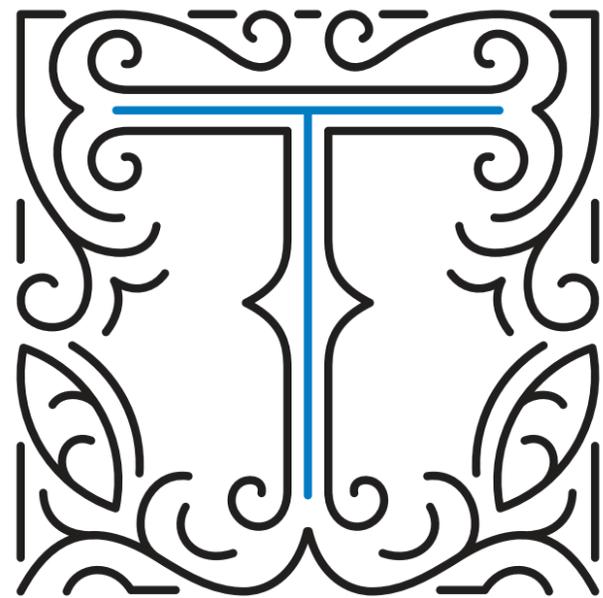




Is this the best wine ever produced in Arkansas?

Unfortunately, you'll probably never know



he story
of John
Trickett
was first
presented to
me as legend.

I guess that's to be expected—the world of wine is full of legends, historic vintages and vineyards, winemakers whose renown stretches with time, leaving behind the factual for the fantastic. And what is wine if not a bottled fantasy, a fable under cork?

But the legend of John Trickett is a legend in reverse, a story that, in its unspooling, becomes concrete. I heard it first in whispers: a recluse who lived alone in the Ozarks and had made the greatest wine in Arkansas. It was the kind of story I'd hear at wine tastings: "Have you heard of the mountain man, the man who made Arkansas' Great Wine?"

It was supposed to be a wine of substance and beauty: a wine farmed entirely organically, less a product of the Earth and more an extension of it. The common refrain was that it was just a story, nothing more than late-night hearsay among the extravagantly drunk. No one knew this man's name or had ever seen the bottles. No one knew if he existed at all.

I chalked the story up to the kind of apocrypha that wine culture is known for, a funny footnote in the novel of Arkansas wine. That novel is a long one, much longer than those of some of the states whose wine-making reputations have eclipsed our own. In the years before the Civil War, as German and Swiss immigrants traveled west, a few saw something familiar in the rolling slopes of the Ozark Mountains, a likeness to the vine-covered hillsides of their homeland, and decided to plant the state's first recorded vines. The 1880s saw the founding of two of the state's oldest wineries, Post Familie Vineyards and Wiederkehr Wine Cellars, as well as the first grape plantings in Tontitown, now home to the century-old Tontitown Grape Festival.

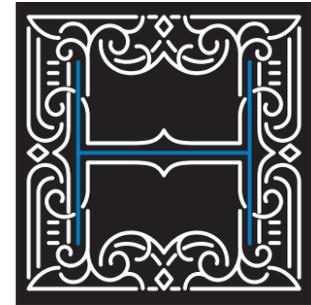
Aesthetics aside, the similarities between Arkansas and the wine-growing regions of Europe are few. Growing grapes in Arkansas' hot and humid climate is like walking an agricultural tightrope. Diurnal shifts—the difference between a single day's high and low temperatures—are infinitesimal during Arkansas' summer growing season, causing grapes to become overripe and full of sugar, resulting in overly alcoholic or unusually sweet wines that lack acidity. Rain during the sweltering spring and summer creates a perfect breeding ground for molds and fungus, while storms in August and September, the typical harvest season, run the risk of swelling the grapes so much that their skins burst, and the grapes rot on the vine.



Only 400-some bottles of the Rock House Red remain, boxed up in an underground room in the winery.

Chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides are essential for ensuring a successful Arkansas harvest. Farming grapes in Arkansas without the aid of modern techniques is generally considered to be a Sisyphean task, if not outright impossible. Organic sprays and fertilizers, unlike their chemical counterparts, are only effective on the parts of the plant they touch, meaning that the underside of each leaf, where moisture and mold like to be, must be sprayed carefully and, in some cases, leaf by leaf. Likewise, organic products are prone to being blown or washed off vines by the elements, meaning that after each rain, every plant must be completely sprayed again.

The idea that a mountain farmer had managed to make a great wine was hard to fathom, but that he'd done it organically, without the aid of modern chemicals, pushed the story into unbelievability. If some of the world's greatest winemakers struggled with organics in France and Italy, how could one man master it in Arkansas?



ere, I have something I want you to try." A friend had just taken a brown paper sack out of her refrigerator. It's a thing we like to do, these blind tastings, forcing the other to decide what wine is in our glass based on sight, smell and taste alone.

She tipped the bag over, making sure the bottle inside was hidden, and a pearly white wine fell into my

glass. I raised it to the light. *Clear, almost starbright. A swirl. No legs, no staining.* I gave it a sniff and ran through the mental checklist of things a sommelier should look for in a wine. *Aromas of peach, wet rock, wildflowers.* I took a sip. *Confirming notes of peach and minerality, spider legs of acidity, low in alcohol, slightly off dry.*

"Alsace. Edelzwicker," I said, halfway confident in naming the white blend of riesling, gewürztraminer and pinot gris from the mountains of eastern France.

"Is that your final answer?" she asked.

I nodded, and she slid the bottle out of the bag. The label was instantly familiar, though it was admittedly a wine I'd never given any real attention: Platinum White Zinfandel from Chateau Aux Arc in Altus.

I cocked my head. "Wait, what?" I'm used to being wrong, but not quite *that* wrong. As we passed the bottle around, each of us pouring a few ounces into our glasses, each of us admitting that it was far better than we would have expected, I asked the group if they'd ever heard of the mysterious farmer in the mountains. They, like me, had heard the stories. "I heard he only made one vintage,



but it was perfect," someone said. "Someone told me that he lives alone, like a hermit, and keeps all the wine for himself," said another.

I would come to know that the wine in question, the 2013 Rock House Red, was a syrah. Native to France's Rhone Valley, syrah is the Ernest Hemingway of wine grapes—smoky and savory, undeniably masculine and coursing with a telltale aroma of pepper. Months later, when the myth had become a man, John would tell me that the decision to plant syrah had been an easy one. "I looked at the soil, I looked at the climate, and everything just said syrah," he told me.

It would be months before the myth of the mysterious farmer would cross my lips again. It was Christmas Eve, and I was sitting on Riley Mason's kitchen floor. Riley, the head winemaker of Little Rock's soon-to-open Rusty Tractor Vineyards, and I had been tasting still-fermenting samples of his 2017 vintage. We'd come back to his house, just a few yards from the winery, to warm up when he pulled a few of his favorite bottles off the shelf, including a small half bottle. "This is one I'm saving for a special occasion."

It wasn't a label I recognized. White with blue type. *2013 Circle T Winery MST.* "It's made by a man named John Trickett," he told me. "He did it for his wife. It's a really great story." A light bulb went off. I told Riley what I'd heard.

"Yep, that has to be John."

"Can you introduce me?"

He couldn't, but he knew who could. After an assist from University of Arkansas professor and member of the Arkansas Association of Grape Growers Renée Therlfall, I had my first contact with John: a short, wary email, asking me why, of all people, I was interested in him.

We exchanged emails, and he was quick to let me know two things: that I'd gotten a fact wrong in a previous article about merlot and that he couldn't understand why I found him interesting. Not quite an auspicious start. We agreed to a phone call, a first step in what I hoped would end with a visit to his winery. "I don't know why you want to talk to me," he said over the phone. It was something he'd repeat almost every time we spoke, reiterating that he was flattered, but confused, by my attention. I told him the truth, that I'd heard a story of a man who lived alone in the mountains and made the best wine in Arkansas. On the other end of the phone, I think I heard him suppressing a groan.

