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Taste of the Triad

Right under your nose: Triad's best little-known wineries

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You may equate golden bantams and pumpkins as big as hogs with N.C. State Fair winners, but the wine competition has become a really big deal, with 41 of the state's 76 commercial wineries and 86 amateur vintners submitting a total of 383 wines for judging.

"Over the past five years, there has been a marked improvement in overall wine quality," said Margo Knight Metzger, the executive director of the N.C. Grape Council, an arm of the state tourism division. "By and large we are now seeing a lot more wines that fall into the good category and quite a few that qualify as great."

The big winners won't surprise you: Childress Vineyards led the medal count with 33 awards and Best of Show. Shelton Vineyards, RagApple Lassie Vineyards, and Brushy Mountain Winery, all of which you've read about in this column, were also prominent.

But what about Iron Gate Vineyards & Winery with its Best of Show blush or Buck Shoals Vineyard with its Best of Show apple mead? And how about Iron Gate's two double-gold medals? Flint Hill Vineyards, McRitchie Winery & Ciderworks and Shadow Springs Vineyard also took gold medals, and Benjamin Vineyards & Winery won two silver awards.

All of these wineries are right here in the Piedmont Triad, and how many have you heard of? Sampling more than a dozen bottles of their wine over the last two weeks has made me and my dedicated panel of wine tasters proud to call North Carolina home. Here are a dozen drinkables, all of them prize winners, that you can put on your holiday shopping list, either as gifts or to accompany your festive feasts.

A. McRitchie Winery & Ciderworks

315 Thurmond P.O. Road, Thurmond

(336) 874-3003

www.mcritchiewine.com

• **McRitchie North Carolina Hard Cider, \$14:** A very refreshing, gold-medal winning cider from McRitchie that's available in a tangy sweet version and a yeasty, dry variety. Look for champagne notes and bubbles to tickle your nose and palate in one. Take care, though, it's 7 percent alcohol, but sure doesn't taste like it.

• **McRitchie Wine Co. 2006 Merlot, \$18:** If you like wine that tastes unashamedly like grapes, pop open a bottle of this Yadkin Valley, silver-medal winning merlot and enjoy the rounded, clean fullness of this dry crowd pleaser. "Smooth and very drinkable," my friend, the merlot fan, said. Though it stands on its own, it begs to be paired with sirloin or ribeye.

• **McRitchie Wine Co. 2006 Chardonnay, \$16:** With fragrances of oak and lemon, this dry, crisp and slightly-tart chard is fine for sipping but will hold its own against tuna steaks. The judges gave it a silver medal.

Taste of the Triad is written by a local critic who, in order to avoid special treatment, prefers to write anonymously. Send comments and suggestions to tasteofthetriad@gmail.com.