

Memories of muscadines

The grape of the South

BY DEBORAH GEERING

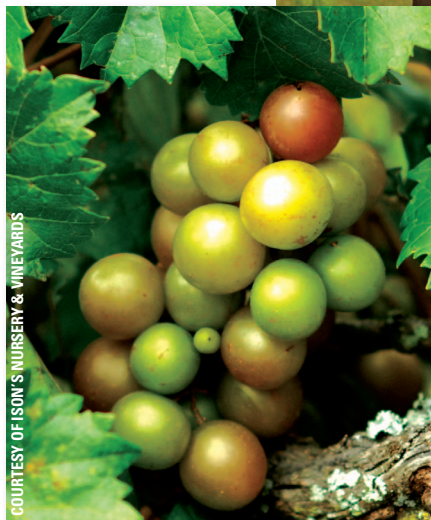
Many Southerners have a cherished childhood memory or two involving muscadines. But few can top the memories of the Isons.

As the third generation of Ison's Nursery & Vineyards, the four children of Bill and Leola Ison were put to work early. Back in the '70s, in the late summer and early fall, when the large native grapes ripen, the children would get off the school bus on Ga. Highway 16 in Brooks and head directly to the family's roadside farm stand. There, they'd join their mother and aunt Mildred Ison-Hoard selling Ison muscadines.

"As soon as we were old enough to write, in the evenings Daddy would have us address catalogs at the dining room table," remembers Janet Ison-McClure, sister of Greg Ison, Darlene Ison-Evans and Pam Ison-Duke.

The best memories, though, are about eating muscadines. "There's nothing better than the first fruit of the season," says Ison-Evans. She and her siblings see it all the time: "People will put it in their mouth, they close their eyes, and it will be like they're back at their grandmother's house as a child. It's truly a Southern treat."

There really is nothing else like a muscadine. Perfectly round, sometimes as big as ping-pong balls, in a mysterious range of colors from green-bronze to almost black, the fruit bursts in the mouth with a flavor that is sweet and tart, refreshing and earthy all at once. Muscadines are excellent eaten out of hand (though most folks spit out the skins and hard seeds, or take a little nibble to pierce the skin with their teeth and then squeeze the pulp into their mouths); pressed into juice; cooked into jellies, jams and sauces; or baked into pies



and cobbblers.

As it turns out, they're amazingly good for you too. Packed with flavonoids, naturally occurring compounds that help protect against cancer, the fruits were recently named on "The Dr. Oz Show" as a top cancer-fighting food—causing a boom in sales for the nursery.

Today, the Ison siblings run what they say is the largest and oldest grower of muscadine vines, helping to make Georgia the leading producer of muscadine fruit. Their father developed and patented more than 30 varieties of vines, which are sold to both commercial and home growers. With 40 acres of vines in production, the company also sells a full line of muscadine products as well as fresh fruit and juice to wineries and local grocery stores.

Most fresh muscadines sold in regional stores, however, come from another Georgia family business. Paulk Vineyards in Wray was begun by Ja-



At Ison's Nursery & Vineyards in Brooks, the family grows 22 varieties of muscadines, ranging in color from green-bronze to almost black.



Siblings Janet Ison-McClure, Darlene Ison-Evans and Greg Ison run the family farm in Brooks.

cob Paulk in the 1950s—with vine stock from Ison's Nursery. Now, with 600 acres in production and three generations of Paulks in the business, Paulk Vineyards is the world's largest grower of the big grape.

Amid gently sloping land lined with trellised vines as far as the eye can see, sits the huge, spotless steel building that houses the Paulk grape-processing operation. As the just-picked fruit is unloaded from the vineyard, conveyor belts carry it past sorters, who select the best



Above: A hint of orange complements the earthy-grape flavor of muscadine in this cobbler recipe. **Above right:** Paulk Vineyards in Wray is also a family business, run by Gary Paulk, Jacob Paulk and Chris Paulk.

muscadines for fresh produce sale, and packers, who pile it into clear plastic boxes destined for stores as far north as Brooklyn, N.Y., and as far west as Texas. About 20 percent is reserved for the Paulk's Pride line of value-added products, including juices, preserves and Purple Power, a dietary supplement made from muscadine skins.

