

EPIISODE #12 DuCard VINEYARDS, SCOTT ELLIFF FOUNDER

SPEAKERS

Scott Elliff, Fred Reno

Fred Reno

Scott, welcome to my podcast. And thank you for giving me this time this afternoon.

Scott Elliff

Thank you glad to Glad to be here.

Fred Reno

So let's start. As always, at the beginning, What's your story? How did you get into this?

Scott Elliff

repeat onset temporary insanity, I think is what it really comes down to. There's really no plan Actually, we bought a country placed out here, you could see it out the back of the tasting room here. And it was just to get away from DC. It was an old dead apple orchard hadn't been farmed in probably 50 years. And I was Type A enough, even then that I wasn't going to leave that alone. And so, I got the experts out to help me think about what to do with it. And I thought I'd be replanting the apples. And the local guys said, no this would be, I wouldn't do the apple business, but this would actually be a good site for vineyard.

Fred Reno

Did you have a notable viticulturist? Who then came in here? Was this just local people giving you this advice?

Scott Elliff

Well, I'm a suburban kid from Chicago. And these guys were from the Extension Service, Virginia Tech Extension Service. And I didn't know what that was. I didn't know why we had tech schools, any of that kind of stuff. But these guys are in every county in the country to help people with with agriculture. And that was my first introduction to it. I asked him why this would be a good site for a vineyard. He said, Well, first of all, it was a very successful apple orchard back in the day, and the old timers kind of knew for location and angle to the sun and frost and so forth. And also that had had really crummy really rocky soil. And I thought, Wait a minute, this is not growing corn in Iowa or something. This is a It was the beginning of my kind of re-education that you want really crummy soil. And that kind of stress, the vines and everything. And so, I looked into it. And then I got various experts involved. We have a handful of people in Virginia who have been just terrific and helping people get started. This was 20 years ago, and many of most of them are still around.

Fred Reno

and who is your lead person?

Scott Elliff

I talked to Luca at Barboursville, Dennis Horton who has since passed away. Gabriele Rausse. Of course, people came out here and visited and said, Yeah, they thought it would be a good, good site, and welcome to the party. And so, what year was it? That you plan it? 2001? That was 2001? I think Yeah, yeah. And we cleared the site and prepped it. And, of course, the first decision you have to make is what varieties you're

Fred Reno

gonna say, Well, yeah, what what led you to the varieties you planted?

Scott Elliff

a scary thing I mean, even after being re-educated, that a crummy site like this would be crummy soil would be good site was okay, I'm going to put these vines in the ground. And by the way, they're going to be in the ground, probably we don't know, but maybe 50 years. And you better get it right. Because there are a lot of varieties that won't grow well here. So, I spent a lot of time researching it to reading about it, and basically knocking on the door of just about everybody I could find to see pick their brain on their experience and so forth. But ultimately, you got to make a call and put vines in the ground. And so, we put in a Viognier which you're drinking right now,

Fred Reno

Which is very good.

Scott Elliff

Yeah. And Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot, and Virginia, native Norton. So we have seven acres on site here. And they said, Well, maybe you should start slow and just plant 20 vines, you know, and see how it goes and so forth. So how long will that take? Well, until you get the vines in production and get the wine out and so forth, you know, five or seven or 10 years or something I said, I'm not going to wait that long to make a decision. I'll do it now and, and learn as we go. We made every mistake in the book no doubt--You just the important thing is you don't make it twice.

Fred Reno

How many acres are now planted under vine here?

Scott Elliff

Yeah. So, we planted all seven acres with those four varietals. Now we have two other vineyards that we operate around the county, but you do we have 17 now everybody's drinking, they like our wine. So, we got to keep on expanding. And of course, it takes a long time is not easy to do that, but we planted them and learn from experience, what worked, what didn't what kind of techniques and so forth.

Fred Reno

Where are the other sites in relationship to this?

Scott Elliff

one's over on the side of the mountain to the west a couple of miles and the others a little bit further south in the in the county, but they all share the same characteristic of beautiful mountain views and a little bit of rolling terrain. The mountain that you see out the back here is Old Rag, which is kind of the the biggest most famous mountain in this part of the Shenandoah used to be 10,000 feet tall. And now it's 4000. Well, 6000 feet of rock basically slid off of the side over the eons and is one foot under the surface of the vineyard here. So, it's it's a crazy interesting place to be growing grapes.

