



Robert Taylor, Vinter



Tilford Winery & Farms A Winery for Ages

by Dr. Alicia Ritchey

The close of this year, 2014, marks the end of a 41-year professional career for Robert Taylor. His tenure, including 22 years with the U.S. Navy Reserve while working simultaneously as a Systems Analyst at the Warner Robins Air Force Base, is a sharp contrast to his elected occupation as a Muscadine farmer and owner of Tilford Winery and Farms.

His time spent in agriculture, namely tilling soil, planting, and harvesting fruit predates his military career. Taylor recalled growing up on a farm, picking cotton, corn, and other vegetable. As a young lad, he watched his grandmother make Muscadine wine for the holidays. "It was commonplace for the children to gather the summer fruit, blackberries, blueberries, grapes, and plums, and my grandmother would take the fruit to make jam, pie, and wine." A native of Utica, Mississippi, Robert was the 4th of seven offspring born to Tilford and Carrie Lee Taylor.

Owning the Craft, Owning the Business ...

Taylor started making wine in the 90's as a hobby, primarily for family and friends. He began with two 55 gallons of stainless steel drums, which allows the wine to last longer, up to 100 years without spoiling. Taylor offered us a tour around the winery, where we noticed wooden barrels that he holds simply as keepsakes. We learned that wooden barrels breathe and leak wine. This requires wine to be continuously topped off, meaning that it has to be maintained at a certain level in the barrel causing the constant loss of wine. Taylor further shared with us that while wooden barrels are not cost effective, some people use them because they want a wooden (smoked) taste. Sometimes wineries use oak chips to give people the nostalgia of the wooded taste.

Taylor realized after his wine was being consumed at an unexpectedly high rate, that people were enjoying this southern region produce, a rare fruit for the rest of the United States. While there have been attempts to grow Muscadines in other regions, particularly in the North, Midwest, and West, variations in temperature, including hot days and cool nights, are not favorable weather conditions for the growth of the Muscadine.



In 2004, Tilford Winery & Farms released its label. At that time, Taylor had 15 acres in production; however, within three years, it became necessary to move from just two steel drums to one hundred fifty steel drums. Additionally, this expansion meant that he would have to move his operation from the carport to the construction of what now exists as Tilford Winery. Although Taylor was not expecting this kind of rapid increase, he was positioned for growth. According to Taylor, "I was already prepared for expansion in terms of the production of Muscadines."

About the Winery...

Tilford Winery & Farms is located in Kathleen, part of Warner Robins, Georgia. The winery occupies a two-story building with office space on the top floor. Inside the Winery is a crush pad used to crush grapes, and a fermentation area, the station where the crushed grapes are transferred in order to actually make the wine. Another section in the winery is the bottling area. Once the wine is made, it goes through the packaging process of being bottled and labeled.

Tilford Winery was self-designed by Taylor as a Farm, and as a Winery that produces its own fruit, in this case, the Muscadine grape. All wineries have to be sterile and Tilford Winery is designed with a wet floor, making it easy to sanitize and get rid of spoil or spoiling agents. Tilford is certified by the State of Georgia as a food processing plant, and maintains a local, state, and federal alcohol license.



Tilford Winery & Farms is named after Robert's Dad, Tilford Taylor. He chuckled, and shared with us, "When people ask whom do I work for, I tell them I work for Mr. Tilford."

About the Wine...

The wine made at Tilford Winery is 100% Muscadine, with no other fruit added. Mr. Taylor manufactures red wine from the red grape, and white wine from the bronze grape. As we were advised, a variety of grapes are used to make the white wine, including the Carlos grape and the Magnolia grape. The varieties of red wine, made from the red grape, include the Noble grape and the Rosé. The Noble is made from skin juice and pulp juice. The Rosé, however, is made from the pulp juice only. Standard in the production of wine, all wine at Tilford Winery is put in sweet; the sweetness of the juice turns to alcohol, which makes it dry. 'Dry' simply means that there is no sugar in the wine. In the case of sweet wine, this has been resweetened with grape juice or cane sugar.

In consideration of people who are not regular alcohol drinkers or are on light medication, Taylor keeps his wine at eight to nine percent alcohol by volume. He also chooses to specialize in sweet wine because it's rare to find a good sweet wine in package stores. "We propagate our own vines, which means the vine is a true vine of its species. It also means that the consumer is getting an authentic product, and that the by-products are at the highest nutritional and pharmaceutical value."

Alcohol Free Wine

Tilford Today and Tomorrow...