"It's like a beehive in here during harvest," says Chris Paulk, grandson of Jacob and manager of the value-added product line.

Ison's Nursery also markets muscadine products, including steak sauce, barbecue sauce, salsa and a muscadine-pepper jelly. (Ison-McClure loves to serve it like traditional pepper jelly: over cream cheese, with crackers.) The family still runs the old farmstand, too. Muscadine season is a special time, bring-

ing visitors and old friends who come back year after year.

"Customers will say, 'I remember being here 20 years ago, and your dad took me for a ride in the vineyard,'" Ison-McClure says. "He would get so excited just talking about muscadines."

And, of course, the harvest brings back that cherished childhood memory, the first muscadine of the season. (Muscadines are harvested in Georgia from September through mid-October.)

"It's like Christmas—you can only get them once a year," says Ison-Evans. It's definitely something you look forward to."

Deborah Geering is a freelance food writer from Decatur.



Paulk Vineyards bottles purple and white (bronze) muscadine grape juice from their annual harvests. Nutritionists say that muscadines are loaded in antioxidants.

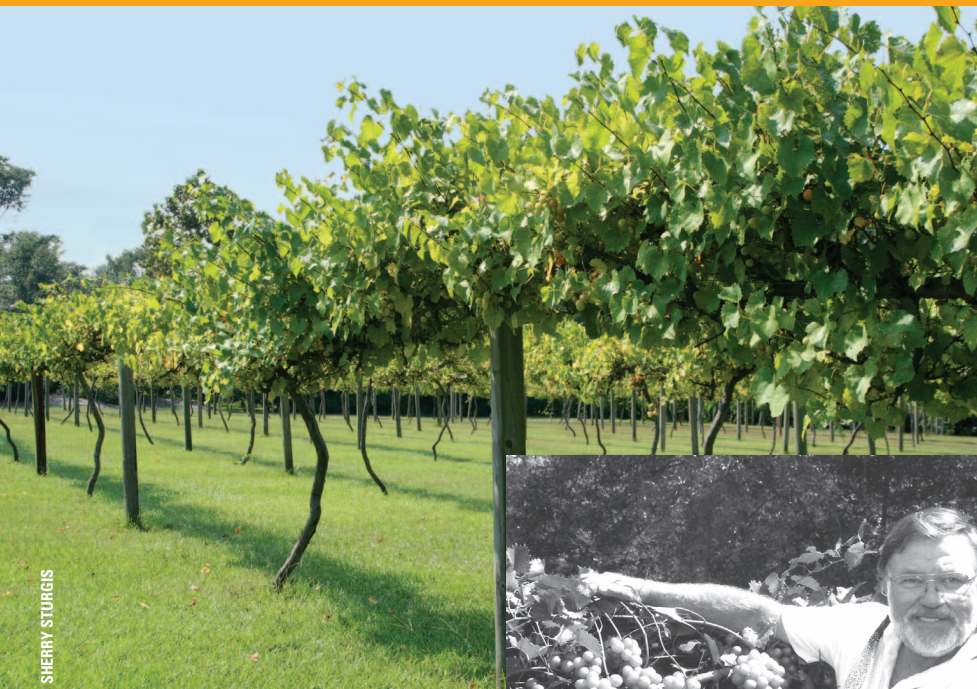
**Ready for recipes?
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The joy of steam juicers

Once the Ison siblings discovered steam juicers, they've never gone back to separating muscadine skins, pulp and seeds by hand. They even carry the devices, which use steam to extract the clear juice from the fruit, in their store. "Jellies come out better because the juice is 100 percent pure," Ison-McClure says. "And the skins are already steamed tender and mostly separated from the seeds."