Fred Reno

are the three different sites. Do they have equal amounts of varietals? Are there certain varietals that do better in certain sites?

Scott Elliff

Yeah, we're still learning you know, I mean, the whole industry is learning on that. We planted the Chardonnay over on the second site and some Merlot because we knew those were good varietals we wanted and planted some some more Viognier over there as well. All of them have taken all of them have been fine but that site is particularly good for the Chardonnay and for the Merlot. on hand, our site is particularly good for the Petit Verdot as it turns out. So

Fred Reno

I think you've answered my question, which was very simply, what was the wine? In your mind that you modeled? In other words, did you grow up? And then get into wine drinking? Or did this all just was a confluence when you came here?

Scott Elliff

Yeah, well, you're gonna shake your head. But there were, like I said, there was no plan at all. I mean, I was kind of a beer drinking frat boy college guy, you know, refined my tastes since then. But I don't come from any particular wine background, and so forth. Remember, I thought I was going to be planting apples not grapes. And so we learned as we went along, my probably seminal experience was when we went to France in my 30s or so. And we were buying wine and just, you know, sitting on the steps of the Seine, having lunch from the little shops and everything. And my wife and I would look at ourselves: man this wine is just really, really good. And it always stuck with us since then. And then that concept that we could plant a vineyard here and aspire to grow. And really good, good wines here was was always very alluring as it is for many people.

Fred Reno

So when you start to produce wine, you start to get going, your you know, your former management consultant of some note; your branding. So, you got to sit around, you got to figure Okay, what's my package look like? What's my brand name going to be? It's not going to be Elliff so. So, tell me that story that we had discussed before? How DuCard came to be?

Scott Elliff

Yeah, yeah, I didn't want it to be Elliff even pronounces it right, anyway. But I wanted it to be something that had some sort of fun significance. And there's a single malt Scotch that goes way back in my family. My great, great, great, I don't know how many great grandmother's founded and ran the Cardhu distillery c a r d. h. u, Cardhu distillery in Scotland. And so, I thought it would be fun to use that name in some way or another. But Cardhu is still in existence. And it's owned by a big conglomerate now. So, I can't use that name because they own that name. But I took it and just sort of flipped it around and call it card DuCard instead,

Fred Reno

that's just brilliant. I think that's brilliant.

Scott Elliff

And so, it doesn't mean anything in French, it doesn't mean anything dirty. It's just it's a term and fun. Sounds kind of French. So we ran with it. And as you saw when you came in, there's a picture of Elizabeth Cumming the great, great, great grandmother founder. And in a picture of a bottle of Cardhu behind our bar together with our bottles, of course. And we named it that and off we went.

Fred Reno

So, of the 17, 18 acres of vineyard you farm, that is the sole source of grapes for your production?

Scott Elliff

Yeah, that's right. That's another sort of, I guess, thing I learned along the way is, you know, when, when I started pretty much it was all guys who just had a small operation, planted their own, tended their own vines, made their own wine, sold them on site, very kind of old world, little burgundy winemaker kind of thing, or Bordeaux winemaker, or whatever. And I really liked that idea because it certainly had such an authenticity to it. And since then, I've learned that it's so important that you control your own production anyway and the quality of your grapes. So, our model business model, if you will, is that we grow all around grapes or, 90 something percent basically ourselves.

Fred Reno

So, you can call all of your wine estate bottle.

Scott Elliff

Well, yeah, yeah, I mean, if you were in the right AVA locations and all that stuff, but grown and operated by by us and then we make the wine in the building back behind here and sell 99% of it at our tasting room with people on the patio looking out at the mountains and after a hike or having a nice getaway or coming out for a bed and breakfast or something like that.

Fred Reno

Well, how did you build an audience then to be able to get a clientele coming here and be able to be so direct to the consumer on site? How did that Yeah. How are you able to build this?

Scott Elliff

It's a constant struggle because as you know, we're not in the middle of nowhere crowd here. We're at the end of nowhere. Internet's a powerful thing people are looking for something fun to do. It's a gorgeous area. Lots of historical significance out here people come out here to hike in Shenandoah National Park and the stay at local Bed and Breakfast country Inns has a certain getaway feel compared to DC or Richmond or other places and people trickle down out of the National Park too to come for extra enjoyment and entertainment and so forth.

Fred Reno

Is there a close access to the National Park?

