



Fred Reno 00:01

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Michael let's start with your motto, which I've always subscribed to myself. It's all about the wine. How did that come to you?

Michael Shaps 00:10

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Well, it kind of represents where we're at our location here at Wine Works south of Charlottesville. When I moved my production here in 2007, it was an old vacant production site, you know, hidden in the woods and not much access to tourists, or it was kind of off the beaten path. So we started solely as a production site, and then eventually opened up for visitation. But you know, originally is all about the wine. And all we're doing is making wine. Not really, we're making wine for myself, other customers, and really using more the 3-tier system to distribute. So it wasn't about the tasting facility. It wasn't about t-shirts and hats and picnics and all that and still isn't really about that here. We're a very bare bones operation in terms of tasting room, but it's always been our motto." It's all about the wine."

Fred Reno 01:01

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Well, let's back up. And then we'll get into that down the road here. So obviously, I know your background here having worked with you, but I think it'll be fascinating for the

audience. The story, you went to Burgundy, to learn how to make wine, here's an American kid going to Burgundy, trying to make wine. How did you get into wine start there, and then what sent you the Burgundy?

M

Michael Shaps 01:23

Well, after graduating from college with a business and economics degree, I decided to follow my friends to Boston and had worked in bars and restaurants in college and not knowing what I wanted to do, I continue to work in the restaurant industry, and eventually was a manager of a real high end operation late 80s that was really ahead of its time in terms of wine service, and eventually put me in charge of the wine program. And I was forced to really learn quickly. Study wine making study wine regions, study everything I could so I can best represent the wine list. And over the course of a couple years, just got fascinated with the wine industry and fell in love with Burgundian wines and eventually decided that I wanted I was young enough and nothing to risk and so I wanted to learn winemaking and did some research into schools and programs and heard about the Lycee Viticole de Beaune up[and left my job in Boston and dedicated about nine months to studying French and learning as much as I could before I went to France and then showed up in Burgundy and went to knock on the door of the Lycee Viticole.

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Fred Reno 02:38

It doesn't sound like you were afraid of the dark. No, nothing I figured I had nothing to lose, I could always you know, come back to US and try my luck out in the West Coast. But I loved Burgundy, loved the wines and gave it a shot. And I was able to talk my way into the Lycee, the director, Pierre Charlot kind of laughed at me because my French was so bad and said there's no way you can, you know, really follow the course in French. And I kind of reassured him that I would do what I could. And he finally relented and said, Okay, I'll make a deal with you. You can go to the program here. And as long as you can pass the classes, you can stay but. And he said, but I really don't think you're going to make it so I'm not going to charge you tuition. But instead In exchange, we'd like you to do conversational English with the students twice a week after school. And for me, that was just an incredible opportunity. And this was in August and he helped me find an internship, in Puligny- Montrachet at Chartron & Trebuchet. And that turned into almost a two year stint as a first and intern then as a celler, one of the cellar team members while I was going to school, and so did they ever charge you tuition?

M

Michael Shaps 03:53

Nope, nope. And I received my there it is right there my diploma from the Ministry of

Agriculture in France, my diploma enology and viticulture, so I was able to prove them wrong. And trust me, there's a lot of all nighters studying and I had a dictaphone I taped every class and we listened to them at night and make sure I was understanding everything. And fortunately, I was working as well. And you know, I had several weeks went through the Vendange before classes started and got exposed and met people who helped me and it just all came together. It was really magical.

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Fred Reno 04:26

Well, that sounds like real tall cotton from boy who comes over from Boston, although I know you're from Chicago, originally correct. So now you transition from Burgundy to Virginia. I know that you came in after Gabriele had left what was started Simeon Vineyard, but then became Jefferson Vineyard. How did you how did that happen? I mean, how did you find out about the position and then got in there? This was 1995 correct?



04:51

Yeah.

