



NELSON COUNTY SPIRITS OLD & NEW

The verdant beauty of Nelson County is sufficient reason for traveling its byways and backroads: dozens of miles of hiking trails, including 45 miles of Appalachian Trail; scenic Crabtree Falls; Wintergreen Resort, for all-season sports; and more. But in the past few years, the spirit of nature has been supplemented by manmade spirits: wine, mead, beer, cider, and distilled spirits. Just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains and south of Charlottesville, Nelson County is home to over a dozen such spirited sites. A few notable stops:

Pollak Vineyards: Virginians declared this their favorite Central Virginia winery in the 2014 Virginia Wine Lover Readers' Choice Awards. You can enjoy Pollak Vineyard's French varietals in their tasting room (by the fireplace if the weather is right) or from the patio. Both settings offer scenic views of some of their 27 acres of French vinifera vineyards, a peaceful pond, and the Blue Ridge Mountains. My favorite Pollak wine is the Viognier, especially the 2012. PollakVineyards.com

Silverback Spirits: Before your first sip, you'll appreciate the careful attention that Silverback Spirits puts into the production of their premium vodka, gin, whiskey, and bourbon. But once you start sampling the wares, your appreciation will be redirected to the results of the "perfect mix of Virginia grains, pure water and American craftsmanship." Just opened in August 2014, the distillery offers tastings, tours, and merchandise, both swag and their spirits. SBDistillery.com

Flying Fox Vineyard: With this small vineyard, size matters only because it will surprise you – the little hidden gem produces quality wines at reasonable prices. In their intimate tasting room or on the summer patio, enjoy the Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot from grapes grown on site; wines from the Viognier and Pinot Gris grown across the Blue Ridge; or their masterful blends. FlyingFoxVineyard.com

Hilltop Berry Farm & Winery: For unique taste experiences, head to Hilltop. Their "True to the Fruit" wines are made from handpicked blackberries, blueberries, peaches, strawberries, and other local fruits, ranging from a luscious sweetness to semi-dry. And their historic, honey-based fermented meads will show you why the Vikings were so happy to party in their banquet halls. Besides the clean taste of the simply honey Voyage, I enjoy the Lavender Metheglin and Hunter's Moon spiced pumpkin mead. HilltopBerryWine.com

Bold Rock Cider: Local apples are crushed to make crisp, drinkable hard cider in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. In addition to the Virginia Draft and Virginia Apple ciders, Bold Rock produces the Crimson Ridge Vat #1 and Crimson Ridge Vintage Dry, more complex blends and a sparkling alternative to champagne. Tours take visitors from cider history to modern production. The new barn and tasting room opened fall 2014. BoldRock.com

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Devils Backbone Basecamp Brewpub: I've spent many hours relaxing in the Devils Backbone brewpub, usually after an invigorating hike, refueling with food and fresh brews. Devils Backbone's accolades include top awards as small brewpub and small brewing company of the year at the prestigious Great American Beer Festival. When the weather is right, partaking of a meal on their patio while taking in the mountain ridges in the distance is a tasty sample of Virginia's allure. DBBrewingCompany.com

Blue Mountain Barrel House Brewery: This production brewery with tasting room is a sister to the better-known Blue Mountain Brewpub, which has been in Nelson County since 2007. The Barrel House focuses on Blue Mountain's higher-end beers, those that require special processes and special ingredients, including one of my favorite Virginia beers, Dark Hollow, their imperial stout aged in oak bourbon barrels. BlueMountainBarrel.com

Wild Wolf Brewing Company, one of a few such mother and son operations in the country, is one of Virginia's fastest growing breweries. Located in Nellysford under shady elm trees, Mary and Danny Wolf offer their wide selection of hand crafted beers such as Alpha Ale, Blonde Hunny and seasonal favorites Howling Pumpkin and Folktobefest, plus Central Virginia's freshest local foods in a century old, revitalized Nelson County school house. Canine companions are always welcome in the outdoor Biergarten, weather permitting.

Finish your day at Wintergreen, for a relaxing ride home the next morning, or make it a two-day trip and catch a few more wine or brewery stops, play a round of golf at Wintergreen's championship golf course, or take a hike.

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