A few weeks later, I was stocking the shelves at my day job, when he came to see me unannounced. "I Googled you. I saw you worked in a wine shop," he said. He handed me a paper sack of clinking bottles. "I thought you might like these." It was a chance, unexpected encounter, and yet looking back on it, I realize that it was somehow the most John Trickett thing he could have done.

Because reality is smaller than fantasy, so too were John and his wines. Standing with him, holding the wines in my hand, the fog of his myth burned away and left a man whose eyes looked surprised and secretly happy that I was looking into them. "I still don't know why you care," he said, "but here you go." He had only one request: that before I drink his Rock House Red, I decant it for at least two hours. I promised I would, and he left me alone.

I soon brought the bottle to my tasting group, wrapping it in a bag and pouring it into their glasses. The consensus was *côte-rôtie*, a particularly aromatic French syrah. They were wrong, of course, but in context, John's wines seemed a clever forgery, showing a nose of cooked honey and lavender, dried herbs, warm granite and pepper.



e eventually agreed on a date for me to visit John at his home north of Charleston, where the earth begins to furrow into the mountains at the edge of the Arkansas River. He met me downtown, letting me follow him to his house, having warned me that my phone was likely to lose service in the hills and I'd be lost without a map. As we turned off pavement and onto a gravel road

that twisted its way through fields and pastures, I was glad he was acting as my guide.

"I heard he only made one vintage, but it was perfect," someone said, "Someone told me that he lives alone, like a hermit, and keeps all the wine for himself," said another.

For everyone who loves wine, who makes their life of it, there is a First Bottle. Rarely, of course, is this their first *actual* bottle of wine, but rather the first bottle of wine they likened to a time capsule, bottled poetry. For John, it was a bottle of Ockfener Bockstein Riesling Auslese he had while on a date in the late 1970s. "I picked the label because I thought it looked cool and I wanted to make an impression," he admitted. His voice was sheepish, acknowledging the lifelong passion that spawned from that first, random decision. "It was the sweetest green apple I'd ever had, and a muskiness, and honey." He rattled off the tasting notes as if, even four decades later, the wine was still in his mouth. "It was just a remarkable moment. It was the first time in my life that I'd ever thought about what was in my glass."

It made such an impression that, regardless of the hostility of Arkansas' climate, he chose to plant riesling vines in his front yard. They were the first





Once you've heard John Trickett talk about the Circle T property, some 1,800 acres of fields and forest, it's easy to find it in the wine.



thing he'd shown me as we parked our cars in front of his house. His "little bit of fun," he'd called them, three slender shoots waiting for bud break.

John's home, museumlike in its tidiness, is like an autobiography. He pointed out paintings he'd collected over the years, artworks his wife had loved before she died. There was a photo of him holding an Academy Award, one of the few visible signifiers of John's career in the movie industry. It's something he played down, calling himself little more than a film wholesaler, but then later admitting that he did have two celebrity autographs he was proud of: John Waters and Fay Wray.

There was, of course, wine as well—hundreds of bottles stored at perfect cellar temperature. Next to a bookshelf sat a magnum of Champagne older than myself. "The bubbles were always her thing," he said of his wife, her presence filling the silence and the room. He opened a refrigerator to show me rows of Chateau Mouton Rothschild, their vintages dating back to the '70s with labels designed by the greats of the 20th century: Warhol, Kandinsky, Domoto. The collected bottles around us, their combined ages spanning centuries, were all the result of a random bottle he picked up for a date. He doesn't remember much about that date—where they went, or even what her name was—but he'll never forget that wine.

