

SOME KIND OF CHEESE AND WINE COVER

FOOD

Coming of age

WNC's growing wine and cheese industries by Jonathon Ammons • jonathanammons@gmail.com

Tucked away in the valleys or sprawled across the hillsides, mom-and-pop entrepreneurs raise cattle or goats, grow grapes, make wine and craft artisan cheese following traditions that are centuries-old but have largely taken root in Western North Carolina in just the past decade. They're a new crop of entrepreneurs pursuing second careers, seeking meaningful post-retirement work, or simply fine-tuning what they love to do most.

And the crop is growing: The number of the WNC Wine Trail participants has doubled since the tours started five years ago. And the WNC Cheese Trail, launched in 2012 by a handful of area cheesemakers, now features 12 member creameries, most of which offer tours and activities for visitors.

Xpress talked to local wine and cheese leaders to learn more.

REBIRTH BY VINEYARD

For many owners of Western North Carolina wineries, it's just the right time, says **Peter Fland**, president of French Broad Vignerons, a service and support organization for WNC wine- and cidemakers and their products. "They reach a point in their lives — they're finished with what they were doing, [or] they want a change in what they are doing, and [a vineyard] seems like an adventure,"

He mentions Parker-Binns Vineyard in the foothills near Tryon, South Creek Winery in Nebo and Silver Fork Vineyard and Winery in Morganton. "Parker-Binns started when **Bob [Binns]** was close to 73, and

that was [his] third career," says Fland, a New Jersey transplant who has his own small vineyard in Marshall.

Binns and his wife, **Karen Parker-Binns**, "are having a great time running that place, and now the second generation, [their children], are coming on to run [it], which is a really great thing," says Fland.

A corporate escape fueled the evolution of Silver Fork, meanwhile. "We came down looking for a place to rent, and we found the previous owner selling ... two and a half acres, just the grapes and the house," says **Jennifer Foulides**. She runs with her husband, **Ed**.

"We were in corporate America before this, in New York," says Jennifer, formerly a global account director for JP Morgan Chase. Ed had worked with Bear Stearns in the stock

trade, she says. "It all starts to wear on you — the traffic, the work," says Jennifer.

"We'd see people 10 years our senior just looking really haggard and worn out, and we just didn't want the rest of our lives to look like that. We made great money, we had a great bank account, but [we had] really nothing else to show for it."

Ready for change, the couple bought Silver Fork from **Larry Kehoe**, who first started growing grapes on the land in the early 1990s. "We have a hard time keeping up with him," says Jennifer, noting that Kehoe still helps out. "He had a vineyard in Michigan, but when he came here, the agriculture center said that the only thing that would grow [in the area] was muscadine. But [Kehoe] thought this [area] was very similar climate and altitude to [the] Bordeaux region and thought that the vinifera varieties of France would do well here."

Kehoe had planted merlot, cabernet and chardonnay vines but was selling his grapes rather than making wine on-site, Jennifer says. When the Foulides bought his small plot,

there was no more than a modest house and an acre of vines. They took Silver Fork to the next level, and now, sitting on the patio for the winery on any given Saturday evening, visitors can sip a glass of the Foulides' wine on a large covered patio and listen to a live band, all while enjoying the foothills and a now-five-acre vineyard.

"I had no experience making wine. I drank a lot of wine," Jennifer jokes. "I went to school for chemical engineering, so I knew the chemistry aspect of winemaking, but growing the grapes and seeing what goes into it has given me a whole new appreciation for what goes into a bottle of wine," she says.

"Now we're working harder, physically harder, even. But at least it is ours. So now we have something we can share with everyone, we have wine that we love, and we have our dogs, so we really got all three things we could possibly want."

Meanwhile, South Creek Winery likewise took root. "Our story starts in 2010. [My husband,] **Jim**, and I had corporate jobs," says co-owner **Mary Rowley**. Her husband had worked as quality director, and she was a pricing analyst. But a pending transfer was going to have them working apart in different states. "We saw the opportunity at that point to leave our corporate jobs and take on something that would be more of a lifestyle," says Mary.

The couple bought South Creek, a vineyard that came with a rustic home that had been built in 1906.

TIME FOR FINE WINE

Like that old house, vineyards take patience, says Fland. It can take up to five years to produce a harvest good enough to make a drinkable vintage, he says. South Creek's original owner, **Larry Boldon**, planted vines 15 years ago but didn't bottle his first batch of South Creek until eight years later, Fland mentions.

But in WNC, there's a time for fine wine.

