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Enjoy Southern Hospitality in Johnston County, North Carolina

by [Joann Holt](#)



Visiting Johnston County in North Carolina offers a fascinating glimpse into the region's history, along with a large serving of southern hospitality. The best way to explore this area is with a local tour guide, like we did recently. We were fortunate to have vivacious Ashby Brame, a Johnston County (JoCo) native now working with the Visitors Bureau, as our guide. My husband and I joined a small group of travel journalists to visit some of Ashby's favorite JoCo sites.

One of our most memorable stops was at the Ava Gardner Museum in Smithfield. Created by a longtime fan, Dr. Tom Banks (a local boy who first met Ava when she was an older college student) the museum opened in 2000. The lovingly maintained museum has a wealth of costumes on display from movies like "The Barefoot Contessa" and "Showboat," along with video and a library filled with portraits.

The legendary movie star was the youngest of seven children, born in nearby Grabtown on Christmas Eve, 1922. Ava's photograph displayed at her brother-in-law's NYC studio led to an MGM screen test in 1941.

MGM hired Ava as an 18-year-old starlet to be a contract worker for \$50 a week. While none of her early movies were memorable, her three marriages to famous men made headlines. Ava's first marriage to Mickey Rooney only lasted one year; so did her second marriage to Bandleader Artie Shaw.

She married the love of her life, singing idol Frank Sinatra, in 1951. Although they divorced in 1957, "People" Magazine called their marriage one of the "Romances of the Century." Until her death in 1990, Sinatra sent Ava a bouquet of her favorite roses every Christmas Eve.



Although she lived all over the world, spending years in Madrid and London, Ava never forgot her rural North Carolina roots. She

returned often to visit friends and family in Johnston County, and is buried in the Smithfield Cemetery.

Stops Along Joco Beer, Wine, Shine & Dine Trail

The Johnston County tour we took was aptly titled “Beer, Wine, Shine & Dine,” since we were given an opportunity to sample bodacious amounts of all the above. From craft beer distilleries to wineries to a modern-day moonshine distillery, we met entrepreneurial dispensers of true Southern hospitality.

Traveling by party bus from place to place, we sampled Muscadine grape wines at Hinnant’s Vineyards. The popular winery is a family-owned business, and features several Ava Gardner tribute wines like Santa’s Baby and Ava’s Allure along with their gold medal award-winning Electric Pelican.

Dining on the rooftop of Mannings Restaurant in Clayton at twilight, we feasted on delicious crab cakes and other delicacies. These dishes were created by Chef Howard Mannings, who specializes in “regional Carolina dishes with a modern twist.” At Broadslab Distillery, owned and operated by Jeremy Norris, we were treated to a fabulous barbecue feast by Redneck Bar-BQ Lab. The family-owned caterers, frequent winners in Kansas City BBQ Society competitions, have now opened their own restaurant in the area.



Pulled pork, ribs, brisket, chicken and turkey melted in your mouth, expertly sauced and grilled. These were served with collards, cornbread, slaw, and baked beans. Redneck Bar-BQ also specializes in yummy desserts like banana pudding and cheesecake piled high with berries.

But first we sampled a little “shine,” which will definitely clear out any sinus problems. Norris, descendant of five generations of moonshiners, took over his grandfather’s farming and distilling operation. He now controls every step of the 100-year-old operation from



“dirt to bottle.”

Other stops on the tour included a Drinkery, “Revival 1869,” a craft cocktail and whiskey emporium in downtown Clayton, who use Norris’ moonshine in some of their cocktails. Deep River, JoCo’s first legal brewery, is owned by brewers Paul and Lynn Auclair in Clayton. Former engineers, they now brew a wide range of beers. We were invited to a tasting in their taproom, where I fell for the watermelon lager.

Another stop for dinner by Simple Twist Catering combined beer pairings at Double Barley Brewing. Specializing in dark brews, Double Barley shares space with local chocolatiers GerDan Chocolates. Their divinely decadent chocolate dessert proved a perfect finish to the farm-fresh food served by Simple Twist.



Our last stop was at Gregory Vineyards, a 135-acre working farm with vineyards, a winery, a distillery, and a tasting room. We enjoyed

touring the property with winemaker Lane Gregory as he told us about the history of the sweet Muscadine grapes grown in eastern North Carolina.

My favorite take-away from Johnston County was the terrific cooperation everyone we met shared. Not only did they dispense hospitality to all of us, they gave loving support to each other. Every place we visited tried to use local produce, beers, wines or moonshine at their own place of business. It would be lovely to see communities everywhere enjoy this same sweet spirit of sharing.

To make arrangements for your own Johnston County tour, visit www.beerwineshinetrail.com. Better go hungry!

Tagged [Ava Gardner](#), [Ava Gardner Museum](#), [Beer Wine Shine & Dine trail](#), [Broadslab](#), [Chef Howard Mannings](#), [Deep River](#), [Double Barley](#), [Double Barley Brewing](#), [GerDan Chocolates](#), [Gregory Vineyard](#), [Gregory Vineyards](#), [Hinnant Wineries](#), [Johnston County North Carolina](#), [Muscadine grapes](#), [Redneck BBQ Lab](#), [Revival 1869](#), [Simple Twist Catering](#)