Scott Elliff

Yeah, there's one to the north and one to the south. So, people kind of put it into a you know traveling loop for themselves when they're spending some time in the park. And so I we just built it kind of one step at a time here and it we certainly we advertise and we get some recognition for awards and that type of thing. And notoriety maybe from for being green winery which you mentioned we'll talk about later. But largely you build it through word of mouth and satisfied customers and that's something I guess I learned from my management consulting is you know, you want to provide a superior experience to people in the experiences, the quality of the wine, the quality of the view, the quality of the staff, the quality of you know every individual step in the operation. And we've been able to do that. It's worked to our favor. And we were delighted to have a nice customer base and love having people come out to visit.

Fred Reno

So, you'd been growing grapes pretty close to 20 years now. Have you seen in that period of time, any relevant significance or have you seen climate change? In some level? And you've seen it an effect on your farming?

Scott Elliff

Yeah, it's a little Yes, yes. And yes, I think is the answer. But it's a little hard to tease it out. Exactly. Because the weather from year to year can be so different. We don't have wildfires like and mudslides, like Napa does. But we have just about everything else. We have hurricanes that they don't have in there. We have a lot of spring frost issues, a lot of heat and humidity. I mean, it's kind of an unnatural act to be growing grapes in Virginia here. And you've got to fine tune your practices and everything and limit your yield and put a lot of labor into the vineyards to make sure that the that the grapes stay disease free and ripen appropriately. And everything to the standard that we want for our for our top end wines.

Fred Reno

Your elevation here is about 1000 feet. Yeah, it helps mitigate a little bit of the frost.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, right. Right. But this year, we had I think there were seven different frost events in Virginia, this vineyard was not affected at all. Thank goodness, it was an old apple orchard, right. I guess the old

timers knew our second vineyard was not affected at all, but our third vineyard was hit by one of the events right at the primary bud coming out. So, we lost all the primaries. And then it got hit a second time when the secondary buds came out. So, we got zero crop on that. So, we lost about a third of our production overall this year. And that's the first time that that's happened to us. But it's, you know, certainly a wake up call. So, if there's climate change and global warming, then you get a little bit less, you know, frost likelihood, of course, but you got more heat and more humidity in the summertime, so, and more intense weather, more hurricanes that naturally come right at harvest and screw you up. And there's a little bit everything out to get us all the time here in the viticulture business.

Fred Reno

Well, exactly. In fact, over the years when I would talk to businessmen and people who were not in the wine business, and they'd always be this allure, they'd always say, Well, God, it looks so great and romantic, right? And all this sort of stuff. And I'd look at them and go, it's farming. Yeah, it is farming, that's right, just farming. That's really what it is at its base.

Scott Elliff

But But I think that the difference is and I mentioned this sort of authenticity aspect to the importance of the quality of the grapes is that our business model is growing our own grapes so that we control our supply. Increasingly now as the industry is growing, there are a number of wineries that pretty much focus their capital and their attention on building a nice tasting room. And they buy the grapes from other people, in some cases, California. And sometimes they have other people make the wine for them. And it's just a it's a different model. And maybe they're smarter than me, but but I feel that like if we grow all our own grapes and make all our own wine that people who are coming are seeing the real deal. They're seeing the terroir, they're seeing what we do on our site with our hands and everything.

Fred Reno

Well, and I will agree with you in this regard. Because what you do here is what I say you're in the wine business, you're in the wine growing business,

Scott Elliff

we're all in and this thing, yeah, no question about it.

Fred Reno

And, and that that was the one thing I saw when I moved to Virginia, how many wineries I would say were in the hospitality business. Right, as opposed to the wine business right.

Scott Elliff

now, not that there aren't great, you know, contract growers and, and we have some some excellent contract winemakers. But it's just it's a different model. I think the people that we want to come out here and the reason that they bond to the place they know that, that we got the dirty fingernails and doing the whole thing start to finish and they're looking out at our grapes, and they're walking through our winery and seeing what we're doing and hear the stories and so forth, the travails and the dissatisfaction, and so forth. And they kind of, you know, kind of relate to that in a way that you don't if you just go into a hospitality business and people are pouring wine from who knows where,