"One thing that I've learned is that the wine industry in North Carolina has been born again and killed three different times," says Fland. "The last time was in the mid- to late-1940s, and all these people who had just crawled back into business were shut down or turned to growing tobacco. And it's really only been within the past 30 years that things have begun to grow statewide," he says.



SILVER LINING: Jennifer Foulides, co-owner of Silver Fork Vineyard and Winery in Morganton, embraced the art of winemaking after fleeing the stress of a corporate job in New York. Foulides is among a growing number of entrepreneurs building businesses in WNC crafting artisan wine, cheese and hard cider. Photo by Tim Robison

"The wineries are successful, the wine is good, but the wine out here just is not very well-known," Fland continues, "I was at a restaurant in Asheville, and I asked the server, 'Why aren't you carrying North Carolina wines?' And he looked at me and said, 'Oh, they're really not very good.' ... Having served on the judging panels for the wine festivals, I know the wines that have come out of that, and they're great. The problem is, they just aren't known."

Now's the time to try WNC wines and get to know them, say both Fland and **Bob Bowles**, co-founder of the Asheville Food & Wine Festival. "When we put the wine trail together about five years ago, there were only about 17 wineries involved in Western North

Carolina. Now there are around 34 wineries listed, and that's not even including the Yadkin Valley," says Bowles.

In a unique partnership, French Broad Vigneron supplies the wine judges for the annual Asheville Food & Wine Festival, Fland explains.

"North Carolina Wines are ..." Bowles pauses, contemplative. "I won't say 'mature,' but I will say 'maturing.' I tasted a lot of North Carolina wines three or four years ago. ... A lot of the vines have been in the ground seven to 10 years now, so the vines are just reaching through the top layers of the soil, and really starting to mature in terms of the minerals that they are bringing into

the wines."

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The evolution got a boost more than more than 15 years ago. In 1999, a settlement with major tobacco producers in North Carolina seeded the Golden LEAF Foundation, which, among several initiatives, helps tobacco farmers transition to other avenues of agriculture.

"The Golden LEAF grant [program] was actually put in place to give money to tobacco farmers to help change their crop from tobacco to [other crops, including] vines," says Jennifer Foulides. "Especially in the Yadkin area, a lot of those were tobacco farms, and now they're vineyards."

Grant recipients also got help transitioning to organic farming, specialty crops and other agricultural endeavors — including cattle, sheep or goats. The latter helped build another industry, one that pairs quite well with wine.

SAY CHEESE

The growth of the wine industry in the state has helped cheesemakers too, says **Katie Moore**, owner of the Cheese Store of Asheville and a co-organizer of the WNC Cheese Trail. "I mean, cheese goes with everything, but particularly wine, so if the wine industry is growing, why wouldn't the cheese industry grow as well?"

She could be right. In the past few decades, artisanal cheesemakers keep popping up. "From just the perspective of Western North Carolina, this scene has really grown a lot in the last 10 to 20 years," says **Rachel English Brown**, who helps promote the WNC Cheese Trail. Her family runs English Farmstead Cheese.

"The very first farmstead cheesemaker was in Western North Carolina — Yellow Branch in Robbinsville, [owned by **Karen Mickler** and **Bruce DeGroot**]. They started making cheese in the '80s, and for a really long time, they were the only ones."

Back in 1986, when Yellow Branch opened, there were only two noncorporate cheese makers in the state, both of which closed shortly thereafter. **Now there are XX.**

"Bruce and Karen ... have been really good in supporting new cheese makers," adds Brown. "A lot of cheesemakers around here look to them because they've been doing it for a really long time, and they've helped to move the artisan cheese scene along."

"We didn't realize we were on the cusp of a movement. We were just making cheese," says Mickler, laughing. When she and DeGroot moved to North

