinction. The wine's bouquet literally jumps out of the bottle. It's not sweet. It's a fully fermented dry wine. It's also a unique wine, locally produced in this vineyard, with minimal processing."

It takes three years for a vineyard to get up to speed and producing a viable crop. Connolly now has 10 acres of vineyards, which enjoy the distinction of being the only organically certified commercial vineyards in the state, and "maybe beyond".

"The greatest challenge is weed control without the use of chemicals," she says. "It's very labor intensive. I'm now putting down a weed mat or landscape fabric to control the weeds. I run the operation by myself, with sometimes help from volunteers and friends and occasionally paid workers."

Connolly, in fact, has purposely kept her operation small scale, to ensure its self-sustainability. Now, however, she is planning on upping production.

"Up until now I have produced 200 to 300 gallons of wine," she says. "It's been a small production. But I'm getting ready to expand. This year, production could double."

She remains ever levelheaded about her capabilities and her ultimate goal, however.

"I want to balance production with what the economy can bear and with what I can bear," she says. "I will grow as my resources allow and as the community allows. You have to be rooted and planted where you are."

Connolly's bottled wines, with their distinctive labels featuring the Monticello courthouse, can be purchased directly from the farm winery by appointment.

For samplings or purchase of the wines, call (850) 294-WINE or (850) 997-7224 or send inquiries to monticellowinery@aol.com.

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