Fred Reno

well, how does one become noted as the Greenest, most sustainable, if you will? winery in Virginia. That's a that's pretty serious accolade. Yeah, wineries here.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, we built the winery 10 years ago, and I don't think the green thing had caught on quite as much as it is now there are people who probably surpassed us in terms of the extent of the practices and so forth, but this was my baby. And so, I said like, just like the wines, we're gonna do it right with the facilities. And so, we, you saw, we're solar powered for the most part here, you see the panels, which is a delicious irony because this is the sun and ripen your grapes. So, using the same sun to power your building is pretty cool thing to be able to do. I don't think you drove a Tesla in here today, but we got a Tesla power station for people, too. So, so, that's nice. But also, it's reclaimed lumber that we had harvested from the back 40. A lot of things in the tasting room we've been able to do like eliminate plastics, for the most part, we use corn starch and potato starch for cutlery, and for cups and that type of thing. We even use lightweight bottles, to bottle, so we have a smaller carbon footprint in what we do, and so forth. So, there are a million different practices that you can do and all decisions that you make, that can be more or less sustainable and better for the environment. And a lot of them cost more than to just go in the traditional way. But I guess I felt like I wanted to make a statement, make an investment, and most importantly, feel comfortable that what I was doing was the best I could possibly do. And be a good steward of nature around here.

Fred Reno

So, of the wines you produce, and I want to get into that in a second with who your winemaker is and how you came to that decision of the wines you produce. If there is such a thing, what is your favorite?

Scott Elliff

I'm sure everybody tells you this. It's all my children. Right, right. But we're especially proud I think of the the Viognier that we have here that you're drinking. And also the the Petit Verdot has worked out very well for us. And we only have one acre of it here, we're rapidly planting or replanting on one of our sites to get more. But as you know, that means we have a whole whopping worldwide production of 100 cases a year. And our wine club gets about half of that right off the off the bat. So, the Petit Verdot when it's released, it's available for maybe two or three months. And that's it. Right? And, you know, unfortunately you have people coming in and say what do you mean it's sold out? How come you don't just order more? You know, it just shows you kind of disconnect. Some people are disconnected from the source supply. I point out to the vineyard and say that's that's the warehouse. It's just not and this is the factory just not not ready to spit anything out yet. So

Fred Reno

your winemaker is from Bordeaux, Bordeaux.

Scott Elliff

He has Yeah, he came before we even open the winery and Oh, really? Yeah, he grew up with a vineyard in his family. So, knee high to a grasshopper he was out there working in the vines and

everything. young guys in the French industry are encouraged to come to the US because the US is biggest global market, maybe until China takes over or something but so the French to their credit said y'all go over there for an internship or something and you know, learn what, what makes Americans tick because the French guys need to be able to sell their their wines to, you know, to America. So, he came over here for an entire three month internship 14 years ago, and has been here ever since and never left. He's a big fish in a small pond. And my management style is for him to to run with it. And we're always after continuous improvement and what can we take from what he knew growing up and how they do things in France in the same sort of, you know, boutique, small winery operation kind of way. And vineyard way, that's what we've been doing year after year.

Fred Reno

Well, it gives you obviously really good continuity of wine quality, and style and where you're headed with what you're trying to do.

Scott Elliff

Right, right, right. And we're totally on the same page that way and he's both the head guy in the vineyard and the head guy in the in the winery. So, there's no pointing fingers about you know, the grapes weren't good enough for me as a winemaker, well you're the one that grew them so we keep it tight that way.

Fred Reno

Do you have any children that are in the business?

Scott Elliff

My my adult daughter is working in the tasting room some, which is delightful for me. She's not so excited about bugs, so she is and don't think I'll ever get her out in the vineyard. Okay, she, I think is one of these super tasters that has a really great palate but as a 20 something she's really not into wine particularly so she she knows all about it. She's watched it all from from day one and she's excellent in the tasting room and works in the back office, some in terms of reservations and Merchandising, and you know, that type of thing. So that's, that's fun for me, for sure.

Fred Reno

I see you're connected. And I'd love to understand this a little bit more deeply. you're connected the Piedmont Community College, and you have some exchange and things going on. What's your work with them entail? What's that like?

Scott Elliff

Right? Well, when I started out remembering again, I didn't know anything. I looked around for courses to take and there weren't any. But as we got started PVCC began a workforce development program to teach people about viticulture and winemaking recognizing that that was a good alternative for people compared to you know, going to college and being an English major or something, you know, that actually worked real workforce skill. And so, they developed courses, and most of them were kind of slideshows that happened to be held in wineries. And so, I took all those, even though we were already in the business. And I said to them, well, you need a hands-on kind, of course, that the way that you

learn is to actually by doing it's a little bit like in school, if you had some lab courses versus lecture courses, you know, lecture courses were fine you write down the notes and spit it back so forth. But you learn more about three days in the lab actually than you do in the whole lecture course. So we set up a course where you basically Adopt a row of our vines, and you come out all summer long from pruning in February in the wintertime, all the way through to harvest in October. And under our guidance, you basically do each step in the vineyard and winery cycle.

