



**BREAKING GROUND**

# Montalvina Winery & Estates

Builder Rob Beecham's dream of opening a winery comes to fermentation in North Georgia with the help of architect Bill Harrison

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It's an idea that has fermented during the past five years. Builder Rob Beecham's growing appreciation for wine—fueled by trips to vineyards and a collecting spree—set his sights on moving to Italy or California upon retirement to open a winery.

"Nothing to me is more beautiful than looking out over hills that are covered with vineyards," he says. "It has an effect on my soul that nothing else does."

That romantic picture of the 40-year-old's later years has become present-day reality. He's creating Montalvina, a community of 300 homes on 400 acres located west of Dahlonega that Beecham says boasts rolling hills and pastures that remind him of Italy.

The vision began last fall during a weekend trip to the mountains. Passing a sign touting Georgia's Wine Highway, a

winding route linking vineyards, Beecham couldn't believe what he saw. Beecham stopped the car at the first winery, tested the fruits of its labor and was surprised by the quality of the wine. He visited every winery along his route to Brasstown Bald.

"I've been in Georgia my whole life and never heard Georgia and wine in the same sentence," says Beecham of Beecham Builders, a longtime Atlanta homebuilder. "It was the beginning of this idea, 'I don't have to wait until I retire.'"

Passion isn't the only ingredient he needed early on in the plans for Montalvina. Beecham needed partners, such as architect Bill Harrison, and a prime piece of land. With offices in Atlanta and Santa Barbara, Harrison, who frequently partners with Beecham, was no stranger to vineyards. "I think

the only thing that I had to be convinced of was that North Georgia is capable of producing wine to the caliber California was," says Harrison.

"I took him on a couple of wine tastings; he came back a believer in the project," Beecham says. They found 400 acres along the Etowah River in Lumpkin County to create their Tuscan village concept. Beecham recalls Harrison's comment: "If you've got a problem, this land is prettier than most of the pieces of land I've seen in Tuscany."

"It really does create this rolling feel of the Italian countryside," Beecham says. At Montalvina, which roughly means "Wine at the Mountain," they intend to create a sense similar to what people would find driving through Tuscany, albeit in North Georgia. The plan calls for retaining 60 percent of the property, and, as Harrison

explains, developing the rest into small villages of 10-16 houses grouped around plazas that encourage recreation and socialization.

All the residences will feature exteriors of stone and masonry stucco, and clay barrel tiles made in Italy. Four types of homes will be offered: two-bedroom cottages primarily for folks seeking a weekend home, priced in the \$300,000s; three-bedroom townhomes in the \$400,000s; three- and four-bedroom villas in the \$600,000s to high \$900,000s; and 93 estate homes with vineyard, river and Chattahoochee National Forest views, starting in the \$800,000s.

The winery and the first 15 villa homes are expected to open and welcome residents next October. With more than 9,500 square feet in production space, the winery will house a restaurant, demonstration kitchen, tasting room and gift shop, and it will host events, including the planned Harvest

Festival (with the anticipated grape stomping). An owners' club on the upper level will feature private wine storage, a humidor and a rooftop terrace. Residents will receive some of the wine produced, Beecham says.

He's serious not only about creating a community, but also about producing top-quality wine, which he believes North Georgia's altitude, soil and long growing season can create. Montalvina's vineyards will include varieties of premium vinifera grapes, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, Viognier and Sangiovese. "It's my passion, and it's going to stay our family business in a sense, but we are bringing in a world-class wine maker," he says.

A 10-acre recreation park with a swim and tennis club, a day spa, a Sunday jazz brunch and art exhibitions are among the other planned activities for residents. "We're establishing a community built around a passion," Beecham

says. "What should draw people in is their passion for food, wine, art and nature."

The development team also includes Joe A. Gayle and Associates and Atlanta developer Bobby Greenway. Beecham points to North Georgia's growth as a second-home destination and the niche his community is crushing out for itself as a way to deflect the slowdown in the real estate market. "We feel like what we're bringing to the market value-wise will separate us," he says.

### THE GRAPE STORY

Georgia's wine-growing tradition dates back to the early 1800s, and the state ranked sixth among grape-growing states in 1900. Then statewide prohibition wiped out many farms. In the last five years, vineyard acreage in North Georgia has more than tripled with the addition of at least seven new vineyards.

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