
Gabriele Rausse Episode 2,Part 1



SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Fred & Gabriele, Gabriele

00:00



Fred Reno 00:16

Greetings, and welcome to Episode Two of the Fine Wine Confidential podcast. My guest today is Gabriele Rausse, who the New York Times called the father of modern day Virginia wine industry and for good reason. In the first part of my interview, Gabriele describes the early beginnings of what is a 44 year journey for him in wine growing and propagating plants. he recounts how he came to Virginia to help the Zonin Family established Barboursville vineyards and make his significant contribution to the growth of quality Virginia wine growing ever since I sat down with him at his winery in the Monticello AVA in Central Virginia, on an early August day, just before the 2020 harvest. Gabriele, welcome. So thank you for taking some time this morning. So I did a little bit of research here trying to get some perspective. I understand you were in Australia, but your story on wine growing and making must predate that. So tell me how you got into this industry in this business.



Gabriele 02:21

well, I fell in love with dealing with Mother Nature and plants. When I was a kid, because my father was managing a wooden mill, we had two little farm with two families living there. And they were producing, you know, vegetable, fruit they were making. One farmer



was making wine, the other one was bringing the wine to a co-op. And then we were going to get the wine from there. So I think I really fell in love with all these things when I was very young. I fell in love also with propagation because we had some greenhouses which are rented, and when the person who rented them decide to leave my father hire somebody, but I was 15 years old. And he wanted me to go there and check what was going on. So that when I fell in love with propagation of plants, and then the things kept going, and I assure you that when I went to university, and my father wanted me to study law, I went to Milano to go down for the team. And when he came back, he said, so what did you do? Well, I said, I went to the law office at the university, and there were 300 people in line, online. And I went to the Agricultural Sciences, and there was not a soul there. So I said, I'm going to choose Agricultural Sciences. And my father said, that's fine, but you will be poor al your life, and you have a hard time to find the wife. But I decided to go in the direction that I like to do. And you know, when I graduated, I went to the military service first, but I couldn't stay put, So I found myself a job in Rhodesia. When my father find out he said My God, not in a dictatorship in Africa, I will find you a job wherever you want. So we found me a job in Australia because he was in the woolen business. He had connection with Australia. And so that when I went to Australia, I went, I love I mean I love the place I work in six different farm and then apply for a job at the University of Melbourne as plant pathologist and I got the job and when they look at my Visa they said listen, better you go to Italy and apply for the proper Visa, because this one looks like you try to come in and sneak in so, if you go to Italy will take you, you know, a week to get the visa to do it from here it will take forever. Oh, I see. So I went back to Italy took me two weeks to go to the consulate in Milano. And when I got there, they told me you are two days to late because the labist took over and every time that they take over, they stop immigration. So it might take a year and a half to a year to get your visa but don't worry, you will get it you know the job you have been offered is very good. And so you will get your Visa just be patient. So I couldn't stay put, and I got myself a job in Franceand work in this nursery south of Paris. And they were mainly propagating roses and selling also cut flower in Paris. And I was there for almost a year when my father wrote me a letter and said, you know, if you want to go back to Australia, you should improve your English not your French there is a possibility of going to Virginia to plant a vineyard, would you like to do it? Wow. And I said I would love to do it as long as we agree that when I get the visa to go to Australia, this is not a hard feeling. I mean, I will do what I can and then when I get the visa I want to go to Australia. So I met actually with Gianni Zonin, you know, the owner of Barbourville and we talked about he said Listen, I want you to start Don't worry about what happen when you get the visa I want somebody to start and so I agreed to come over here. He put me to work on his winery in CA' Bolani neither one near Yugoslavia



Fred Reno 06:49

for a few months and vineyard also and then he brought me over here. Had you been making wine during this period prior then? No, I study enology. That's right. Again, enology I was bottling wine when I was little, because we were getting the wine from the thing. So I was playing with it. I was not studying Enology or winemaking and when I went to the University, I study I also got a good a good 30 over 30 on enology. But so this was in 1976. I came here April 10, 76. Right. it borrows.

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Fred & Gabriele 07:28

At Barboursville, and I see where they had hedged their bets because they were having cattle and farming and everything else on as well as vineyard to start they had a business partner. Correct. Yeah, they Yeah, but that's another reason I didn't last very long. Well, you know, one of the business, the business partner, was Count Braga rosa. And he told Zonin I will put some money on the on this adventure if you hire Gabriele as a person in charge, because my grandfather was in charge of his property. And he's been associated I will trust him with a tractor. Oh, I see. Okay, well, there is all this story behind, I got it

G

Gabriele 08:10

But, the beautiful thing I would say was this one, because when I came here, Gianni Zonin send over to help me, the best people he had. Right? And I tell you who where the best people, the best people were the guy who started to work in the winery when he was 13 years old, the guy who started to propagate vines when he was 12 years old, old people who started when they were a kid, and they were all wonderful people. So I give the marriage to him for starting the right way, you know, to hire a winemaker who started to make wine when he was 30 years old might be alright? It's better to hire one who start to make wine when he was 12 years old, fell in love with winemaking and then eventually.