Fred Reno

Oh, they must love that. That's fantastic.

Scott Elliff

And so that adds to the other kind of coursework and a lot of people who are looking to get into the business, then they really have a qualification that say, I actually worked in a vineyard all summer long. It's also it's been useful for people who are thinking about getting into the business people who moved to the Charlottesville area, buy a nice estate, what am I going to do with this land, maybe I should plant some grapes, like you said, it's so alluring. We tell them to take this class first. And what always happens at the end is he goes way too much work I'd rather stay a consumer. And from my standpoint, that's a victory too. We've helped them avoid something that would have been out of control for them or not the right match or whatever. But they have better appreciation for it. And so it's a win, regardless of how it works out.

Fred Reno

So, with 20 years worth of hindsight, if there was one thing you could do differently, what would that have been?

Scott Elliff

Oh, my goodness, there are a lot of things I would have done differently. But the philosophy and approach that I chose and that we've executed, is exactly what I think is the right thing to do and what fulfills it for me. It's you know, it's small and it's subscale and it's high cost, and it's, we're very small in a big world of wine, even Virginia's a dot on the landscape, its uphill in all respects the weather like we talked about and everything. When you get a glass of your own wine in in hand and you're looking at it over your estate, and you're pretty proud of it and there's and and people are enjoying it. It's about as good a fulfillment as you'll get.

Fred Reno

Just had a sip of your Viognier what vintage is this? This is 2017, 17. Folks, if you can buy a bottle of DuCard Viognier, you should this is really the real, this is the real deal. Tremendous focus. really precise,

Scott Elliff

nice Thank you know,

Fred Reno

Really, really nice wine. So, I see your big, philanthropic endeavors. And you support a tremendous, I mean, almost too many to mention right here, local groups and charities and talk about that side of your business. And what drives you here.

Scott Elliff

Well, this is as you as you can tell, it's the second or third career for me. So, it's not really about making the maximum amount of money if there is any money to be made. But but it's a lot more about fulfillment and doing something that is enjoyable and long lasting and you feel proud about. One of the things that I think of the wine is kind of our currency. I mean, God knows you don't have any hard currency when you're in this business, but you've got wine, so I try to use it to support various local endeavors and everything. Even this summer with COVID. I watch CNN and saw the heartbreaking stories of these frontline workers, you know, you feel so inferior and helpless compared to all the great things that they're doing, you know, what are we doing, we're just handling some some grapevine staying out of the way. So what we did is we took a batch of our rose and made it a thank you heroes label Rose where people could buy it. And they could write the name of their hero like a doctor or a nurse or something or a frontline worker of some kind or another on and we would deliver it to them as just a little special thing in the post terrific the proceeds were donated to the local nonprofit foundation to distribute them for people in need and even for psychological programs to help the doctors who are getting, you know, overwhelmed by the caseload and everything. So does it make you know, is it a big difference? No, but it's the kind of thing that that I feel like is useful to do and that we can do it at our scale and and it's a gesture that I think is is the right thing to do.

Fred Reno

I saw you at one point did some labels some package for Madison Foundation is that right?

Scott Elliff

Well, Madison Heritage we're actually helping one of the big hospitality old lodges here is Graves Mountain Lodge and they've been here for third fourth generation 100 and some years or so. They wanted to partner with us because we represent what they you know want to be in a new era of you know, high quality and high customer service and everything and so we said we would do a wine designated for them called Madison Heritage that recognizes their heritage and the history of the county and everything. So, it's a DuCard wine, but it's exclusively for sale over at the lodge. I see yeah,

Fred Reno

Well, that's, that's interesting indeed. So, you're you're pretty much 90 plus percent of your wine comes right directly from here to the consumer. Have you been involved at all in restaurant when there was a restaurant business?

Scott Elliff

Well, I got a few friends that have restaurants and they're customers. And so they, they'd like to have maybe one of our labels in there. We do that on a very limited basis, one or two bed and breakfasts the country inns have it as well. That's just sort of sidelight for us, I guess if they're, their guests, or their customers will then have a better recognition of DuCard and come over to hang out at the tasting room.