F

Fred Reno 04:52

Yeah, it was 95. I was actually when I came back from Burgundy. I was trying I was interviewing All over the West Coast, East Coast, I almost went back to France, I had an open door there to come back and stay as a full time member at Chartron& Trebuchet. But I really wanted to strike out on my own and do something. And kind of same reason everyone told me I was crazy. To go to Burgundy without good knowledge of French. I decided to take a job in Massachusetts at a start up winery for a short stint knowing I was going to keep looking elsewhere. It was kind of just something to fill the void till I found the right opportunity. And while I was there, through a good friend of mine family, they knew the owners of Jefferson vineyards when Gabriele left, and so it was a short stint in Massachusetts, and I was still looking. And sure enough, they contact me because they heard about me and came down here. And you know, I had originally interviewed in Virginia tried to get a job in Virginia. But at that time, there was nothing open back in 93 or 94. And so I always had my eye on Virginia. And actually when I was in Burgundy back in 1990. I remember reading an article on Wine Spectator about Virginia this new up coming region and so that kind of piqued my interest in always had that in the back of my mind that Virginia had a lot of potential interesting so it can't really came to fruition. Well then. So you're at Jefferson Vineyard, you're you know, you're making high quality wine

and then all of a sudden, how do you start your own brand somehow ties to helping another winery get started I believe? Yeah, so after about five vintages in Jefferson Vineyards, a people were calling me asking if I could help them with their winemaking the quality of the wine was, had been recognized in Virginia's as, you know, some pretty good wine and I kept getting calls from people to ask if I'd helped them and I realized that maybe there was a potential to be a consultant. And at the same time I met started meeting with David King in 1999. 1999 in that range, and they had just planted a vineyard and I was looking to maybe branch out and start my own brand and to do some consulting. So we got together, I left Jefferson Vineyard started doing consulting. And then we started the Michael Shaps brand together and the first vintage in 2000. And we, I used their grapes. We made the wine together at Afton Mountain. And I was consulting for Afton Mountain. so we just kind of exchanged they allowed us a custom crush type setup there. And I help them with their wines. And so the first two vintages of Michael Shaps wines were made at Afton Mountain with King Family fruit. And then the Kings saw the potential and decided to build a winery on their property. And so we moved the production there and that's when I started making my wines they are in the King Family vineyard label as well at the same time in 2002, we started that when did you depart King Family and just devote full time to your own brand?

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Michael Shaps 07:51

In 2007, I moved here to the facility here which was the former Montdomaine winery, right and started the moved the Michael Shaps brand here and then started the contract wine making as well at the same time.

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Fred Reno 08:06

You know, I find that fascinating, as I mentioned to you before we first met that you do something that's pretty commonplace in California, in the wine industry and Europe, I'm assuming as well contract wine making but as I know it, you're potentially the first to do it here. Maybe still the only one who is doing contract winemaking making wine for other wineries?

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Michael Shaps 08:29

Well, there's some others now are doing but I definitely kind of started it as a you know, a business model in '07. There wasn't anyone doing and the laws were kind of prohibitive as well. We were able to get some of the laws rearranged the farm winery laws allow it to be legal. We can't call it custom crush in Virginia, we have to call it contract winemaking. Got it. So there's a lot of regulations still in place in Virginia, which make it a little more

challenging but as winery building as its base and started saw and interest from there's a lot of beautiful properties here with people putting planting vineyards and they'd love to have wine made for them. And so started that way with people growing the grapes and bringing us the grapes and then they will eventually build their own tasting rooms and start selling.

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Fred Reno 09:16

How many wineries would you say you've at one time in your career now Virginia produced wine for them in one shape form or another? Gosh, I'd say Oh, probably 30 to 40 different wineries I've either consulted for or we produce wine for over the past 26 years. So probably. Yeah, I haven't counted lately. But we currently have about 17 clients here at Wineworks. And we've had a few come and go. And then with all my consulting Virginia that's easily between 30 and 40 that I've worked with. Well one of the things that I mentioned to you that I find interesting here is there are a number of winemakers who have trained under you and gone on to other horizons, if you will. To me, that is what Robert Mondavi secretly did in Napa Valley that nobody really focuses as much attention, how many winemakers would you say, have come through here and then gone on? on their own

