

# EPIISODE # 17: AILEEN SEVIER/EARLY MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS

## SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Aileen Sevier

**Fred Reno** Aileen, welcome.

**Aileen, Thank** you pleased to be here.

**Fred Reno** So as I like to start always in the beginning your story, how did you get into wine?

**Aileen** Yeah so, I entered as many people do through the restaurant side of things had worked in restaurants since I was 15, you know, worked my way through college in restaurants and really found a love for the stories but especially the additional tips you can make when you are able to sell some of the fine wines on the wine lists that that I was that I was involved with.

**Fred Reno** Well, it says here that one point you were really working with Sandy Block here. Legal seafoods.

**Aileen Yeah**, so that's that's definitely when I went deeper into the wine world. So was getting my MBA at Brandeis University and outside of Boston and Waltham, and interned at Legal Seafoods, which has had one of the greatest wine programs for a chain restaurant throughout the country, had Sandy Block a Master of Wine at the helm. And I came to help them open a new concept. But as part of that helped with the wine training and was so pleased when Sandy had me stay on as an intern through my second year of business school, and then he created a job for me. So, at Legal Seafoods, you know, just got to taste hundreds of wines a month, you know, we were sourcing for 33 restaurants, the largest buyer in Massachusetts. And we're traveling throughout the world direct sourcing wines as well. So that's when I got to travel to, you know, many of the great wine regions of the world, and really focused on helping the staff, you know, helping these consumers who are dealing with 8 million different customers, different guests in the restaurants really communicate clearly about wine provided training from very, very basic up to quite advanced. We had a very robust training program at the restaurants.

**Fred Reno, You** had told me earlier that prior to getting in the wine business, you'd spend some time if I'm not inaccurate in Japan,

**Aileen**

I did. Yeah, yeah. After graduation. So, I majored in anthropology and Asian Studies. So, you know, graduated, and realized that I was either going to be working in restaurants with that degree, or should

head overseas. So, I taught English in Japan for a year, and then traveled throughout Asia for for six months.

**Fred Reno**

Well, that must have been a fascinating experience. Yeah, it was amazing. Well, this is timely talking about legal seafoods. It's gotta be a little bittersweet. I see the Berkowitz family put it up for sale.

**Aileen**

They did Yep. So big, big change. I mean, the restaurant industry, obviously, is going through quite a tough time right now. And, you know, I think the high cost of goods of a seafood restaurant, you know, combined with their focus on just extreme cleanliness. I mean, they they decided not to reopen very fast after some of the COVID protocols were lifted. So, I just think it was, you know, kind of a perfect storm in a in a tough way.

**Fred Reno**

Yeah, that's unfortunate. But I can understand why to give it to a much larger entity who can handle this, whatever's in front of us for a while for the on-premises restaurant industry. So how did you end up in Chicago working for Tony Terlato? That must have been interesting in and of itself?

**Aileen**

Yeah, so my husbands a university professor. And you know, in that world, you go where you get a tenure tenure track job. So, we actually moved to Milwaukee. This was as the financial crisis was really ramping up in 2008. And so, the there really wasn't a good opportunity for another corporate restaurant role at that point. Plus, I was really interested in going deeper into the world of wine and had worked closely with Michelle Pae at Terlato wines. She's one of the best in the business from a national account standpoint, was able to transition to the import side working for Terlato Wines.

**Fred Reno**

Okay, what did you do there specifically?

**Aileen**

Yeah, so I was a brand manager, so started as an associate marketing manager with a portfolio of, I think I started with about eight wines, and then grew, and by the time I left, I was managing 18 different wineries from around the world and had a great team and was really focused on our iconic imports. So, Working with Michel Chapoutier in the Rhone Valley, Il Poggione winery in Brunello di Montalcino, Rochioli Winery out in the Russian River Valley, plus some really, really great South African wineries, Australia, Spain, Italy. So had a really diverse portfolio.

**Fred Reno**

Oh, yeah, that's, that's fantastic. Well, that gives you that broader, broader perspective on the wine industry itself. So, Virginia, how do you end up here in Virginia? And then let's talk about Early Mountain Vineyards?

**Aileen**

Yeah, similarly, my husband got a job at University of Virginia. So, we moved to Charlottesville. At the time, you know, I was having a lot of people say, Oh, you're so lucky. You know, there's wine all around Charlottesville, and definitely had a bit of, you know, snobbery, I'd say at that point, in the sense of, like, I work with the greatest wineries in the world, you know, what's what's going on in Virginia that could be of interest to me, so I actually kept my job at Terlato for three years, flew back and forth to Chicago, but was really falling in love with what I was seeing around us and in Virginia, you know, what was happening. And it was really a harvest party that I went to, that changed my mind, combined with visiting Early Mountain and tasting the Petit Manseng there, that I felt like there was both this combination of really, really dedicated smart people doing amazing things, you know, throughout the state, as well as the excitement of, you know, a grape variety that I had never really tasted or heard of before, that I felt like was so, you know, specifically Petit Manseng that I felt like was so exciting from, you know, the the sales and marketing side, and that I decided to transition over and took the job at Early Mountain

**Fred Reno**

What year was that?