And then that's great. But our businesses not to ton it out and make a lot of wine and sell it off through distribution to wine shops or something like that. It's a beautiful label, but nobody knows enough about it. And it's no substitute for being out here on our patio and enjoying the experience.

Fred Reno

No, its very, I mean, even this dreary rainy Monday day. It's beautiful here.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, we think so.

Fred Reno

I mean, I agree. Yeah. Just see how nice it is. So, you're about 10,000 cases, give or take,

Scott Elliff

oh, not even worth two or 3000 cases.

Fred Reno

Oh, why did I have that in my mind?

Scott Elliff

Probably because you need to be 10,000 cases to be survivable in this. But

Fred Reno

going back to this idea about it being farming and everything. One of the things I always tell people, the only time the winery really makes any money is when they sell the farm. That's like every farmer right? Yeah, I think I've

Scott Elliff

Yeah, I think I am coming to that realization to.

Fred Reno

Up to that point though. It's about your life. Yeah, what you want to do,

Scott Elliff

right, but exactly right. Yeah.

Fred Reno

And I'm envious. At one level one thing I've never done, make wine myself because it looks really hard.

Scott Elliff

A lot of things can go wrong. It's a simple process and its fraught with

Fred Reno

I've been invested, I've been an investor in vineyards before. So, I understand conceptually. All that. Yeah. But the winemaking itself. They're like children, right? You got to tend to them.

Scott Elliff

Oh Yeah, definitely. Yeah.

Fred Reno

So, if you had one wine, that you would say that you want to make a statement, impress a major press guy, impress some master sommelier some trade, what would that wine be that you would pull out of your portfolio?

Scott Elliff

Yeah, there is one. It's called Triskele, t r i s k e l e, Triskele. And it's a kind of a triangle symbol. That's the try. It's like, it's a religious symbol. In Europe, you see it in churches like Holy Trinity Father, Son, Holy Ghost, Earth, Wind and Fire or Earth Wind and Fire the band, I suppose it would count or Crosby, Stills and Nash don't get me going. But then in our case, it's it's a blend of three Bordeaux grapes, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot. And what we decided to do a few years ago is to release that as a label, only in the best years. So, if we have a harvest and growing season that we think is really good, and have good product, then we will devote some of our Cab Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot depending on the season in that and create that three part blend. And it's a very limited release kind of thing that Yeah, we try to use it to impress, impress people with it's beautifully drinking very deep color, Very aromatic and nice, soft tannins. But like all our wines is limited to about 100 cases a year usually. So, it doesn't go along very well. And in 10 years of having the operation, I think we've done it three times. Okay, and we got another one coming out. So, and that probably is the example of what seasons are like out here, there's only three or four out of a decade that you feel are, you know, reasonably above average, and that you can make actually your best product?

Fred Reno

Well, one comment I will make along the lines of the wine when I bought some wine here about a month ago when I came through and bought a bottle of your Chardonnay. And then you and I spoke on the phone a few weeks back before I had it. And you made a comment that you do it in such a style. It's more like a good Macon from France. And when I open it and poured it in first glass and smell and taste. I said he nailed it. It tastes I mean you've absolutely nailed it. It tastes like a really good Macon. Yeah. Congratulations. I mean it was right there.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, thanks. Yeah, Macon being a small town in France for the particular style, which is a little bit of oak subtlety, but not buttery, not the traditional California oaky buttery, super buttery Chardonnay. And so, we do some things in the winery do not allow that development.

Fred Reno

What clone Chardonnay do you have here?

Scott Elliff

We have two or three all Dijon clones.

Fred Reno

One of the things about I say about vineyard be really fascinating. hear your thoughts. You've been growing grapes for about 20 years. At some point. The grape varietal itself tends to what I say mutate or take on the character of the vineyard in which it's being grown. Have you seen obviously vine age makes a big difference but have you seen a gradual character development where you can you have a signature so okay out of our vineyard. That's the character we get from Cabernet Franc, yes or Chardonnay

Scott Elliff

Yes. Yes. I think that's true for Chardonnay, Cab Franc and Viognier as well. Maybe Petit Verdot as well. A lot of people in Virginia will talk about Virginia Cabernet Franc has a very distinctive taste in Virginia. Sometimes maybe a little too herbaceous or green for my standpoint, but people drink Cab Franc and say that's a Virginia Cab Franc. And I think we have a very Virginia Cab Franc you know, as well. And the Viognier characteristic comes through very strongly. And the Chardonnay because of the winemaking style, I think, but also the clones and the, the raw material. And everything is part of it too so

Fred Reno

well, Chardonnay is the most in my experience the most neutral grape, it's like a blank canvas. And so the vineyard if you maximize vineyard potential, don't manipulate it. you're going to get a true terroir expressed wine.