PLANT

1/8H

FONTAINE

1/8H

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ADDISON

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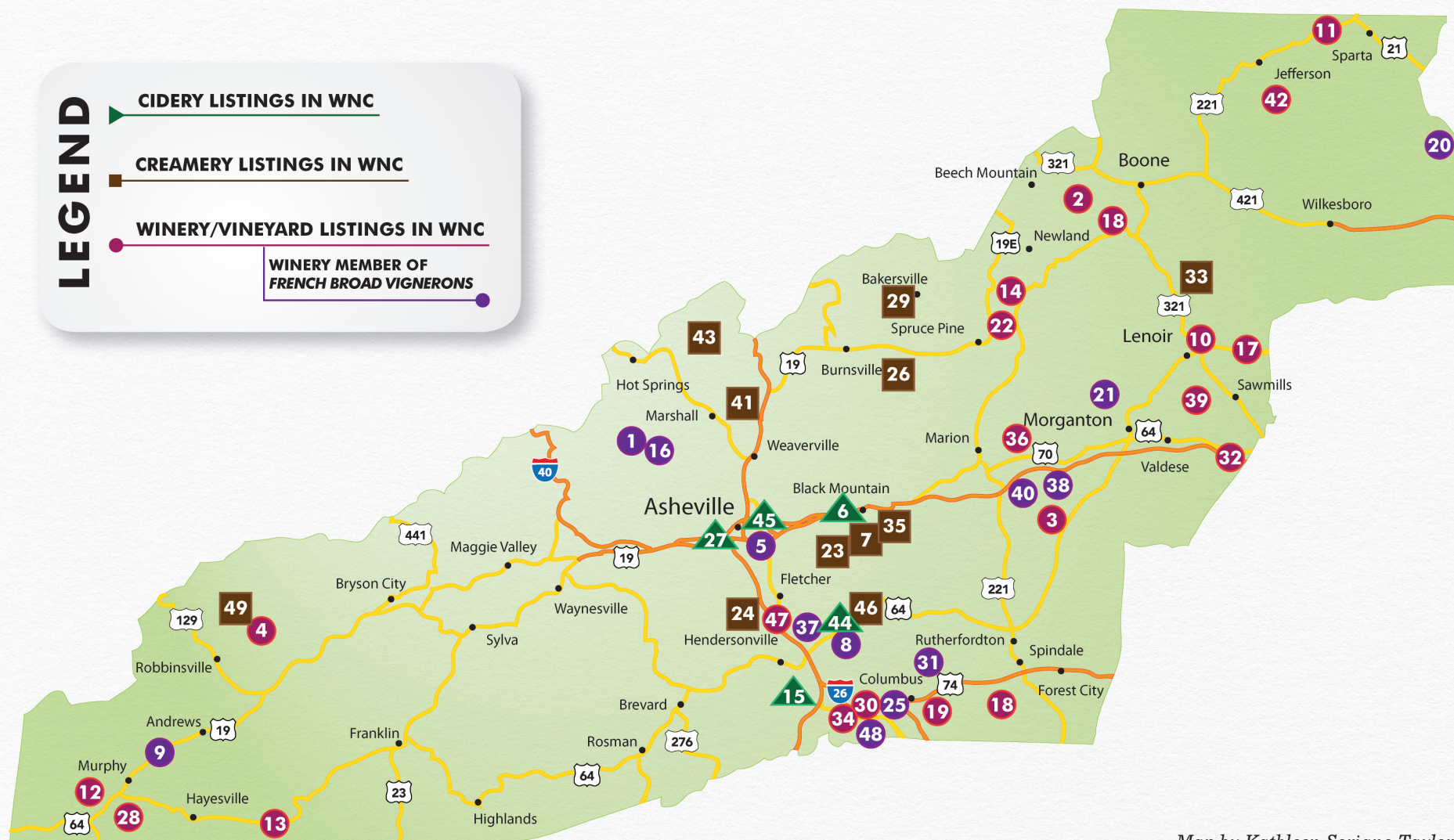
LEGEND

