

## New shake for state grape

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Just when you think you know a grape, it goes and surprises you.

Southerners, and transplants who pay attention to such things, know that fall means another crop of Southern-native muscadine grapes is ripe, ready to be turned into cola-sweet wine or eaten raw, with a little effort and skill.

But even muscadine lovers may not know that muscadine wines can be dry. That there's more to be made from them than grape hull pie. Or that the grape's seeds and skins contain antioxidants.

For those who didn't grow up in these parts, pulling handfuls of muscadines off their grandma's grapevines, there's a technique to eating this grape: Place the stem end on your lips, bite down to split the skin and squeeze the pulp into your mouth. Swallow the seeds whole and toss the skins. The skins are just too tough to chew up, and the seeds are bitter.

The problem with this tradition, say researchers, is that it means missing the healthiest parts of the fruit. The skins and seeds contain the majority of the muscadine's antioxidants, which help our bodies fight free radicals that cause cell damage and can lead to cancer and other diseases.

"It's like a secret that needs to get out," said John Snipes, a marketing specialist with the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

An industry has sprung up to make the health benefits of muscadines more palatable. At least three North Carolina companies sell capsules of ground muscadine seeds. There's also a powder to add to your morning fruit smoothie. And bottles of juice and extracts are popping up, as well as facial creams and body lotions.

At a recent muscadine day at the State Farmers' Market, Sandra Bass was selling Nature's Pearl muscadine grape supplements, juice and gift baskets. She told those who were tasting samples of the juice that muscadines can help alleviate migraines and arthritis and decrease cholesterol. She had copies of a recent news release from the National Institutes of Health that reported muscadine grape skin extract inhibited the growth of prostate cancer cells in laboratory experiments.

Bass and others in the industry say that muscadines are a good source of resveratrol, an antioxidant that was credited at one time for the "French paradox," the low incidence of heart disease among French people who consume a high-fat diet. But food scientists, including the NIH, caution that more recent research disputes the high levels of resveratrol touted by the muscadine industry.

While many in the industry cite anecdotes and lab research about the grape's health benefits, scientists say those do not prove what muscadines will do in the body. Clinical trials involving muscadine products are being conducted at Wake Forest University. Nature's Pearl paid for the research; results are expected next year.

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On the dry side

What is known is that muscadine wines are renowned for their sweetness. But not every muscadine wine can go toe-to-toe with Fanta Grape.

At Hinnant Family Vineyards in Pine Level, near Smithfield, they sell dry and semi-dry red and white wines, including the semi-dry Southern White. That wine, poured at the recent muscadine day at the State Farmers' Market, has a more tempered sweetness than most muscadine wines.

"There's a stereotype of Southern wines that they are like your traditional sweet wines," said Wesley Dills, Hinnant's tasting room manager. "This proves them wrong."

Seth Gross and Craig Heffley, who own Wine Authorities in Durham, say muscadine wines taste a lot like the grape, making it a good way to introduce novices to wine. By tasting dry muscadine wines, they say, a person could progress to wines from vinifera grapes, the European-native grapes that make most wines.

But does it work the other way? Not often, they say; dry muscadine wines don't tend to win over people who drink vinifera wines.

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A twist to a tart

As winemakers play around with tradition, so do dessert makers. Muscadine dessert recipes usually call for cooking the grape's pulps and skins together until tender and jammy but with the skins still evident. But April McGreger, a pastry chef who sells seasonal preserves and baked goods, has elevated the humble grape with her muscadine meringue tartlet. McGreger, whose business, The Farmer's Daughter, sells at the Carrboro Farmers' Market, was asked to make a dessert for the final dinner of the Southern Foodway Alliance's conference in Chapel Hill earlier this month. "I wanted to do something Southern, something in season and I thought the muscadine would be a good idea," she said.

McGreger wanted her pie filling to have a strong grape flavor with a silky, thick texture, akin to lemon curd. After several attempts, she found the trick; she used a food processor to emulsify butter into the cooked muscadine pulps and skins. She finished it with a dollop of meringue.