Scott Elliff

Well, Julian is speaking French to the vines all the time. So you know, we think after 15 years, maybe they'd be maybe they'd be catching on to his instructions.

Fred Reno

No, I've been impressed with the limited amount of wine I've been able to taste. I'm still perplexed. Because how do you get this audience to? I mean, to build and build. When I talked to a couple retailers, of course, which you don't sell wine to and I asked about DuCard? they either give me a blank stare or like, well, I don't know much about them. Yeah. So you got to constantly be working hard to keep the word out there.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, absolutely. Well, we had an event yesterday for our wine club. Just give you this as an example. I know pretty much all of our wine club members, but sometimes they join and sometimes when I'm not here, or whatever. So, I was talking with one of them and asked them what their journey was that got them here to our event. And they said they were taking a trip from DC and coming down to enjoy the countryside. And they researched TripAdvisor. And we're number one on TripAdvisor actually, for the area. She said, I saw all these all these great reviews. And that's a good indicator. And then one of her neighbors, when they were talking said, Oh, you're going down, you should go to DuCard. So, their

neighbor apparently knew about it, she put those two things together, and came out here and had a great time from the get go and immediately joined the wine club. And it's been you know, up and up and Adam ever ever since. A little, little kind of random various methods. Get people here, I think it's not TV advertising can't do that it's not wine shops. But it's it's a lot of word of mouth and reputation. And people that want to gravitate toward this sort of style of, of small, personable high quality, beautiful location, and they aspire to that just as a in these times as a safe place to come and get out of the house.

Fred Reno

In some ways that mirrors how I discovered you. My wife was at a farmers market here in the Charlottesville area. Yes, she bought a bottle of your Norton brought it home. I'd heard about the DuCard, but I never had the wine. She brought it home. I said, Oh, that's fantastic. I'm really interested. So we had it. It's the best Norton I've ever had. I mean, hands down is the best Norton I've ever had from Virginia at that point, and that's what got my intellectual curiosity going. I got to stop by I got to figure out what's going on there. They need to be part of the Fine Wine Confidential Podcast. I know, there's a story there. But it was that experience that she had, that she just randomly bought a bottle of somebody that was working for you or was at the farmers market. So, it does work that way.

Scott Elliff

I admit it's, it's, you know, it's it's not an overnight success. It's probably not a very efficient way to market. But I think it's very effective. Because if people find out about things through trusted methods, and neighbors and reviews, tastings that they've been to, or whatever, and then they they kind of zero in and come out here and hopefully that gets reinforced in what they were looking for. And then they're they become fans.

Fred Reno

As a former management consultant. How did that help you in your decision-making process here as you started the winery?

Scott Elliff

I think I probably have to blot a lot of that out of my head because the business characteristics of this are long lead time, very weather risky, high capital costs, high labor cost, unbranded, not well recognized even as a whole region of the world, for wine and so forth. So, it's got an highly regulated as well, legally and highly taxed. So, so, it has a lot of things going on and going against it. To be successful in it. I think you have to apply all the best disciplines and experience that you can to kind of overcome those sort of things. to be creative, and to be focused in one or two or three very specific areas, like what we've been doing with the onsite focus and the green element, the high personability at the tasting room and that type of thing. So you create a niche, I think the world is basically a collection of millions of niches, and you look for a niche that you that you like, try to really be strong in it. And the people that like that niche are looking for it, they'll find you. And it's not for everybody, you know, lots of other niches or hobbies or whatever, you know, none of us have any interest in but they have their own followings. You know, and same thing for that. For here. People like that particular vibe of the place and the following. We get is because of that.

Fred Reno

What's the one bottle of wine that you've had that you want? Wow, I mean, what's the one that sticks in your mind? Putting your own wine aside for a second? Yeah, it's like, what's that bottle of wine? you went? Bingo. That's really unbelievable.