M

Michael Shaps 10:17

Wow. I don't know, that's a good question, at least, I'd say, you know, eight to 10. Over the years, I know when I was consulting in, you know, from 2000, to, you know, I'd even say up into 2014 or so. I would know, the people I work with, I've had to get them interns from France or elsewhere, that had experience and knowledge. And, you know, they would run the cellars at small wineries that didn't need more than one person. And so I would oversee these, you know, interns and stuff. And alot of them staid, a lot of them either finding way to get a green cards and stay or they marry locally. And so there's a lot of former my former intern still out there and around and then also the winemakers that I brought on to help me here have all eventually moved on and taken over another one.

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Fred Reno 11:09

Well, I have a question I want to ask that I think will help segue into where I was going to go with this interview. And that is, I had one vintner say something to me when I first came here that I found fascinating. I think you subscribe to this notion that is possible that some of the best vineyards in Virginia haven't been planted yet.



Fred & Michael 11:31

Oh, yeah. How do you feel about that?



Michael Shaps 11:33

Oh, I there's so much potential out there and different sites, you know, obviously, the most of the wineries who are currently out there where we're started because of their location in proximity to the agritourism aspect of the industry. Not necessarily where it's the best, you know, soil and best exposure, climate, elevation, everything like that. So, so there's still a big state, there's still a lot of potential sites out there. That really,



Fred Reno 12:00

so you bought one of the first established wineries in the modern day Virginia wine industry in Shenandoah Vineyards back in late 2018, I believe, November '18. So let's talk about Shenandoah Valley, that winery, the history of what you're doing there and Shenandoah Valley now because I think that's an exciting growth opportunity that we're talking about here. Yeah, I consulted for Emma Randal I believe it was 2010 '11 ish in that range there. So I helped them transition and train the young winemaker there. And I saw the potential when I was consulting for them. I mean, great soils or white soils, lots of limestone. A drier climate than here. I mean, Shenandoah, that area is the driest part of the state, one of the driest counties in east of the Mississippi, great elevation, and just everything is there in terms of potential for grape growing. And so I always have, in the back of my mind, never be a great location to do something now it's, you know, it's we've seen the expansion of Winchester, Harrisonburg population moving out there, and more people leaving Northern Virginia. So, you know, 10 15 years ago is pretty remote, in terms of tourism, but always had the potential for great winemaking and grape growing. And then, you know, I know Emma had been trying to sell the property for a long time. And we were bursting at the seams here in Charlottesville and needed another location. And plus we had a bunch of clients that we make wine for from the valley. And so it kind of all made sense to look for a separate location that we can accommodate some of our customers have their wine grapes, go there and make their wines there and then also have this beautiful, historic property with great vineyard potential. And that had been times I've been kind of, you know, not well maintained. And so, so yes, we've worked out a deal and bought bought Shenandoah vineyards. And we've been revitalizing ever since replanted almost all the vineyard with some new varieties. And we'll have our first crop this year from there. And, yeah, it's really been How large is the original vineyard site there



14:16

about 15 acres of vineyards. And only the property itself is only 20 acres. So there's about 15 solid acres of vineyard land, and then we also have been leasing some other properties in the area. So



Fred Reno 14:33

well, you you might find it interesting that when I asked Gabriele Rausse, that question he immediately went to talking about Shenandoah Valley Oh really? Yeah. That's the first thing that came out of his mouth. So he concurs wholeheartedly with what you're talking about here.



Michael Shaps 14:48

Yeah, I've seen it. I've seen the amount of rainfall we get here versus there. The soils are so much you know, more interesting. I think then for certain varieties than here and Yeah, I really think there's gonna be a bigger push in that area.



Fred Reno 15:03

Well, that's that's the next segue and this is okay. So what are, in your opinion, the best varietals to be planted in a different AVA's here and your experience of working with what excites you? I mean, what do you see here for Virginia, as it relates to varietals?