Tilford Winery and Farms is currently located on 30 acres of land. Within the next six years, Taylor hopes to expand the vineyard to 80 to 90 acres of Muscadines. He expects to sell to other wineries, which in most cases, buy their juice from other vineyards to minimize the expense of having to grow their own grapes. They will often use Muscadine juice as a base, and then flavor their wine with other juices.

Tilford Wine is shipped across the country. "We choose not to have our wine in stores because we like the personal touch of



being able to educate the public about the Muscadine grape, and its health benefits," said Taylor. The Muscadine has higher antioxidants above any other grape and wards off free radicals and cancer cells. To support his argument, he referenced research done by a number of Southeastern universities on Muscadine health, nutraceuticals, and pharmaceuticals.

Taylor has also recently launched a line of Muscadine juice, free of any alcohol contents, which cyclists use as an energy drink. He is currently in the process of getting these in stores across the U. S. Another by-products he is working on is grape seed oil, an oil used for cooking. He also has a number of nutraceutical products on the market: energy capsules and capsules for male enhancement. Consumers will be able to purchase the nutraceutical products on-line (tilfordnutraceutical.com) starting in 2015.



In the next five years, Taylor is looking to move the winery into the vineyard, so guests can enjoy both the winery and the vineyard at the same time. He expects to have a small kitchen, a larger tasting area to be able to serve wine with heavy hors d'oeuvres, as well as an area for special events. The existing winery, he plans to leave for accommodations for out-of-town guests.



Tilford Winery & Farms: A Family Affair

With a farm the size of Taylor's, harvesting might be viewed as a daunting task. However, at Tilford Winery & Farms, harvesting is turned into a Labor Day Weekend festival. From morning to the afternoon, family and friends travel from across the country to help harvest the grapes. After harvesting is complete, they all enjoy a fish fry, catfish, oysters, and Georgia coast crabs.

A strong work ethic is a Taylor family tradition. Robert has three sons, Elar, LeQuintiss, and Tilbért, all of whom are involved in the business in some capacity. Elar and Tilbért work primarily on the harvesting side of the business while LeQuintiss is more involved with marketing, website design, and maintenance. He's the contact person for the business.



Taylor's wife, Venetta, does most of the coordinating for the harvest festivities. And throughout the year, she serves more in a supportive role, assisting with local deliveries, and helps with maintaining the orchard garden of apricots, plums, and guava.

Taylor Business Philosophy...

When asked of the most challenging aspect of farming, Taylor described how in growing his winery business, "everything was done shoe string," sort of a pay as you go arrangement. "I may not have been able to go to the bank to get X amount of dollars to build a winery business; I may have been turned away, so it took me a little time to build, but in the end, I don't owe anyone."

He continued sharing, "I had some savings, so I loaned myself the money to get started. I had the product, the Muscadine



vine, so I didn't have to pay for that. I sold fruit and fruit juices. I then took that revenue and paid myself back. Eventually I was able to expand." Taylor seemed more inclined toward a slow and steady pace of building a business rather than the shot gun approach. He advised, "Take time to build your business instead of using the magic wand. People will want to push you to move beyond the appropriate timing for you. And then sometimes you may get involved with investors, and you end up working for the investors, instead of your product working for you. Be patient. Don't be quick to sell your soul for a dollar. Don't allow people to push you into the deep water when you know you don't know how to swim."

Taylor continued to stress that timing is essential as he told us how he took advantage of time, the time needed to develop his own product. This helped prepare him for expansion, but it also allowed him to save money while multiplying his production. "If I had not waited to grow my own grapes, sure I could have made money, but now I would have been in debt to the person who manufactures the grapes. Through education in how to propagate my own grapes, I learned that I could triple the annual production without the expense of buying.

Robert Taylor, the Community Builder...

Taylor has helped five minority growers start their own vineyards, two in Mississippi and three in Middle Georgia, with two other potential growers in Southwest Georgia. He desires to see other black growers benefit from the agriculture industry. "Blacks are not strangers to farming. We do that well. Many of us have done that all our lives. We learned from our parents and grandparents." Taylor's commitment to assist other minority farmers is partly motivated by an inclusive outlook. "Like farmers of other cultures, other races, we should also take advantage of the vast opportunities available in agriculture, not only as consumers, not only as sharecroppers, but as land owners, who manage successful businesses in the farming industry."

indigoLife Magazine is honored to have had the opportunity to share with our readers the story of Mr. Robert Taylor and Tilford Winery & Farms, a Black Life Treasure, lauded as the only African American-owned Muscadine Winery in the Southeastern U.S. For more information about upcoming wine tastings and how to purchase Tilford products, visit tilfordwinery.com.