Scott Elliff

Chateau Montelena that's in your Yes. In your old neck of the woods. Oh, at

Fred Reno

one point. Yeah, exactly.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, we had a trip to Napa, and probably about the 80s or 90s or so. It's a gorgeous facility, as you know. And I didn't know at the time, how storied it was and the role that it played in the Judgment of Paris and everything. A Cabernet Sauvignon and an Chardonnay from there were two unbelievably memorable wines when we were on our trip. And it's not like we were scouting and thinking that we were going to do this. It was just a vacation. And probably the wines that we just randomly bought out of little wine shops in Paris when we had our baguette and cheese and charcuterie and a bottle of wine. Sitting in a park in in Paris.

Fred Reno

Wine always taste better at the source doesn't it

Scott Elliff

it does, doesn't it yeah,

Fred Reno

that's part of your secret to success here.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, it tastes particularly well sitting on that deck over there looking out over the vineyard and having the creek bubbling right past you and everything's breathing in the fresh air and getting away from the world struggles and everything. That's kind of what it's about.

Fred Reno

Have you gotten any particular help from let's just say the Virginia Wine Marketing Board? Some organization like that I mean? What's their outreach? Like, I am curious about that?

Scott Elliff

Yeah, we're, you know, for a little plucky state, we're pretty organized. We've got a dedicated office with three or four full time people that work to market the state overall as a as a region, etc. We've got a fantastic state viticulturist Tony Wolf who's world world famous, and he's been working with all of us for Well, before I started, we as a state winemaker at Virginia Tech. since retired, Bruce Zoeklein who's been fantastic to support us all. The, the state for a fairly conservative state, I think has been very smart

and focused and supportive, in terms of recognizing that this is a up and coming, high value kind of agricultural operation. And agritourism obviously plays a big, big deal in it. So, we have all kinds of got a vineyard Association and a wineries Association. And through COVID, we we relied on the legal support that we got from the wineries Association.

Fred Reno

Yeah, I think they were I've been

Scott Elliff

allowed to do and what we couldn't do and so forth. And it's really been incredibly supportive. Actually.

Fred Reno

Oh, I think you have a customer.

Scott Elliff

Okay so we'll be right back.

Fred Reno

Well, we're just finishing up here talking about the type of support the state has given the industry and I was what I was starting to say was, I've been a member of the Virginia Wineries Association myself since 2017. When I was in California still because I wanted to understand what's going on. Yeah. And I was I've been Uber impressed. With the type of support you're talking about the legal the compliance, everything they've been given during this whole COVID period. Right. It's been I've been reading all the bulletins reading everything if I was a winery owner, which I'm not, I would have been really like this is spot on. Yeah,

Scott Elliff

Yeah, I think the wine industry came together very well. You know, it's a, in general, I'd say we're all a bunch of independent cowboys. You know, we all do our own thing, we all think what we're doing is, is feel my way or the highway is the only way to do it. But under this, we realized that we all needed to, to make sure we were unified and and compliant, and supportive. And we didn't really have anybody who said, well screw that I'm going to continue to do whatever I wanted because it recognized that you get a target on your back otherwise if you're kind of too good for for everything. So, I think everybody really, very diligently made sure we followed all the procedures and everything doesn't do us society or industry or anything, any good to be to be a source of spreading of the virus or anything. And so when we were allowed to open up again, we didn't open up right away. I took a couple of weeks and we basically went through all our procedures step by step and almost like football plays where you doing in slow motion, you practice them and you do them again, you know Make sure we had all the different provisions and everything in place. So that when people come out here, they, they tell me that they feel like this is one of the few places they go, because they're comfortable out here and then safe in this environment. And so, we've been super strict about it the entire time. We limit the number of people, even though we have a beautiful expansive lawns and everything, I just got to make sure that everybody can, can stay apart. And we have a limited number of people in a tasting room at any one time. And that type of thing. We even have that hand washing station in the front as you come in the

building, for example, too. So we're treating it pretty seriously. And as a result, we don't have any knock on wood. We haven't had any real issues where people, you know, would come here and not want to comply, they recognize that this is a place that's, that's doing it by the book, and they appreciate that, I guess. So, It's just us, you know, but I think the industry was pretty good, pretty good about this overall. And the state has recognized that we're kind of an outlet for people, I guess not a lot of places you can go but you can go to beautiful lawns, winery sites and have a few pops and fresh air and feel like you're a little bit refreshed in the face of a very stressful time. Obviously.

Fred Reno

This is been as good as I thought it might be. I really enjoyed this conversation. It's really Pleasure to meet you. When we're off tape. I'll tell you who you remind me of an old friend of mine. Again, I'll say thank you for your time and good luck and continued success.

Scott Elliff

Thank you. My pleasure.