Michael Shaps 15:20

Well, I mean, I've been, you know, here in the Charlottesville area, I have been big on more higher acid varieties, which I think really worked well in our heat, humidity, whether it's the Petit Verdot Tannat or especially Petit Manseng. And those are the three varieties that I think really do well, on our very hot humid area here in Central Virginia in the valley. I was leaning more towards, and we have some Riesling there are some, some whites, but also we're doing experimenting with some Lemberger. And we're doing some different things that are a little bit cooler climate, but it's really as great white wine potential there. I believe, you know, we haven't fully done we have some ideas of some other varieties we want to plant there. But, you know, it doesn't have the heat and humidity it has the heat but not as bad as it is here in Central Virginia. So different set of varietals that don't work so well here would work better there.



Fred Reno 16:12

Do you see the mentioned Lemberger? Do you see any potential in any of those sites for possibly Pinot Noir or even Gamay?



Michael Shaps 16:20

Yeah, oh, yeah, definitely. We, we have someone up there who's gonna plant a little experimental Pinot Noir. I've seen some sites out there that have you know, higher elevation, even cooler, the soils are there. It's just a matter of whether we can you know, it's still a little bit too hot for Pinot makes me a little nervous. And trust me. I would love to be able to make a great, Pinot, in Virginia, I just haven't found the site yet. So I'm I'm not saying it's impossible keep looking until we find the right place and then make it work somehow.



Fred Reno 16:50

Well, yeah, that would be fascinating, wouldn't that, you know, to see if any Pinot Noir could be made here? That's credible. Okay,



Michael Shaps 16:56

there's some being made there's some being made, but I think we can do better.



Fred Reno 17:00

Okay I will go along with that. one of the things that you've done here at Wineworks in general terms, I find interesting as well as you've been pioneering some alternate packaging, and your Growler program over at Wineworks extended, where people can come in and get wine on tap and take your own Growler. How did all that develop?



Michael Shaps 17:19

Oh, gosh, sure, you know, it's, it goes back to my, you know, time in France and the attitude towards wine, European approach, and, you know, where there's wine making more and more style is more accessible for daily, you know, casual consumption we started doing bagging in the box under Wineworks brand, you know, that was the first bag in the box in Virginia back in 2010, '11; 2009 '10, somewhere in that range. And so, I've always been trying to find because economies of scale aren't really in our favor here. And we're always struggling from value. And so always been trying to find a way to get some

value wine out under a different brand. And so we started with the bag in box project. And that's been always been a huge success. And then with your technology changing and having the available the ability to get the disposable kegs, I didn't want to mess with a lot of, you know, stainless kegs and deposits and tracking keep track of kegs. So the key keg and the other brands are similar became really interesting to me as a good way to package a bigger volume. And so we started doing that here first at Wineworks as an experiment having two taps in our tasting room, and then when we took on Avon street location, our other facility in town, it was a no brainer. So you know, kind of turning more into a wine bar atmosphere and being in downtown Charlottesville. And so now we have six taps there where we have the growlers you get from Virginia or for Burgundy, which is fun.



Fred Reno 18:52

Well, full disclosure, as you know, I fill my Growler up several times a week over there with some Cru Beaujolais so I'm a big fan of that program that I mean it's wonderful I'm just this has got to be really plate full kind of question but how do you balance making wine in Virginia with making wine in Burgundy and and you own property in Burgundy upi own property in Virginia? This is amazing. How do you balance this it's gotta be tough



19:21

it's about the people I have such great people great staff on both sides of the pond that we have, you know, my staff here has been with me for a long time. The core staff and you know, I can I can trust them they know when I want to know how things like things to be done. When it comes to communication. I don't have to look over their shoulder, you know, to hold their hand they know the expectations and I trust fully trust what they're doing here so I have to be in Burgundy and not have to worry and then same thing in Burgundy. I have two great guys to help me. Both one more specialized in the administrative side of things the other was more of in the cellar as a consultant and also does some of the work for me and it can be kind of trade space. He also makes his wines at my place. So So I have two great people there plus my daughter's over there. And so I have a, you know, just great people that how The only way to happen if you don't have really, people you can count on and trust and you shared the same goals and it could never happen.