**Aileen**

three years ago. So, 20 end of I guess I started early 2018.

**Fred Reno**

Well, you know, I share the same newfound love for Petit Manseng myself, because I like you thought I knew everything about wine from around the world. But I learned I didn't. And that's the beautiful thing about wine. You learn something new every day.

**Aileen**

I think it's such an exciting grape, as far as how it shows in the glass as far as how it fits with our climate. And, you know, working with Ben Jordan, the winemaker at Early Mountain who is really figuring out how to make incredible dry Petit Manseng. Yeah, it's a lot of fun. And for a new region. It's amazing to work with a grape that's a discovery for people because there's no preconceived notions, there's no oh, well, it's like this in this region. And so, you know, that's what we're thinking of when we're trying it. You know, it's really our chance to I don't want to say have a signature because that's not really what I see it as being you know, I think diversity is the key for Virginia have a wine that can really lead as we're going out into the world as we're talking to, you know, sommeliers in New York or you know, consumers who know a ton about wine but are really interested in in discovery and exploration.

**Fred Reno**

So, Jean and Steve Case, they bought the property in 2009 is that correct? 2011. 2011 but they reopen shortly thereafter

**Aileen**

Yeah so, they renovated I mean, all of the the key pieces were in place. Um, certainly on the production side, the winery had been built in 2005. It's a 300 plus acre property in Madison, Virginia. So, it's

between Charlottesville and Washington, DC, the tasting room and the event Hall had also been built, but they did some major renovations and then rebranded to Early Mountain and open in 2012.

**Fred Reno**

Oh, so it had a different name, and they brought the Early Mountain name,

**Aileen**

correct. Okay, Sweely vineyards before that,

**Fred Reno**

I think Early Mountains better branding, that's for sure. So, what was it like when you got there three, four years ago? And what have you seen the changes, if you will, in that short period of time, both there and in Virginia in general, as it relates to selling the response to the wines? Your audience, what do you see?

**Aileen**

Yeah so, there was a huge pivot point in quality with the 2015 vintage for Early Mountain. So, for two reasons, you know, one was Ben Jordan joined the team at that point. So, he came over from Michael Shaps he, you know, cut his teeth in California and Sonoma valley then came and really had you know, an amazing experience with Shaps because they're making wines from you know, vineyards all throughout the state. They have a lot of custom crush clients. And so, he really got to experience you know, a tough vintage great vintages so really learned fast. I believe he started there in 2011 and are no sorry 2010 which was a great vintage and then 2011 was a really, really tough vintage or rainy vintage in Virginia. So got to experience Both of those back-to-back. So, he joined in 2015. And we had a great team in place. But he was really kind of the final important piece. 2015 was also the first vintage that our team farmed, our mountainside site Quaker Run start to finish, we'd worked with the fruit in 2014. But from pruning all the way through to harvest managed the property, starting in the 2015, vintage. So, when I started, we were just releasing those top tier reds. And that was also what I really felt was exciting was taking this property that had established itself as a top hospitality destination. I mean, for example, in 2016, was named the number one tasting room in America by USA Today poll and had the opportunity to then really have these amazing high-quality wines releasing, we just gone through a rebranding. So, we had this amazing kind of modern, very, very sleek, new branding that I felt was really, really strong and would have great presence out in the market. So great quality wine, you know, building on this top hospitality destination, and then really being able to lead the marketing both through distribution. So going out into the world and getting it placed at top restaurants and retail shops, as well as then in the tasting room. Just really tightening up our brand identity so that the wine quality, and the focus on on fine wine would be our lead.

**Fred Reno**

Well, I was goanna interject just for a second, thinking back to what we were talking about a couple minutes ago, just for the audience, Jean, and Steve Case, were the founders of AOL. How did they decide they wanted to open a winery?

**Aileen**

Yeah, so they lived in McLean, Virginia, for 35 years. AOL was based, I believe, just right out either in DC or right outside of DC. So lived in McLean, Virginia, and they were starting to taste wines from throughout the state that they found really exciting. And they're looking around, and their friends were not drinking Virginia wine. And so, as entrepreneurs, a light bulb went off of saying, Wait a minute, there's this great quality surge happening, no one really knows about it, we want to be part of helping establish Virginia as one of the greatest wine regions in the world, the best way we can do that is to buy a winery, and really pour our expertise and our resources into it. So, from the beginning, Early Mountains mission was not just to establish our own brand and our own winery, but really to help tell the greater story of quality Virginia wine.