"When you drink wine," John said, "especially an older vintage, you're uncorking questions." Who made it? Are they still alive? What history has happened since it was made? Who else has drunk this wine? "I wasn't trying to create immortality," he admitted. "I knew I'd never make a great wine, just because of where it is ... but I wanted

ISO: The Next Great Arkansas Wine

Rock House Red will be tough to top, but we'll gladly taste through these to find a second best

SPLINTERS SYRAH AT CHATEAU AUX ARC VINEYARDS AND WINERY, ALTUS

Since opening in 2001, Chateau Aux Arc (a nod to the French spelling of "Ozark") has championed the practice of using 100 percent Arkansas-grown grapes in their wines, and winemaker Audrey House helped establish cynthiana as the official state grape in 2009. (It helps that Aux Arc has more plantings of the grape than any other winery in the world.) Aux Arc's recently released Splinters syrah is an easy favorite. (chateauauxarc.com)

SEYVAL AT POST FAMILIE WINERY, ALTUS

The Post family has been making wine in Arkansas since the 1880s, so they must be doing something right. Owner

of the largest winery in the state, the family has made a name for itself by making wine from native muscadine grapes, as well as many other varieties—fans of dry white wines such as sauvignon blanc should look no further than a bottle of the family's seyval. The winery's Altus tasting room and gift shop offer some of the best views in the state. (postfamilie.com)

FRUIT WINES AT MOUNT BETHEL WINERY, ALTUS

Not all wine comes from grapes, and Mount Bethel Winery might just be the master of Arkansas fruit wines. If you've ever spent time floating on any of Arkansas' rivers, you've probably seen elderberry bushes growing on the banks, and in the hands of the winemaking team of Mount Bethel, the elderberries turn into dark, tannic, fruitful wines that are full of purple fruit and floral aromas. (mountbethel.com)

SYRAH AT SASSAFRAS SPRINGS VINEYARD, SPRINGDALE

Sassafras Springs may rank among the state's smallest wineries, but it also ranks among Arkansas' most beautiful. The winery's tasting room is located inside a converted milk barn, and visitors are encouraged to grab a glass of wine (we recommend the syrah) and explore the grounds. A common wedding venue, the property boasts picturesque horse stables and the "ruins" of a mission-style church. (sassafrasspringsvineyard.com)

ROBERT'S PORT AT COWIE WINE CELLARS, PARIS

Robert Cowie began making wine as a hobby when he was 15 and, in 1967, founded his own winery. Fifty years later, Cowie Wine Cellars has won multiple national and regional wine awards. We're big fans of the winery's fortified dessert wine Robert's Port. When you visit, make sure to stop by the on-site Arkansas Historic Wine Museum for an in-depth look at more than 100 years of Arkansas wine history. (cowiewinecellars.com)

ROJO CHAMBO AT RUSTY TRACTOR VINEYARDS, LITTLE ROCK

Though it's not quite open for visitors, Little Rock's own Rusty Tractor Vineyards is bringing winemaking to the capital city in a big way. An on-site pizza oven and plenty of outdoor picnic space will make the winery a hot spot on the southwest side of town, and when the business opens, we'll be the first in line for a bottle of Rojo Chambo made from estate-grown chambourcin grapes. (facebook.com/RustyTractorVineyards)



Though many of the myths surrounding John Trickett have been proven to be half-truths and exaggerations, the man behind Circle T Winery & Vineyards is a legend still.

to know if it was possible to grow grapes that would express the land as fruit.” He was looking for terroir, that mystical combination of soil and climate, the way in which wine from one side of a road tastes different from that on the other side, the reason why some of the most valuable land on Earth is given over to grapes.

As we dodged raindrops on the walk that led from the main house to the nearby guest cottage, he motioned in the direction of his Circle T property, the namesake of his winery. Located just north of Booneville, the land has been in John’s family since the 1860s. The property’s homestead, a lone stone house that gives the Rock House Red its name, was built by his great-grandfather in the early 1900s. Even the winery’s logo, a T inside a circle, was based on the property’s cattle brand. For young John, who grew up in Shreveport, Louisiana, staying with his grandparents, exploring the creeks and forests of the property was the perfect summer getaway.

Circle T is vast—1,800 acres of fields and forest, rocky, sandy soils that show themselves in the wine. “It had such a distinct smell, I can kind of still taste it,” he said. As he talked about wine and about his childhood, I began to wonder if, for him, his wine was anything but bottled sensory memories of being 12 years old and chasing cattle through the fields, of whip-poor-will and grasshoppers, Johnsongrass and dogwood.