Fred Reno 20:15

Well, you've been pretty well decorated with wines that have been in the annual

Governor's Cup. I think several years ago, if I'm mistaken. You had five other wines that were in the governor's case. Yeah. out of 12 Well, either you was Michael Shaps brand or a winery that you made wine for? That's pretty phenomenal. I mean, it's just I mean, the Governor's Cup is a rigid tasting contest. This is no frivolous you know, pin the medal on the cattles butt you know, kind of you get Jay Youmans a MW running this thing. You got high quality judges, it's got to be really satisfying when your wine sing to the top.



20:55

Yeah, no, it's been really we've been really consistently, you know, top medal winner most gold most medals for our wines, our customers wines. And so it's really, you know, again, tribute to our staff. And you know, they take pride in it, we have a fun time with it we have an annual tasting, our cellar staff gets together and we taste all the wines decide what we want to enter and if you know, there's enough consensus, we'll enter it and then so they take pride in it. And we actually have a competition in house that everyone picks which one you think might do the best and they can win some wine if if they guessed the right you know, gold medal winner or, or such thing. So it's a lot of fun. And they take pride, which really helps and you know, again, when the winemaking here, and the grape growing, so it's it's fun for us to get recognized. It's great for our customers, it for me is most rewarding when our contract wine making customers win gold medal for the first time or get in the governor's case. It really is so rewarding for me.



Fred Reno 21:55

Well, I mean, I think that recognition, validates and backs up the model. It's all about the wine. Yeah. It kind of plays off, but it's as well, you know, what do you see? I mean, so looking from your vantage point, where is Virginia headed? In the wine industry? What's this going to look like in five or 10 years?



22:19

Well its hard to say. I mean, while that's going on, I thought for sure, we kind of go into a little bit of a wall here with the whole COVID situation economy. But believe it or not, we've had three new customers this year, sign up for a contract winemaking in the middle of the pandemic. And so it just shows you there's still a lot of interest, it's something that's going to continue to grow. It's a matter of finding the niche, the right varietals, the right sites, I think we're still learning quite a bit. I mean, nobody would have guessed, you know, I would have never guessed, you know, 15 years ago that Petit Manseng would be, you know, the hottest wines in Virginia and, you know, really a big success story for me. So

who knows, but I think we're learning a lot about, you know, what varietals work in this climate and the proper viticulture and so people are constantly experimenting, which is so important.

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Fred Reno 23:12

Why no, you have been knocking on the door, national distribution, attempting to get your wine and your reputation what you're doing out there. What do you think, has held Virginia back? I mean, when I was, you know, when I talked to a lot of people I know, should know something about wine. They always looked at me kind of like Virginia, what are you talking about? What is holding Virginia back from this wider recognition nationally?



23:39

It's the economics, I mean, most of the you know are still a lot of family owned properties. Why is the majority farm by far the majority of the industry, they're not corporate entities. So they're smaller, you know, entities that have the economies of scales don't work for distribution, and it's really more an agritourism industry. I mean, we're relying on tourism from out of state from Northern Virginia from, you know, the Tidewater area. And so all these wines can survive just on that. So there's really no need for them to push distribution outside. I really no big fan of Virginian like the wave the flag and I started more the opposite way through the three tier system through distribution. And even on a state before I even had a tasting room. And I know the importance of the distribution model to get recognition to get customers especially now in the age of the Internet of sales, the wider the net, you know, the more you can really bring people in and even whether it's through distribution feature that will lead to also online sales and so on and so forth. So it's really important, you know, to dedicate a certain amount of our production to distribution.

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Fred Reno 24:50

Do you of your, of the consumer base you have here I'm curious about something. How many of them recognize you for also producing wines from Burgundy? Again what would you sense I mean, what's your consumer base like here comes or calls and say hey I want I want to buy some Michael Shaps and often do they buy both Virginia and Burgundy at the same time?