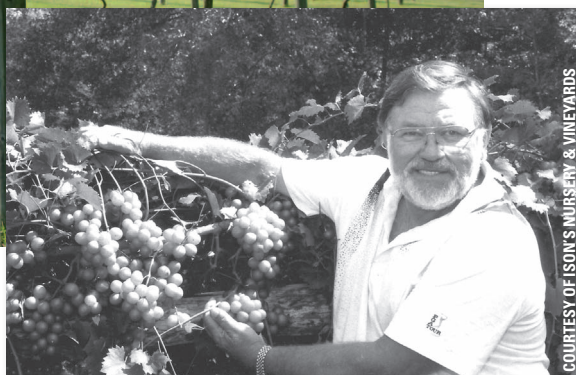
Ison's carries a brand called Back to Basics Nutri-Steamer, but there are several other brands sold online as well.





SHERRY STURGIS

Above: Muscadine vines grow on long trellised rows. **Right:** Bill Ison shows off one of his muscadine varieties back around 1989.



COURTESY OF ISON'S NURSERY & VINEYARDS

Based on a recipe from Wenkers Vineyard in Albertville, Ala., this cobbler uses apple pie spices and a hint of orange to bring out the best in muscadines.

Muscadine Cobbler

2 pounds muscadine grapes (about 4 cups)
1-1/4 to 1-3/4 cups granulated sugar, divided
Zest of 1/2 orange
1 to 2 tablespoons fresh orange juice, to taste
1/8 teaspoon cinnamon
1/8 teaspoon nutmeg
1 tablespoon 5-minute tapioca
1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter
1 cup all-purpose flour
1-1/2 teaspoons baking powder
Pinch salt
1/2 cup milk
Vanilla ice cream, optional

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Remove skins from muscadines; reserve skins. Cook pulp and 1 to 1-1/2 cups sugar in a saucepan over medium heat, stirring occasionally, 5-10 minutes or until seeds loosen. Press mixture through a wire-mesh strainer, discarding seeds. Return pulp mixture to saucepan; stir in reserved skins, orange zest, 1 tablespoon orange juice, cinnamon and nutmeg. Bring to a boil; reduce heat and sim-

mer, stirring occasionally, 5 minutes or until tender. Taste and add additional tablespoon orange juice, if desired. Sprinkle in tapioca and remove from heat.

Place butter in an 11x7-inch baking dish in the oven to melt. In a small bowl, stir together flour, baking powder, salt, remaining 1/2 cup sugar and milk; pour melted butter over mixture and stir to combine. Pour muscadine mixture into baking dish. Drop batter by spoonfuls over filling. Bake at 350 degrees for 35 to 45 minutes or until golden and set. Serve with ice cream, if desired.

Set aside some of these preserves to give away during the holidays. The rich, deeply earthy flavor is perfect on a cold winter day. Serve on toast for breakfast or over vanilla ice cream for dessert.

Spiced Muscadine Butter

5 pounds muscadine grapes (about 10 cups)
4 cups granulated sugar
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon allspice
1 teaspoon ground cloves
1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
1/8 teaspoon salt

Bring a pot of water to boil; add muscadines and cook 2 minutes. Transfer grapes into a bowl of ice water to cool; drain. Slip off muscadine skins, reserving pulp. Coarsely chop skins in a food processor or by hand; set aside.

Place pulp in a large saucepan; cook over medium heat 10 minutes or until seeds begin to separate from pulp. Press pulp through a sieve to remove seeds; discard seeds. Return pulp to saucepan; add reserved skins, sugar, cinnamon, allspice, cloves, nutmeg, ginger and salt. Cook over medium-low heat, stirring regularly, until mixture thickens, about 30 minutes. Spoon warm mixture into hot sterilized half-pint jars, leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Cover with metal lids and bands. Place in boiling water that covers jars by at least 1 inch. Return to boil; process for 5 minutes. Remove from water to cool. *Yields 7 to 8 (half-pint) jars.*

In "The New Southern-Latino Table: Recipes that Bring Together the Bold and Beloved Flavors of Latin America and the American South" (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), Sandra Gutierrez says that throughout Latin America, chicken stewed in white wine is a common theme. This one is reminiscent of dishes found in Chile—Latin America's wine country.