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Fred Reno 09:01

So I see that your first vines and grafts failed. And then you went to California and something happened there that made you realize, oh, okay, this is the vines were purchased. Right? they were purchased from a place I don't remember the name now in Maryland, and they end up to be a disaster. We lost 50%. Right. And so when my boss asked me what happened, I said, if the grafts were very fragile, you know, sometime they broke when we were planting, right? So he said, should we start to graft our own? And I said to me, would make sense. So the following year, when first we went to California to find the rootstock because we couldn't find the rootstock we wanted, right? And so that was very interesting, because UC Davis said, yeah, that is a guy who grow those rootstock nobody want them. So if you want to see him, he will send them all to you. Right. So this

was in the zuckermann mandeville. Highlander Manderville Highlander Zuckerman Mandeville highlander was the company right when the guy was so happy Say yeah, I started to propagate these rootstocks nobody want them SO4, K5BB, 3309 so they were all rootstock which were discarded in America right? And to me was interesting when in California the word is crisis I don't know when 20 years ago because the rootstock was no good anymore and ax AXR 1, right. And I remember you know, people calling me they say, Well, you know, AXR1 is not resistant to phylloxera is resistant to nematodes, and maybe to other thing. But that's why when I came here, I started to use rootstock resistant to phylloxera right. So everybody got excited, it was very, very interesting. the whole picture you know what happened? And now how things change, right? What was the first vintage at Barboursville? commercial vintage of wine that you made? Okay, the first commercial was 1979. Because in 78, I made like 500 bottle of wine. And Zonin said, well, you can drink them yourself or give them to your friend. And actually, my wife were very kind to make the label you know, by hand with the name of my friend, right? Who were my friend, the plumber, the carpenter, I didn't know anybody. Right. So so it was beautiful because I gave them the bottle you know, and I gave you because you were the carpenter the bottle of my wine. And after two weeks, your cousin invited me for dinner. And the bottle I gave to you it is in your Cousin house. And after a month, somebody invited me for dinner, the bottle I gave to you, and you gave to your cousin is at somebody else house and I remember telling Zonin, we made 500 bottle they will keep going around, nobody will ever open. I think we have done, that's what I told him, so. But '79 was the first you know, official vintage, and interesting, you know, experience because I remember that to get in touch with a distributor in Charlottesville, which was Kirtley I think was the name. Oh, yeah. Because JWC gave up jwc gave up so Kirtly became the distributor. And I brought him a you know, 15 cases of wine. And after a couple of months, Zonin called me say so do you know the sale are going, do you know what's happening? I said, No, I never heard from him anymore. Well, why don't you want to talk to him? So I go there. Right. And I asked the secretary say, Can I talk to Mr. Kirtley 10 minutes and find him? And then he come out and he said, What do you need? I was wondering if you were successful in selling the wine, that you know, I brought you a few months ago and and I wanted to know which variety was doing better whatever. He said, Yeah, I remember he said, Let's go to the warehouse, right. So we go to the warehouse. And he look around Oh, here it is. Look 15 cases. That was I brought you those 15 cases. (they hadn't even opened them) Oh, is that? what he said? He's from Virginia. What were the varietals at that time what were the wines you made?



Gabriele 13:24

The first vine I planted were Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Riesling.

F Fred Reno 13:30
Okay. And of course you understand that I started with variety, which was popular, right, right, what do you want to know? is interesting how Virginia went in 10,000 direction now. And you find those kind of variety planted at the beginning I planted those No, because I was hoping that they were doing better than our because I knew that commercially. Those were the variety were it would be recognized. You left Barboursville in '84 is that accurate?

G Gabriele 13:58
Physically

F Fred Reno 13:59
you left Barboursville in '84 is that accurate?

 14:04
physically, I left in '81. Oh, okay. But I stay there to run it for

F Fred Reno 14:14
a number of years.

G Gabriele 14:15
to Luca came

F Fred Reno 14:17
Oh, to Luca came. Okay. Yeah.

 14:19
I think there were 13 people, between me and Luca

F Fred Reno 14:23
there was a whole Yeah. And so I was always, you know, taking care of it and running it.

And, of course, Zonin was always hoping me to come back, right. But my wife didn't want to go back. Right. And so eventually when Luca took over the thing change because he was really very enthusiastic about the whole project. He spoke English because that was the issue also with other people come in before we even speak the language, right. So Zonin wanted to be sure to be able to communicate with them. So they were Italian, who didn't speak much English. Right? Right. So that was definitely a problem. You know, and when Luca came, because you had spent some time in the United States already. He was speaking English pretty good. And he was Italia. So that did work out perfectly for Gianni. So then you started. How did you end up? It says you planted some grapes or vineyard I'm sorry, vines for what were show in 1984 at Monticello?

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Gabriele 15:22

Yeah.