25:09

Quite a bit. it's our customer base, our wine club members, our regular customers have been able to taste Burgundy's here on site, which is rare, I mean where can you do that? So we always have at least three being poured at any of our two sites in Charlottesville. And so once they get exposed and learned from our staff about the Burgundy's all sudden, they're they're more interested in and we offer a wine club for you know, mix Virginia Burgundy or just Burgundy or just Virginia. So we really been exposing a lot of people to Burgundian wines. So our clients here are thrilled to have that opportunity. and so word have been spreading about the ability to get some pretty nice burgundy wine in Charlottesville.



Fred Reno 25:56

Well, that that is wonderful. There's no question about that. I would agree with that. Well, um, boy, what, what a pact 20 Well, 25 years here, Virginia. Wow. I mean, this is 25 vintage



26:15

No, actually the 26th This will be the 26th campaign, as we say in viticulture and winemaking in so 26 vintages in Virginia. And I gather there were 43 wineries, I think and now are over 300. And so it's been fun to be a part of that.



Fred Reno 26:34

What do you think? I always hate to ask the winemakers this in the winery owners always I say oh don't say anything you're gonna jinx it. And but what do you think this harvest holds in front of you here right now you can be getting really close. What kind of quality? What are we looking



26:51

at as far as some samples this morning from one of our vineyards? And yeah, we're about to start with sparkling here within the week. And we had a you know, obviously a real hot spell there in July dry hot spell in July. almost too hot. I think I've slowed some things down. And now we've been it's classic Virginia we have been hit with a bunch of rain in the past 10 days. Not the ideal timing. But here we have a beautiful, you know, week ahead of us, I think we'll be able to bounce back. And right now it's looking to be pretty strong, strong vintage. It really depends in Virginia. You know, it all depends what happens and

you know, late August and early September, whether we get any coastal storms and hurricanes, any any fronts that sit on us, and that will make or break the vintage and you know, we were fortunate last year, fantastic. Vintage no rain, you know, pretty much the whole month of September. And so we have that we'll have another really stellar vintage.

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Fred Reno 27:48

So let me put you on the spot. What's your favorite white wine that you produce from Virginia?

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Michael Shaps 27:55

Oh, gosh, that's hard. I mean, obviously, I'm really proud of the Petit Manseng the dry Petit Manseng is something unique that I kind of really helped to develop here in Virginia. I've gotten incredible recognition from all kinds of publications, you know, international publications for it. And it's still turning a lot of heads and surprising a lot of people. But if I had to say one thing on my probably surprise a lot of people that I'm really, really most proud of is my Wild Meadow Chardonnay, a single vineyard Chardonnay that we grow up in, in Purcellville It's a unique site a unique expression of Virginia Chardonnay, that really has a lot of people fooled for Burgundian. And so as Burgundian winemaker and Virginia winemaker, I'm most proud that I can kind of get close to replicating something that's that's somewhat similar style to what we do Mersault

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Fred Reno 28:47

Well and switching to red varietals I'd love you to weigh in about Tannat because I know that you're a big fan of what you think can happen with Tannat and you produce I think a very outstanding example that here so what why Tannat what do you think gosh, I've

M

Michael Shaps 29:03

gosh, I've always been a big fan of Maderan this going back to the days in the late 80s an early 90s I got turned on to Maderan wine and and always actually we're also an importer of producer from the Maderan on so I've always been a fan of the wines and didn't really have any Tannat to work with here in Virginia until we took over the Honan Lee property and started leasing that and managing that when there was that Dennis Horton had planted Tannat there and, and really got lucky that we were able to get our hands on that and it's been a huge success for us. I mean it just has. What's really important for me is high, higher acid varietals here in Central Virginia that can hold up to the humidity and maintain the acidity and balance and so Tannat has everything you want for a big

structured red that we you know, it does well in our more heavier clay soils and you know than say Cabernet Sauvignon so it really for us that and Petit Verdot can help us produce a bigger, heavier or more structured red that we couldn't do with some other varieties



Fred Reno 30:07

Well Michael I appreciate the time here this morning I think you've made a significant impact on the Virginia industry and I love your wine so thank you for your time



Michael Shaps 30:18

thanks for including me and I really wish you best of luck. I really appreciate you doing this is great for all of us.



Fred Reno 30:24

Well, thank you