CIDERY LISTINGS IN WNC

CREAMERY LISTINGS IN WNC

WINERY/VINEYARD LISTINGS IN WNC

WINERY MEMBER OF
FRENCH BROAD VIGNERONS



Map by Kathleen Soriano Taylor

Wineries, Cideries & Creameries

— WINERIES —

1 Addison Farms Vineyard

4005 New Leicester Highway
Leicester, NC 28748
828-581-9463
addisonfarms.net

2 Banner Elk Winery

60 Deer Run Lane
Banner Elk, NC 28604
828-898-9090
bannerelkwinery.com

3 Belle Nicho Winery

525 Patton Valley Drive
Nebo, NC 28761
828-659-3168
bellenichowinery.com

4 Big Girl Farm & Winery

368 Stecoah Heights
Robbinsville, NC 28771
828-479-3621
www.facebook.com/pages/Big-Girl-Winery/112485155468756

5 Biltmore Estate

1 Lodge Street
Asheville, NC 28803
800-411-3812
biltmore.com

8 Burntshirt Vineyards

2695 Sugarloaf Road
Hendersonville, NC 28792
828-685-2402
burntshirtvineyards.com

9 Calaboose Cellars

565 Aquone Road
Andrews, NC 28901
828-321-2006
calabooscellars.com

10 Carolina Mist Winery

118 South West Main Street
Lenoir, NC 28645
828-754-4660
www.facebook.com/CarolinaMistWinery

11 Chateau Laurinda Vineyards

690 Reeves Ridge Road
Sparta, NC 28675
336-372-2562

12 Cherokee Cellars

23 Hickory Street
Murphy, NC 28906
828-835-9565
cherokeecellars.com

13 Eagle Fork Vineyards

8 Cedar Cliff Road
Hayesville, NC 28904
828-389-8466
eagleforkvineyards.com

16 Fontaine Vineyards

36 Mount Airy Road
Leicester, NC 28748
828-683-2316
fontainevineyards.com

17 Ginger Creek Vineyards

858 John Cline Road
Taylorsville, NC 28681
828-312-4362

18 Grandfather Vineyard & Winery

225 Vineyard Lane
Banner Elk, NC 28604
828-963-2400
grandfathervineyard.com

19 Green Creek Winery

413 Gilbert Road
Columbus, NC 28722
828-863-2182
www.facebook.com/GreenCreekWinery

20 Jones von Drehle

964 Old Railroad Grade Road
Thurmond, NC 28683
336-874-2800
jonesvondrehle.com

21 Lake James Cellars

204 East Main Street
Glen Alpine, NC 28628
828-584-4551
lakejamescellars.com

22 Linville Falls Winery

9557 Linville Falls Highway
Newland, NC 28657
828-765-1400
linvillefallswinery.com

25 Mountain Brook Vineyards

731 Philips Dairy Road
Tryon, NC 28782
828-817-4376
mountainbrookvineyards.com

28 Nottely Valley River Vineyards

4689 Martins Creek Road
Murphy, NC 28906
828-837-0691
www.facebook.com/VRVWinery

30 Overmountain Vineyards & Winery

2014 Sandy Plains Road
Tryon, NC 28782
828-863-0523
overmountainvineyards.com

31 Parker-Binns Vineyard

7382 North Carolina 108
Mill Spring, NC 28756
828-894-0154
parker-binnsvineyard.com

32 Raintree Cellars

521 U.S. 70, SW
Hildebran, NC 28637
828-397-5643

34 Russian Chapel Hills Winery

2662 Green Creek Drive
Columbus, NC 28722
828-863-0540
russianchapelhill.com

36 Silver Fork Winery

5000 Patton Road
Morganton, NC 28655
828-391 8783
silverforkwinery.com

37 Six Waterpots Vineyard & Winery

4040 James Drive
Hudson, NC 28638
828-728-5099
sixwaterpots.com

38 South Creek Vineyards & Winery

2240 South Creek Road
Nebo, NC 28761
828-652-5729
southcreekwinery.com

39 Thistle Meadow Winery

102 Thistle Meadow
Laurel Springs, NC 28644
800-233-1505
thistlemeadowwinery.com

40 Waldensian Heritage Wines

4940 Villar Lane, NE
Valdese, NC 28690
828-879-3202
www.facebook.com/pages/Waldensian-Heritage-Winery/324830874196690

42 Woodmill Winery

1350 Woodmill Winery Lane
Vale, NC 28168
704-276-9911
woodmillwinery.com

47 St. Paul Mountain Vineyard

588 Chestnut Gap Road
Hendersonville, NC 28792
828-685-4002
saintpaulmountainvineyards.com

48 Rockhouse Vineyards

1525 Turner Road
Tryon, NC 28782
828-863-2784
rockhousevineyards.com

— CIDERIES —**6 Black Mountain Ciderworks**

104 Eastside Drive, Unit 307
(CITY?!), NC 28711
828-419-0089
blackmountainciderworks.com

15 Flat Rock Ciderworks

(ADDRESS??)
Flat Rock, NC 28731
828-231-9410
nakedapplehardcider.com

27 Noble Cider

356 New Leicester Highway
(CITY?!), NC 28806
828-808-7403
noblecider.com

44 Three Sisters Cidery

3016 Chimney Rock Road
Hendersonville, NC 28792
828-702-1891
threesisterscidery.com

45 Urban Orchard

210 Haywood Road
Asheville, NC 28806
828-774-5151
urbanorchardcider.com

— CREAMERIES —**7 Blue Ridge Mountain Creamery**

327 Flat Creek Road
Fairview, NC 27830
828-551-5739
caveagedcheeses.com

14 English Farmstead Cheese

19456 US-221
Marion, NC 28752
828-756-8166
englishfarmsteadcheese.com

23 Looking Glass Creamery

57 Noble Road
Fairview, NC 28730
828-458-0088
ashevillecheese.com

24 Mills River Creamery

4193 Haywood Road
Mills River, NC 28759
828-891-4007
millsrivercreamery.com/index.html

26 Mountain Farm

3001 Halls Chapel Road
Burnsville, NC 28714
828-675-4856
mountainfarmnc.net

29 Oakmoon Farm

452 Roan View Drive
Bakersville, NC 28705
828-688-4683
freewebs.com/oakmoonfarm

33 Ripshin Goat Dairy

1865 Highway 268
Lenoir, NC 28645
828-758-0906
ripshingoatdairy.com

35 Round Mountain Creamery

2203 Old Fort Road
Black Mountain, NC 28711