When he’d first asked that I spend a few hours letting his wine decant, to let the liquid sit and think about itself, exposing it to oxygen to allow its aromas to develop, I let it sit for three hours, tasting it on the half hour, looking for and finding differences each time. Once you’ve heard John talk about the land, his vivid green patch of earth, it’s easy to find it in the wine. Syrah has never taken hold of American palates in the same way as cabernet or pinot noir, but in John’s hands, it’s symphonic, all muted violets and dried herbs, raspberry jam on toast, the warm smell of an early-summer’s eve.

For so much of John’s life, Circle T had served as a refuge. I wondered if, in making his wine, he had sought to bottle those memories.



While living in Dallas, John met Marvella Spann in the first wave of ’90s internet dating sites. Her profile had listed two main interests, wine and movies, and for John, could be no better match. She was a hair stylist and a people person, a counterweight to John’s admitted lack of social graces. When he speaks of her, his voice fills with a subtle awe—like even now, he can’t believe that it was he who was lucky enough to love her. Just like

John, Marvella fell in love with Circle T, and once John had decided to plant grapes there, she was with him every step of the way.

John planted the first vines at Circle T over Easter weekend in 2007. It was the first concrete step in a plan that, in his mind at least, had been forming for over a decade. Marvella would be the face of the winery, greeting guests and leading tastings, networking with retailers and restaurateurs, and handling sales, while John managed the vineyard and winery. The goal was, at first, a simple one: to grow grapes organically, without the aid of chemical herbicides or pesticides. Nurturing the land that had once nurtured him was a responsibility that John refused to take lightly. He had to take care of the land first. “It had already been so good to me,” he said. For John, the quest for organic fruit was just as important, perhaps even more so, than the wine that might one day be made from it.

Later that same year, while he and Marvella were still living full time in Dallas, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Weekend trips to Circle T allowed John to tend to the vines while Marvella underwent treatment, and in 2009, with Marvella’s cancer in remission, the couple moved to Charleston to work in earnest on the project.

The next year, John’s grand plan worked. The summer of 2010 saw a harvest of two tons of organically farmed Ozark Mountain syrah, all

from a single acre. John called it “beautiful, perfect fruit.” For the first time, John and Marvella had proof that their dream was possible. They were both near tears when they saw the first truck full of fruit pull away. Without a winery of his own to process it, John had sold the fruit to another winery and admits that he doesn’t know what became of it. Most likely, it was pressed into bulk wine and unceremoniously racked along the bottom shelves of grocery-store aisles. But still, the harvest was a success, and it meant that John could move on to the next phases of his and Marvella’s plan: Plant more fruit, and build a winery.

Two thousand more vines were ordered, 1,600 syrah and 400 viognier, enough to plant almost 3 additional acres to vine. Plans for a commercial winery were drawn. But then, just months after that first successful harvest, Marvella’s cancer returned and spread to her spine. As Marvella underwent treatment in Russellville, she made it her goal to see the winery completed. John managed the farm, planting the 2,000 new vines in the summer of 2012. With limited help during Marvella’s illness, John was left with the choice of either taking care of the vines or taking care of his wife. (“That was an easy one,” he said.) Without John’s attention, the newly planted acres were reclaimed by nature, leaving John to focus his energies on the original acre. John finished construction of his winery later

in 2012 and primed it to receive the next year's harvest. It sits just a few hundred feet from their home, though with her condition worsening, Marvilla was only able to step inside it once. "Marvelous," she'd called it.

John culled the first of the 2013 harvest on the same day Marvilla entered hospice care. Those grapes would eventually go into the dessert-style wine MST: Marvilla Spann Trickett. John had told me that as he'd handed me a bottle the first time we'd met, his voice heavy, like he was handing over a part of her. The vineyard's remaining grapes were harvested in the days before Marvilla's death and would eventually become the 2013 vintage of the Rock House Red. She died on Aug. 25, 2013, never having tasted any of their wine. Knowing that she never tasted the literal fruit of their labors is one of the great heartbreaks of John's life.

