



Lush Life

Move over Blackberry Farm, Persimmon Creek Vineyards cultivates a fab food and farm experience in North Georgia

| By Katie Kelly Bell |

Tucked into a fold of lush green valley two hours north of Atlanta sits Persimmon Creek Vineyards, one of Georgia's most acclaimed wineries. Boasting a stable of award-winning wines and presence on several top-tier wine lists like Woodfire Grill and Nikolai's Roof, the vineyard and its boho-cute owners, Sonny and Mary Ann Hardman, should be content with their success. (He's a physician who became interested in winemaking; she's an artist who hand-calligraphies wine labels.) But devoted purists like the Hardmans never rest on their laurels. Now a new chapter in the winery's evolution unfolds with clusters of East Friesian sheep grazing the vineyard rows, honeybees pollinating numerous gardens, and fresh sheep's milk cheeses aging in the springhouse. There are also three adorable guest cottages that would make Martha Stewart proud, featuring side-by-side clawfoot tubs, state-of-the-art kitchens and dreamy canopy beds. All of these changes make it tempting to compare this pastoral sanctuary to the famed Blackberry Farm resort, but there's no fancy spa or aristocratic sporting clay course here. And don't expect a uniform-clad staffer with a Lexus to squire you around this property. However, the Hardman's will gladly take you on a personal tour of the farm—*on foot*.

During a recent visit, Mary Ann is playing mama to a premature lamb, cradling it in her arms as we tour the 110-acre spread. Speaking with missionary zeal about their efforts at sustainability and "polyculture," she gestures toward the new solar panels used to run the winery (a small nod to 21st-century techniques). "I'm not a Luddite," says Hardman. "Technology has

its place, but I just love the old ways. We bottle and label by hand and keep things simple. Wine often comes off as a snob sport. We hope to change that."

Hardman also talks about their precocious new winemaker, Caroline Hoogenboom, who hails from Emory with a degree in classics, five languages under her belt, formal training in France, and a stint as assistant winemaker at Dana Estates in California (where she helped craft a wine that earned 100 points from Robert Parker). Currently, Hoogenboom is working on PCV's Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Riesling and Seyval Blanc. "I'm most excited about the Cabernet Franc because that is a grape that loves a cool climate, much like the one we have here," she observes. "We also just finished planting Furmint, the primary grape used to create lush, honeyed Tokaji dessert wines."

Next, Persimmon's master gardener, Jasmine Howard, leads guests through the culinary gardens, bursting with everything from Jerusalem artichokes and asparagus to mint and fennel. The bounty is free for the picking and often woven into the farm's seasonal wine dinners (frequently served in the vineyard itself) or daily breakfasts, where you might taste a quiche crafted from local duck eggs or muffins plump with native wild blackberries.

True, it may not have all the posh amenities of Blackberry Farm (not *everybody* requires Orvis-endorsed fly-fishing). But an unplugged stay at Persimmon Creek Vineyards is a welcome respite from the jangle of 21st-century life, offering a little slice of agrarian and epicurean heaven in the mountains of North Georgia. **A**

COTTAGE INDUSTRY

Persimmon Creek Vineyards is a family-run, mini cottage industry cultivating everything from wine to agricultural produce. *Clockwise from top right:* A pastoral view of the vineyards; barrels of house-made Cab Franc; local grapes; owner Mary Ann Hardman on the property.

Farm and Food Fêtes

On July 17, PCV hosts guest chef Virginia Willis, who will craft a traditional French menu with Southern influences. \$95/person. Aug. 21, guest chef Todd Richards of Rolling Bones BBQ and One Flew South serves up elegant barbecue. \$85/person. 706.212.7380, persimmoncreekwine.com. Cottages from \$325/night with two bottles of wine; wine tasting/tour on request.