828-669-0718
roundmountaincreamery.com

41 Spinning Spider Creamery

4717 East Fork Road
Marshall, NC
828-206-5509
spinningspidercreamery.com

43 Three Graces Dairy

335 Milky Way
Marshall, NC 28753
828-656-2195
3gracesdairy.com

46 Vineyard's Edge Dairy

(ADDRESS?!)
Edneyville, NC 28727
828-685-1422
www.facebook.com/VineyardsEdgeDairy

49 Yellow Branch Pottery & Cheese

136 Yellow Branch Circle
Robbinsville, NC 28771
828-479-6710
yellowbranch.com

1/4 S- BILTMORE ESTATE

CIDER SIDEBAR

Carolina from Iowa, they bought a small 10-acre farm. Their intent was to use the space as a studio for her pottery and his carpentry, which they still do. But after getting a few chickens for eggs, the couple decided to get a cow for milk. They named her Rosebud.

"We quickly had too much milk for just two people, so we started making cheese," she recalls. "Then that cow had a calf, and before we knew it, we had more cheese than we could possibly eat."

For years, the couple milked their two cows and produced around 2,500 pounds per year. About 15 years ago, Bruce had to make the decision to either shut down the creamery so he could focus on carpentry as his livelihood, or expand the cheese making business. He chose to expand.

These days, DeGroot milks seven cows and produces as much as 7,000 pounds of cheese per year. "He does it full time now, and it gives us a livelihood," says Mickler, who also runs Yellow Branch Pottery.

Post-expansion, you can find Yellow Branch cheese at such local groceries and restaurants as Earthfare, the French Broad Food Coop, Early Girl Eatery, Homegrown and Rhubarb — as well as an ever-expanding roster of local cheeses and cheesemakers. In fact, the industry has grown so much in Asheville that it has inspired its own springtime event, the Carolina Mountain Cheese Fest.

"My goal was to sell 500 tickets, and get 500 people there, but we sold 1,500 tickets," says **Katie Moore**, who helped organize the event. The festival featured over 20 cheesemakers and nearly a dozen other artisans who make crackers, jams, pickles and breads.

"I think that people are becoming more aware of the importance of supporting an industry that is in your neighborhood or using a product that is local. For example, a local cheesemaker has to get milk from somewhere, that farmer has to get grain from somewhere to feed those animals, and there are all these components to making that cheese," she says.

"What we tried to emphasize with Cheese Fest is that it isn't just about that cheese, it's about all those components that go along with it," says Moore.

"So I think when people start to think about the cheese industry as a part of that larger picture of the local economy, it's easy to say, 'I want to support this!' People won't just support something that is locally made, but they will support something that is good and locally made."



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GROWING CULTURE: Yellow Branch Creamery, which started in 1986 with one cow named Rosebud, has responded to increased demand for locally produced cheese by expanding. The farm now produces about 7,000 pounds of cheese per year. “We didn’t realize we were on the cusp of a movement. We were just making cheese,” says co-owner Karen Mickler, laughing. Jennifer Perkins of Looking Glass Creamery



You might think that small business owners would feel threatened by the growth, but Mickler says, “Everyone wins when an industry is strong, and an industry is only as strong as the people that are in it.”

She continues, “I’m a potter in a state where there are a lot of potters, but that just makes my work stronger. We are a network of like-minded individuals, and maybe that’s because we’re in a craft. You know, we’ve always looked at our cheese-making as more of a craft, and we’ve approached cheese that way, rather than the industrial side of it.”

So for these artisanal producers of cheese or wine, you may not find many of their products in your local grocery store. Instead, you have to travel the back roads through rural communities, neighborhoods and small towns. But really, that seems to be the only way to truly appreciate WNC’s wineries and creameries, from their front porches, the cattle in the pasture, the wind swaying the vines on the hill. After all, there is no better way to get to know your state than to see it, smell it, touch it, and taste the fruits of its labor.

So when Mickler talks about cheese, she sums up a sentiment

most craftspeople share: “We love what we were doing,” she says. “Learning about cheese, and how to market it, and meeting other people who make it and that community — it really added a dimension to our lives.” X

1/4 V - NOBLE CIDER

SOUTH CREEK VINEYARDS

1/2H-

1/4 S
FRENCH BROAD VIGNERONS

1/4 S
PARKER BINNS VINEYARD