Drunken Chicken With Muscadine Grapes and White Wine

1 whole chicken, cut into 10 pieces
1-1/2 teaspoons salt
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
5 cups thinly sliced Vidalia onions
3 large garlic cloves, thinly sliced
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
1 bay leaf
1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes
1 cup white wine (such as Chilean chardonnay)
3 cups muscadine grapes, halved, seeded
1/4 cup chopped flat-leaf parsley
Pat chicken dry with paper tow-



Second helping

Craving more? Be sure to see page 63A of this month's digital edition for a bonus recipe featuring a spin on a Southern favorite: Muscadine Upside-Down Cake, topped with whipped cream! Find it online at www.georgiamagazine.org, or scan the QR code here with your smartphone.



els; season with salt and pepper. In a large Dutch oven, heat oil over medium-high heat. Working in batches, brown chicken pieces on all sides and transfer them to a platter. Discard all but 1 tablespoon of oil left in the pan. Add onions and cook 4-5 minutes, stirring occasionally, until soft. Add garlic, mustard, bay leaf and red pepper flakes. Cook, stirring, for 30 seconds, or until garlic is fragrant. Add wine and deglaze by scraping bottom of pan; bring to a boil. Return chicken (and all juices that have collected on platter) to pan. Cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer for 15 minutes. Add grapes with their skins and stir well; cover and simmer for 25 minutes, or until chicken is cooked through (juices will run clear when chicken is pierced with a fork). Taste sauce and adjust salt and pepper. Transfer stew to a serving platter and sprinkle with parsley.



Muscadines roll down the conveyor line on their way to packaging at Paulk Vineyards in Wray.

This tangy-sweet pie has the texture of cherries but the flavor of grapes. It's so special, it just may become your new favorite. Of course, it absolutely must be served with vanilla ice cream.

Best Muscadine Pie

7 cups muscadine grapes

1-1/4 cups granulated sugar

1/4 cup all-purpose flour

1 tablespoon quick-cooking tapioca

Juice from 1/2 lemon


Zest of 1 lemon

Pastry for a double-crust pie

1-2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into pieces

Use a small paring knife to cut a small slit in each muscadine. Pop the pulp and seeds into a bowl; reserve the skins. Pour pulp, seeds and juices into a saucepan. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until pulp softens and seeds are easily separated, about 15 minutes. Press pulp through a sieve placed over a bowl. Discard seeds. Return strained pulp and juice to the saucepan and add reserved skins. Add enough water to cover skins. Simmer over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until skins soften, about 20 minutes. Remove from heat.

In a small bowl, stir together the sugar, flour and tapioca until no lumps remain. Add to cooked fruit and stir well. Stir in lemon juice and zest.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line a 9-inch pie pan with 1 crust. Pour in muscadine mixture and top with butter. Top with remaining piecrust. Seal and crimp crust edges and cut a few slits in the top to vent steam. Bake for 40-45 minutes, until crust is golden brown. Cool to lukewarm or room temperature before serving. 



COURTESY OF ISON'S NURSERY & VINEYARDS

Muscadine resources

- **Ison's Nursery & Vineyards**, 6855 Newnan Rd., Brooks. Founded in 1934, this family company sells potted and bareroot muscadine vines as well as many other edible plants, vineyard supplies and muscadine food products. www.isons.com, (800) 733-0324
- **Paulk Vineyards**, 1786 Satilla Rd., Wray. The 600-acre farm is mostly a commercial growing operation, but the Paulk family also operates a you-pick vineyard and a seasonal farmstand. www.paulkvineyards.com, (877) 583-2880
- **Paulk's Pride**, 1788 Satilla Rd., Wray. This family company sells muscadine-derived products—juice, jelly, preserves, sauce and dietary supplements—online as well as to distributors. www.paulkspride.com, (229) 468-7873
- **Sirvent's Farm and Vineyard**, 108 Thornton Lane, Florahome, Fla. Need muscadines in the off-season? Lois and John Sirvent ship them frozen, year-round, for baking, wine making and jelly making. They also offer you-pick and pre-picked fresh fruit in season. www.sirventsvineyard.com, (386) 659-2231