

Inside the 57th Annual AWS Conference: A Showcase for North Carolina's Wine Industry

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Attending our first American Wine Society (AWS) Annual Conference in our home state of North Carolina was more than an introduction to the vibrant AWS community—it was a showcase of the growing North Carolina wine industry on a national stage.

The 57th AWS conference brought together a diverse mix of over 600 attendees from across the United States, all gathered to celebrate, learn and indulge in the culture of wine. The AWS, which includes thousands of members nationwide, fosters this sense of community each year by bringing industry insiders, enthusiasts and experts together to exchange knowledge and experiences.



As part of the conference, AWS organized pre-conference tours featuring some of North Carolina's standout wineries, giving visitors a taste of the local wine landscape. Tour stops included Rayson Vineyards, Haze Gray Vineyards, Dobbins Creek Vineyards, JOLO Winery & Vineyards, Jones von Drehl Vineyards, Raffaldini Vineyards & Winery and Piccione Vineyards. These tours provided a unique opportunity for attendees to explore North Carolina's diverse terroir and winemaking techniques firsthand.

The conference officially kicked off Friday evening, November 1, with a welcome reception sponsored by Raffaldini Vineyards & Winery, where dozens of North Carolina wineries showcased their wines. It was an evening of lively conversation, where positive feedback filled the room as attendees tasted local wines and caught up with old friends. The hospitality suite was a popular spot, buzzing with guests eager to connect with fellow enthusiasts, try new wines and share stories from their winemaking journeys and chapter accomplishments.

North Carolina-Focused Sessions and Learning Opportunities

The weekend's sessions highlighted North Carolina's role in the wine world alongside various global wine topics. Attendees explored themes like organic wines, wine trends, Dr. Frank's Ukrainian roots, wines from Spain, France and South Africa, and a handful of presentations hosted by North Carolina's local wine experts and winemakers.



Lifesaving Muscadine? Documentary & Tasting

A session titled “Lifesaving Muscadine? Documentary & Tasting” showcased the remarkable health benefits of Muscadine wine. Tina Smith, owner of Cypress Bend Vineyards in Wagram, North Carolina, along with Dan and Cathy McLaughlin of CLINNEAN and the nonprofit Fine Wines of North Carolina, led attendees through an enlightening journey into the unique qualities of Muscadine.

Participants tasted three award-winning Cypress Bend wines—a dry white (Magnolia), a dry red (Noble), and a semi-sweet (Carlos)—while Smith explained that Muscadine, a grape native to the southeastern U.S., is often misunderstood as purely sweet. Highlighting the grape’s versatility, she declared it “the healthiest wine you can drink today.”

The McLaughlins presented their award-winning documentary, *Healthy Hope*, which explores Muscadine’s potential health benefits. Featuring insights from researchers at five universities, the film delves into studies on the grape’s properties, including its potential to slow cancer metastasis, combat fatigue and support the body’s healing processes. Attendees had the opportunity to view the documentary and participate in a Q&A, gaining a deeper appreciation for Muscadine’s unique qualities.

Délestage Method Using Chambourcin with JW Ray

JW Ray of JOLO Vineyards, located in Pilot Mountain, North Carolina, led an engaging session on the unique délestage method, a two-step process for fermenting red wine that involves racking the fermenting juice away from grape solids.

Opening with humor, Ray asked why attendees had chosen his workshop, prompting one participant to respond, “I was closed out of the other classes!” The lighthearted exchange set the tone for a session that captured the curiosity and openness of AWS conventions. Ray shared his background in hospitality, describing how his passion for wine led him to North Carolina, where he founded JOLO, now one of the state’s most celebrated vineyards.

With a glass of JOLO’s award-winning Chambourcin in hand, Ray presented on “3 Ways to Fine Wine”—punch down, pump over and délestage, or the “lightening” method. Though less common, the délestage technique offers significant benefits, as it introduces oxygen to the juice during fermentation, promoting healthy yeast activity and softening tannins through oxidation. This method enhances fruit flavors and makes the wine more approachable.

Drawing on his hospitality roots, Ray explained his philosophy: “I want you to taste what I grow. I want you to taste Chambourcin in the best environment ever. I want you to taste Norton in the best environment ever. Or Sangiovese. Or Merlot. Or Cabernet Sauvignon.”



Exploring Sagrantino with Jay Raffaldini

Jay Raffaldini led an in-depth exploration into one of the most tannic wines on the planet, Sagrantino. He guided the packed house through a blind tasting of four different Sagrantino while diving into the background behind the grapes and the Appassimento process he uses to partially dehydrate the grapes to produce a significant concentration of flavors and intensity in his wines.

Known as the "house of tannins" by locals and "Chianti of the Carolinas," Raffaldini's approach to big, bold reds has made the winery one of the most well-respected in the state. And if you know Jay Raffaldini, you know all about his witty and dry humor. In the session, while talking about grapes that grow well in the state, he says, "You know what does grow well in the state? Weed! If they legalize that, I'm ripping up everything and planting that!"

If you couldn't get enough of Raffaldini, you were in luck. Raffaldini's winemaker, Chris Nelson, brought to the center of attention the process of Appassimento, an old winemaking technique of drying grapes in another session.

Luxury Wines of North Carolina with Mountain Brook Vineyards

This session was led by Mountain Brook Vineyards' winemaker, assistant general manager and vineyard manager. Winemaker Dave Coventry talked about luxury as more than just the wine itself. For Mountain Brook Vineyards, luxury is about having a team and support from everyone around him to help produce high-quality wines. It showed in the wines attendees sampled, which included three different styles of Chardonnay, a Merlot, a Cabernet Sauvignon and a Bordeaux-style red.

During the session, well over a dozen questions were lobbed Coventry's way on winemaking styles, the quality of his wines, and what makes wines taste bad. To that question, Coventry replied, "There are no bad varieties; there are only bad winemakers."

Innovations & Its Influence on Regional Winemaking

This session touched base on the three pillars of the Fermentation Sciences Program at Appalachian State University. Led by Erik Martella of Erik Martella Wines, a winery set to let the world know that not all Muscadine wine needs to be loaded with sugars. He primarily described to the audience his personal experience there while developing his wine label.

During Martella's session, the attendees sampled three of his wines, which included two different Carlos wines, a carbonic maceration Noble, and a CranApple cider from Ivory Tower's fermentation department. Guests left the session with an appreciation and understanding of the unique chemistry behind muscadine wines.



In addition to these NC-focused presentations, sessions on sparkling wines and other educational workshops broadened the experience, underscoring how conventions like these are a dynamic hub for learning about trends and techniques worldwide.

Our last conference session, Better Living Through Chemistry, was one of our favorites. Paul Wagner (Blazac Communications) and Miguel Pedroza (Fresno State University) presented this session on altering wine with regular household items in your cupboard. Using sodium chloride, tartaric acid, baking soda, sugar and cheese, we sampled our way through five glasses of wine, all using the same controlled wine as the base. It was a fun experiment and something we plan on recreating with our local chapter in the near future.

Looking Forward

The AWS Annual Conference in North Carolina highlighted our state's role in the evolving U.S. wine landscape, fostering relationships and sharing innovations from our region with a national audience. Next year, the AWS conference will head to Northern Virginia, continuing its mission to unite wine lovers and expand wine knowledge across America. For North Carolina's wine industry, this year's AWS conference was a landmark opportunity to shine nationally, positioning our state as a wine exploration and excellence destination.