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Fred Reno 15:23

How did that come to be? well, that happened because the manager of the garden and grounds at Monticello were just living, you know 500 yards from from Jefferson vineyard, okay vineyard, right? So of course I was running into him in the little store that my wife was running the littl store what is called now? Simeon it's called Simeon. Right, yeah. And so that's how we were, you know, running into each other, I was going to see my wife and he was there buying something. And so he was excited about the possibility of me, you know, propagating some vines that Jefferson planted because he couldn't find the variety, right. And they were most of them were very strange variety. And so I say, Well, I can ask UC Davis if they have them. And out of 24 they had 20 of them. Right. So I said I'd be happy to graft them. Right. And I remember this guy wanted me to graft Frankie and then he just passed away a couple of months ago, right? A wonderful person very excited about the thing. So we start to graft all this, you know, variety in 1983 we planted it in 1984. And the beautiful thing which happened is that when they start to produce grapes, you know, the manager of Monticello said I want you to make wine out of the grapes I said, I cannot blend 20 varieties of grapes. So we adopt to plant some Sangiovese at another little vineyard like we just took part of the vineyard that Jefferson planted. I say let's focus on a variety that Jefferson had is not popular here. That plants Sangiovese and then I can blend some of the other variety with Sangiovese Mamo Toscano, we'd go with it. So we went in the direction of planting the Sangiovese. I made a white wine actually with the old vineyard blending all the white varieties in right. Oh, yeah, I still have some bottle. Yeah. But then eventually, when we started to be serious about we started with the Sangiovese. Have you started Simeon vineyard at that point with the Woodward family?

G

Gabriele 17:40

Yeah, yeah, yeah. The Simeon vineyard. I started in '81. First of all, because this is the neatest thing. The owner liked wine, right. He was a former ambassador to Canada. He was whatever he was a politician, things like that so parties all the time, right. And he did me a favor of hiring me because one of the people living at Simeon farm was Mario de Miranda. Do you know who was Marfio De Miranda? I don't believe so. He died now. But you are the owner of the Rotonda designed by Palladio in Italy the original Rotonda Oh, wow. Hlm with his brother, right, but the owner of the Rotonda, but he was at UVA teaching history of architecture. So he's the one who got me there, actually, is also the person who got in got me in, Virginia when Zonin planted because he knew Zonin, he knew the Count Braga Rosa knew all these people. So he's the one who said, Well, you know, I think it might be a good idea to plant a vineyard in Virginia, his wife was still alive was growing all kinds of flower from Europe, right from Italy, right? And so he said that is the flower work and also the grape by work, right? So okay, who is behind that? Right? I planted just an acre of grapes at Simeon Okay, vineyard, because the owner said, I want you to make wine only for me. I don't want to go commercial or anything. Right. So it's funny because his wife died in '85, I think. And he said, Well, if you want to plant more grapes, now, you know, and go and go in the direction of selling grapes. You know, I let you do it. My wife is not around anymore. She was the one who didn't want to go in a direction. And I said, Well, you know, we could even start a winery. Well, I don't know about you. I like to plant more grapes. So I planted more grapes, and then Mario de Miranda and he said why don't we build us a winery? So he designed the winery there. Right? Okay, the winery at Jefferson Vineyard and so I started to make wine there, right. And they didn't want to open to the public. So in the beginning, you know, was a little bit difficult if you want. But eventually, he decides to let me go and open to the public and start a tasting room. And it was beautiful because my children were so involved in to the thing because that was how you say pastime every day. Okay? Every day. I remember my son, the youngest one, three years old, coming to the tasting room with 15 people, you know, waiting to do tasting and asking, does anybody want a tour of the winery? And so somebody said, Well, can he do it? Yes, he can do it. Okay. We go there, three year old son three years old, you was taking them through and then they were coming back? He answer to every question yet. Oh, man, I love it. Terrific. You know, because when somebody start to do the job when they are little, then they will do it very well when they grow up.

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Fred Reno 20:55

what was the first commercial vineyard a vintage at Simeon, which became Jefferson vineyards, eventually,



21:01

the first commercial vintage? Let me think about, I would say was '87, I would say, Okay, I can check and find



Fred Reno 21:10

just curious when you started making and then you left Simeon vineyard in '95 is a



Gabriele 21:19

Yeah, April 1st, '95



Fred Reno 21:21

If I could ask, why did you leave?



Gabriele 21:23

you can ask I don't know if I can answer



Fred Reno 21:25

Okay, then you cannot answer, that's fine.



Gabriele 21:29

In '92, the owner died. Oh, I see, his son came in with a French wife, which was very aggressive. You know, she said, I want to tell you what to do in this farm because my grandfather was a farmer. So I know what to do. And I answer to her everybody grandfather was a farmer because there was nothing else.



Fred Reno 21:54

Well, I get the picture. I seen that movie before. Well, folks, you can see Gabriele Rausse is quite the character. I really enjoyed that first part of that interview with Gabriele, in the second part, he will tell you how he was offered a job at Monticell, what that entailed. And then he has some very funny stories, and some really interesting historical perspective on Thomas Jefferson, and some of the early founders. That episode will be published in the upcoming days. Stay tuned. .