The muscadine meringue tartlet got the seal of approval from the Triangle's most well-known pastry chef, Karen Barker of Magnolia Grill. She says, "It was just the perfect little bite."

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Muscadine Meringue Tart

Filling

2 1/2 pounds muscadine grapes, at least half of them purple

1/2 cup sugar

1/3 cup all-purpose flour or minute tapioca

Grated zest and juice of 1 lemon

10 tablespoons unsalted butter, cool and cut into tablespoon-size pieces

Shell

1 (9-inch) prebaked tart shell, or 3 (4-inch) tart shells

Italian Meringue

scant 1/2 cup egg whites (about 3)

3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar

Pinch of salt

1 vanilla bean, scraped and seeded (optional)

Filling: Squeeze the grapes with your fingers, putting the insides into a saucepan and the skins in a bowl. Bring the skinned grapes to a boil, and cook until they soften and give up their seeds, about 10 minutes.

Push the grapes through a medium- to fine-meshed strainer to separate the seeds. In a pot, combine pulp, sugar, flour, lemon zest, lemon juice and skins. Cover and simmer for 30 minutes, stirring often, until the mixture has thickened and no longer tastes of flour. Be careful not to scorch the mixture. Add water a tablespoon at a time if the mixture seems too thick or sticks to the bottom of the pan.

Remove filling from heat and let cool to 140 degrees, or until the mixture is just cool enough that you can stick your finger in it without burning it. Transfer the filling to a food processor or blender, or use an immersion blender. With the food processor or blender running, add the butter one tablespoon at a time. Blend after each addition, incorporating, before adding the next piece. The cream will be lighter in color, opaque and quite thick.

If not serving immediately, refrigerate for up to five days. To use after refrigeration, gently heat in a stainless steel or glass bowl over simmering water until it has just softened.

Shell: Fill the tart shells with muscadine cream when ready to serve.

Meringue: Pour about 2 inches of water in a pot and bring it to a simmer. Combine the egg white, sugar, salt, and vanilla, if using, in the stainless steel bowl of a stand mixer. Whisk over the simmering water until hot to the touch (120 degrees), about 5 minutes. Whisk with the attachment of the stand mixer until it is thick and glossy, stiff peaks hold. Top pie filling with meringue and brown under the broiler or with a torch.

Note: You can top with lightly sweetened whipped cream instead of the Italian Meringue if you wish.

Makes 6 servings.

Per serving: Calories, 680; fats, 30 grams (39% of calories); cholesterol, 50 milligrams; carbohydrate, 102 grams; fiber, 3 grams; protein, 6 grams; sodium, 293 milligrams

Source: April McGreger of the Farmer's Daughter

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#### Muscadine events

What: The 2007 N.C. Muscadine Harvest Festival with musical performances and wines from more than 20 N.C. wineries.

Where: Duplin Events Center, Kenansville. Go east on Interstate 40 to Exit 373, then follow the signs.

When: Friday and Saturday

Tickets: \$15 via [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com)

Details: (910) 290-1530 or [www.muscadineharvestfestival.com](http://www.muscadineharvestfestival.com)

What: Second Annual Celebrate N.C. Wines, with wine tastings, hors d'oeuvres and music, followed by the N.C. Wine and Grape Council's presentation of awards for N.C. State Fair wine competition.

Where: JC Raulston Arboretum, Raleigh

When: Oct. 7

Tickets: \$50 in advance, \$60 at the door. Proceeds benefit N.C. State's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences' viticulture research and the arboretum.

Details: Contact Autumn Keck at (919) 513-3826 or [autumn\\_keck@@ncsu.edu](mailto:autumn_keck@@ncsu.edu) or go to [www.cals.ncsu.edu/advancement/NCwines](http://www.cals.ncsu.edu/advancement/NCwines).

**Caption:** 3 c photos

Muscadines are in season at the State Farmers Market. Photos by Ray Black III for The News & Observer

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