John poured himself into winemaking in the days after Marvilla's death. In the face of so much that was out of his control, he sought solace in the manual labor of punching down his fermentation tanks. Marvilla's death had been a horrible one, both to endure and to witness, and John was glad for the distraction of his winery. It was a feeling, however, that would fade with time.

"It was so much more *our* thing than I ever imagined. This," he said, waving his hands around the guest cottage, "was supposed to be a bed-and-breakfast; more people to fawn over—that was her thing." Even though it was John's land, his

“Maybe I wasn't the right person to do this experiment, but I would then always wonder, 'What if?' if I hadn't.”



idea and labor, it was Marvilla who had been steadfast at his side. Without her, things just weren't the same.

The four vintages since Marvilla's death have been, by John's own admission, disasters—losing crops to pests, drought or hail. Now, 11 years after the first grapes were planted, only one vintage of wine has ever been made. "Maybe I wasn't the right person to do this experiment," he said, "but I would then always wonder, *What if?* if I hadn't."

We sat around a coffee table, and it was easy to imagine how different things might have been. Were Marvilla still alive, the room we were sitting in would have been busy with visitors tasting and buying wine. Outside, the pastures had turned to puddles. I finally

asked the question that we'd been working up to for the better part of an hour, the question I'd wanted to ask since our very first email.

"Do you think the experiment was a success?" He tried to answer but only sighed, his eyes casting down and sweeping the floor.

"I don't know. I think that's for other people to decide. I think that's what you're here for," he said with a laugh. "I guess it goes both ways, doesn't it?" It was then that John admitted that he's ready to leave it all behind. When the winery's permit expires this month, he won't renew it, effectively ending Circle T Winery. Marvilla's ashes were spread among the first vines at Circle T, a fact, John admitted with a wry smile, that will force him to keep up that acre at the



very least.

"I hope so," he said when I asked him if he's at peace with that decision. John's commitment to organic farming had left him without fruit four years in a row. Would he have been able to make wine if he would have relaxed his standards? He didn't want to get into the "what ifs," but the silence meant we both knew the likely answer. "If you beat your head against a wall for long enough, you begin to figure out that the wall is going to win," he said. His words were slow, almost trepidatious. I wondered if that was the first time he'd said those thoughts aloud.

The way he shifted from pride in his fruit to heartbreak over the loss of his wife, I couldn't tell how he actually felt about his winery. He seemed so resigned to end something he'd sunk over a decade's work into. In a way, it's like another death in his family, or maybe a second, more final death for Marvilla. Goals and dreams have lives just like people do, and they, too, sometimes die. To John, the dream of a winery is dead, and now he's making himself say goodbye.

"Sometimes we just have to do that with things we love," he said.



As the rain subsided, we walked out to the winery. I wondered what Marvilla would think about it all and what she might think about John now, shuttering their dream. Without her, even the fresh and vibrant wine produced in the weeks after her death was a hollow victory. Only about 400 bottles of the Rock House Red remain, sitting in boxes in an underground room in the winery. John mostly drinks them himself or gives them out to friends.

The last few bottles of MST are down there, too. John's reserving them for Marvilla's daughter's wedding, in the hopes that, in some way, it makes up for Marvilla not being there. It occurs to me that the next time he makes this wine, if he ever does, it will be more than a time capsule of his youth. It will be a tangible connection to Marvilla. John never looked for his own immortality in his wines, but immortality is what he gave Marvilla through them, a way for her to become not only the wine, but an even greater part of the story that surrounds them.

Back in my car, quarter-sized raindrops thudding the windshield, and heading south, I looked in the direction that I knew Circle T to be. It was too far to see, but I remember how it tasted—idyllic and wild, a testament to one man's drive and his heart. I don't believe in legends, but I believe in John Trickett, and to me, and maybe even to himself, he's a legend still. ♦