

by Blake Warenik

Dahlongega's New Gold Rush

North Georgia Winery Brings Local Wine to the Front Door

Most Georgians (and history buffs) know Dahlonega as the site of America's first gold rush way back in the 1820s. For a while, the tiny hamlet in the North Georgia hills even hosted a U.S. mint to turn all that bullion into legal tender. But in the late 1840s, Georgia's sun as America's gold capital was eclipsed by much larger strikes in California.

Few know that Georgia was also among the nation's top producers of wine at that time. It was once again California that took over as the leader, and to this day the Golden State produces more than 90 percent of all American wine.

Perhaps it's time for Georgia to steal back a little of that thunder. Though almost all of the gold has been panned from Lumpkin County's streams, the hillsides above are yielding a new kind of gold.

Every summer, golden-yellow and blood-black wine grapes glisten lusciously under the much-needed shade of their vines, hiding from the withering southern sun along what is known as the Georgia Wine Highway. The Highway cuts a meandering path beginning in the far northeast corner of the state near Clayton, down through little alpine Helen, back up through Young Harris, then down past Dahlonega and finally ending near Braselton. Dahlonega is the heart of the Highway—of the eight wineries formally considered a part of the route, three are located in Lumpkin County.

The purple-and-white signs that mark the way inspired a family of builders in Roswell to get in the game on a plot of land near Dahlonega. The Beecham family, now in their fourth generation of building in and around Atlanta, all have a passion for wine—collecting and drinking it and now wanting to have a go at making it. But their project is far more than just a winery—it's more like a cluster of Tuscan villages



built around a wine lifestyle and nestled among the red hills and clear streams about an hour up GA 400 from Atlanta.

It's called Montaluce Winery and Estates, and it's something that must be seen to be believed. Upscale, Italy-inspired communities are in vogue in Atlanta-area development these days, but most tend toward the gaudy. The architects here styled cottages, villas and estate houses on authentic Tuscan designs, tasteful in their simplicity. Instead of lying in monotonous subdivision rows, the houses are naturally situated according to the landscape around communal gardens, much like Italian countryside villages.

Montaluce was conceived around a central concept: la tavola, the Italian phrase meaning the table. But in Italian, the phrase

means more than a piece of furniture. It describes the central place in the Italian country lifestyle, where wine, food and family converge to give life importance. With that in mind, Montaluce has much more than vineyards and houses to offer.

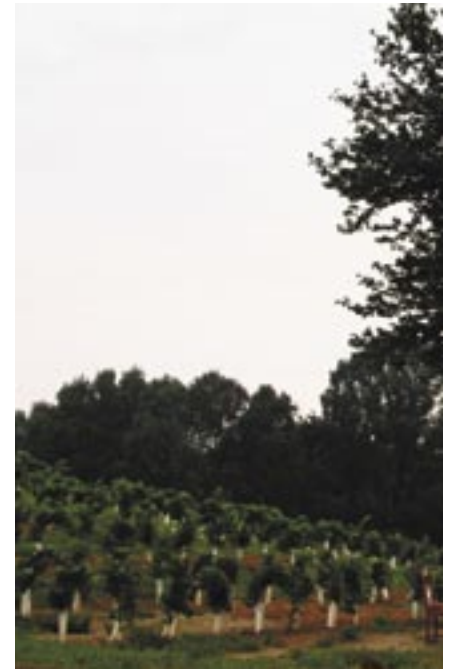
The winery complex will house Le Vigne, a fine Italian restaurant and wine bar, as well as a lounge and dining area for the owners of homes in the development. In the works are also organic vegetable and herb gardens to supply the restaurant and residents, a smokehouse for the cured meats used so prominently in Italian cuisine, and an amphitheater complex for live entertainment.

But in the end, it's about the wine. Montaluce is banking on the Mediterranean qualities of North Georgia's climate and soil to produce a more complex and

interesting product than California's almost-too-ideal growing regions. It's doubtful that Georgia wine will ever truly give California a run for its money in terms of quantity or fame, but here's hoping that the handcrafted, small-batch wines at Montaluce Vineyards and others around the state make Georgia's new liquid gold known for its rare quality.

And in any case, Montaluce brings a lot more to la tavola than just wine.

Blake Warenik is a freelance writer out of Atlanta. Harvest isn't until next summer, but he got to taste some Montaluce grapes and thinks the future's looking pretty sweet. Write him at b.warenik@gmail.com for wine tastings, gigs, or weekend trips to Italy (I'll pay my way). Photography by Chris Hornaday.



What:

Montaluce Estates and Vineyards, a 400-acre development of vineyards, Tuscan-style estates, a winery, restaurant and more. Montaluce is inspired by the Italian way of life and its focus on family, community, and good food and wine.

Where:

Just a few miles west of Dahlonega, from Atlanta Route 400 N to Route 19/60 N. Log onto montaluce.com/directions for directions.

When:

Montaluce Winery and Le Vigne Restaurant are slated for a public opening December 1, and villas and cottages are under construction now.

Contact:

Visit montaluce.com, call toll-free at 800.251.4385 or call locally at 706.482.0118