



# CAMPUS HISTORY:

Enology Lab

Revived

Mississippi

Winemaking

By Bob Ratliff

Photos by Marco Nicovich



Tucked away atop a pine-covered hillside on the North Farm is an architectural reminder of Mississippi State University's 20th century history.

Construction of the A.B McKay Food and Enology Laboratory began in 1974, following a \$500,000 appropriation by the Mississippi Legislature. The laboratory was part of efforts by then MSU Vice President Louis Wise to provide university support for new agricultural enterprises in the state.

Reminiscent of an Alpine chateau, the state-of-the-art teaching and research winery began operating in 1975 under a federal permit allowing MSU scientists to experiment with winemaking.

At the time, Mississippians were prohibited by a 1908 state law from producing more than small quantities of wine for home consumption. Prior to 1908, several wineries operated in the state, and scientists at then Mississippi A&M College worked with viticulture, the branch of agriculture concerned with the culture and production of grapes.

The state law changed in early 1976 with the passage the Native Wine Act, which allowed the commercial production and sale of wines from native grapes in the state. Wild grapes, or muscadines, grow in forests throughout Mississippi.

MSU scientists were ready to start working in the lab when it was completed in 1975 because the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station already had research plots established by horticulturist Pat Hegwood,

containing about 80 grape varieties at Crystal Springs, Richton, Stoneville and Verona.

The university also had individuals with the expertise to staff the enology lab.

The head of enology research at the new lab was Boris J. Stojanovic. A native of Yugoslavia, Stojanovic grew up on his family's vineyard and was trained in chemistry at the University of Bonn in Germany. He joined the Mississippi State faculty after earning a doctorate in microbiology and biochemistry at Cornell University in 1956.

The viticulturist for the lab was Jean P. Overcash. He was in charge of the production of the muscadine grapes cultivated to supply the enology research.

Gale P. Ammerman, professor of food science and technology in the Department of Horticulture, worked at the lab with food products made from grapes, including fruit drinks, jams and jellies. The lab's first processing engineer was Fred L. Shuman.

During the fall 1976 semester, MSU offered its first course on winemaking: HO 1003 "Introduction to Enology." It was a survey course taught by Stojanovic and touched on all aspects of winemaking, preservation and marketing.

By 1977 the lab was ready for its first cellar master, the individual in charge of production at a winery. Richard P. Vine, former head of production at Taylor Wine Co. in upstate New York was hired to fill the post. During the late 1970s, he and other members of the lab staff began providing research data Mississippi farmers and winemakers needed to develop a wine-making industry in the state.

The MSU lab contained all the equipment and other facilities found in a modern winery, including corking machines and

tasting cubicles. It also had a special touch: a Vinitheca or "library" of bottles of all the wines made at Mississippi State for use by students to compare vintages and variations.

By the early 1980s, five commercial wineries were operating in Mississippi, and the MSU enology lab had earned a reputation for quality. Though not publicized at the time, President Jimmy Carter's mother, Lillian, had sampled MSU-produced wine during a campus visit and insisted that it be served at the White House. In a 1983 article, Clarion Ledger wine columnist John R. Hailman noted that the MSU facility was "perhaps the finest in the Southeast and one of the finest for its size in the country."

During the mid-1980s, other types of food-related research began at the lab, including work with the byproducts left over from winemaking. Out of that research came important discoveries by nutritionist Betty Ector about the health benefits of a compound found in the thick skin of muscadine grapes. She found that resveratrol in muscadine skins helps lower cholesterol and cancer risk. At the same time, food scientist Juan Silva and others worked at the lab to develop new products from muscadine byproducts and from other fruits produced commercially in the state.

Research with native wine production has ceased at the MSU Enology Lab, but the university still produces and markets a popular nonfermented muscadine grape juice, which is shipped nationwide by the MAFES Sales Store.

The Enology Lab currently houses campus meeting facilities, and plans are under way to locate a center for healthy living in the historic building. The center would include labs for research with grain and fruit processing.

