



BEHIND THE LEAVES: Auton Valley Berry Farm owners Tammy and David Auton.

Out of the Vineyard

BY BAILEY SHERRILL

Down a long gravel drive, past a pair of brick houses and a field of squash blooms, two acres of green leaves and grapes the size of gumballs hang. They're too green yet, but the berries' thick hulls are darkening by the day. These are the muscadines and scuppernongs – black and bronze cousins of the seeded grape – of Auton Valley Berry Farm and they're in business, Bethlehem.

Tammy does the talking; David does the sweating. That's how the Autons work. When Tammy's dream of opening a vineyard and winery was born, David didn't hesitate.

She studied her viticulture and enology books – learning the age-old fail-safes of vine-pruning, aging and bottling wine – and David tilled and sowed her practice plot of Concord grapes. When she considered testing black and blue-

berries to gauge their fermented flavors, he planted those too. Tammy drove to Surry Community College twice a week, two years straight for winemaking classes; David drove wooden posts two acres wide and threaded wiring between them after 8-hour workdays.

But it wasn't always like this. After all, this Bethlehem couple is beyond gifted with their hands. From the early eighties – when the couple tied the knot – until 2009, the two crafted. Tammy crafted jeans – stitch by stitch – and David crafted homes, with lumber and dry wall and support beams.

Tammy grew up in the sewing business. "I watched the women in my family sew since I could pull up in a crib," she said with a smirk and a defiantly raised chin. Both her grandmother and her mama sewed. She recalls standing

there, right over their right shoulders and taking jabs of their elbows and criticism of her hindering their work. But she loved it.

So, it was no surprise to hear that she made her own dress at age 10 without a stroke of practice. Or, that she became responsible for making her entire family's clothing wardrobe from polyester cloth within the same year.

Her home economics class in high school was like an ABC book for a third-grader. Her first job, however, slung the doors of possibility open wide. It was a posting as a sewer at Taylor Togs, a small jean manufacturer based in Taylorsville. Yes, you read that right: a jean manufacturer was once headquartered here, in the county. Tammy recalls her days on the floor, working on pairs of "Chap" jeans – for guys – and "Gal" jeans for the ladies. She even

snickered explaining that "Gal" doubled as the acronyms of company owner Greer Lackey.

At Taylor Togs, Tammy climbed the ranks like a stitching seam. She went from sewing to pricing jeans and setting rates for girls who worked production to Assistant Plant Manager. It was there, under the management of supervisors and production quotas that she told herself, "one of these days, I'm going to have my own business."

Many years and two leather sewing jobs later, Tammy is seeing her vision come to life. Still a full-time employee of CR Laine Furniture in Hickory, she bides her evening hours away with testing pH levels and sampling her vines.

David Auton was

raised on the very land he now owns. His grandpa, Leonard Auton, settled the plot straddling present-day Teague Town in the 1950s. On it, he grew corn and other cash crops alongside cattle. He passed the operation down to his son, Ralph. David didn't quite follow suit. Now, he still raised large gardens like the Auton men before him. But instead of doing that full-time, he went into carpentry. In fact, he entered the industry at 16 rather than continuing high school and has been part of the industry since.

40 or so odd years have passed and David's still using his strong hands to build residential homes. After hours, he's in the fields pruning

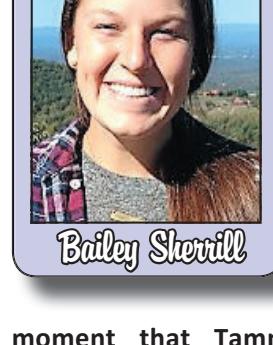
and picking the vines. He planted all of them – all 220 original vines and the slew of replacements needed the following Spring. He also tends to them and harvests, essential to the daily operations of this two-fold berry business.

The land is where it all began in Tammy's two-year business management plan. Together, the couple considered the soil's red clay conditions, the rootstock, their trial-run test plot successes and mulled over varieties of muscadines that would thrive both in it and a wine bottle.

They hosted auditions for the titles of bronze and black, scuppernong and muscadine respectively. For the former, they chose a Sweet Dixie scuppernong. For the latter, the veered for the dark-skinned Noble muscadine. Before long, a massive delivery from Double A Vineyards of Buffalo, NY – a partner with Surry Community College's vineyard and winery, Surry Cellars – arrived.

Last year was the

first true harvest for the Autons. It was the

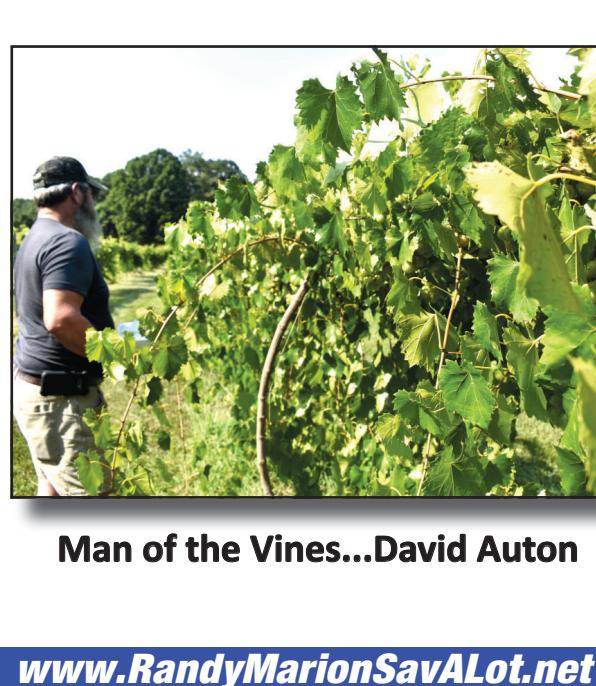


Bailey Sherrill

moment that Tammy had been dreaming of and David had brought to life. They're hoping last year's "just enough for us and the deer" yields will become a bounty this season.

With late August through October marking the muscadine season, Tammy said they're simply "waiting for the sweetness to soak from their skins all the way through them."

It's just around the corner now. Their off-road vehicle is ready. The rows are mowed, the seed-filled grapes turning their respective shades, and Tammy's fingers are tingling. The Autons hope to see you and your family driving the gravel drive for picking the sweet fruit, or maybe – just maybe – asking about the art of muscadine wine.



Man of the Vines...David Auton



Aiden Auton enjoys a "Scuppernong Snack"

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