**Fred Reno**

That's fantastic. Cuz that leads perfectly into that question I was going to ask you next was your one of the few if the only but certainly one of the few I'm aware of in Virginia that serves other wineries wines at your winery? Whose idea was that? And how does that go over? It'll be interesting to hear how the consumer takes out. Are they confused? Or they're like, excited me? How does that work?

**Aileen**

Yeah, so that's been from the very beginning. So very much came from Jean Cases vision. And it was also, you know, a bit of a utility play at the beginning, because until we had our own wines, it was amazing to be able to feature wines from throughout the state. But it's one of our core missions, as I said, is really telling the story of this bigger quality Virginia wine story. And so, it's something that we've continued while certainly now we have enough wine to fully service the guests we have, and consumers love it. Because we don't just serve other Virginia wineries wines. We also offer wine flights. And we were, I believe the first Virginia winery to do wine flights. So, you can have in the summer, you know, for Roses side by side from different producers throughout the state. Right now, it's the week between Christmas and New Year's we have a sparkling wine flight. We have a cellar stocker flight that includes you know, RDV, King Family, Glen Manor, we've had different you know bright whites you know, all these different themes so that you can really get great verticals or horizontals or different stylistic approaches. You know, this was something we continued through the COVID period, when we were doing a lot of different virtual webinars. We weren't just talking about our own wines. We were inviting other Virginia winemakers on and again telling these these bigger Virginia wine stories.

**Fred Reno**

Well, let me put you on the spot. Do you get to make that decision about which wines are poured? Is that your decision?

**Aileen**

I'm definitely part of the team that decides but one of the great things and I think it's it's fun for the entire team that as we are out and about tasting things. Anyone can raise their hand saying hey, I tried this. It's delicious. You know, let's together taste it and decide if we're going to include it. So, Dave, our general manager or Jen, our tasting room manager or Shawn, our wine club manager, everyone has input and is involved in it.

**Fred Reno**

Oh, that's great. I mean that that's terrific. So, let's turn to selling and marketing Virginia wine. How do you find this different from what you've had to what you've experienced in the past? Because I know it's different. So, what are the challenges? What are you facing, both in the state and out of state?

### **Aileen**

And I'll start with for sure, one of the strengths. In my former life at Terlato, I was mostly doing what you'd call trade marketing. So, I was helping, you know, talk to sommeliers or to, you know, fine wine buyers throughout the country, and getting them to really, you know, believe in my wines, and tell their story. To get them, you know, part of wine dinners are part of ways for them reach the consumer. And sometimes I felt like I was so far away from the end user because it's kind of working through all these layers of talking to the distributor sales team, talking to the buyers. What I love so much in my role is how close I am to the consumer. So, one of the advantages that Virginia wine has is just the strong the very, very high proportion of wines that are sold through what's called direct sale direct to consumer. People are coming to our tasting rooms, because they love the experience that's possible in Virginia wine country. They're discovering the wines right there; they're hearing the story right there. And they're taking wines home with them. But from a brand building standpoint, that has limitations. So, I've really been part of the push to go out into distribution. And you know, use my expertise with trade marketing, to launch in the New York market. So, we decided that that was absolutely critical for discovery of Virginia wine. So, we launched in New York, I guess, now about two and a half years ago, you know, really found this amazing reception, it was like the time was perfect for a Virginia wine like Early Mountain in that market for really hip downtown restaurants, Brooklyn restaurants, wine bars, wine shops. Because there there been this, you know, transition to people, both consumers and buyers being very interested in things like indigenous grape varieties, and anything but Chardonnay and looking for wines that have an elegance and kind of a food friendliness. And looking for these real kind of genuine stories, smaller producers. So, the stage was already set for a wine like Early Mountain to have success. And then grapes like Petit Manseng or 100% Cabernet Franc, were just ready made for having this this great reception. So, you know, within a couple of months, we were in over 50 of some of the top top, you know, really, really kind of cool kid restaurants and bars and wine shops. So, it was kind of the opposite of what when I was working with these very established prestigious producers from throughout the world. I'd go to New York, and we'd be in Midtown and uptown, whereas now everything was downtown and Brooklyn. That's, that's, you know, hey, hanging out in the cool accounts.

### **Fred Reno**

Interesting. Well, I can see it. So, New York, surrounding area any foray into any other larger Metropolitan markets outside of this area yet?

### **Aileen**

I mean, obviously, DC. So, DC, which, you know, is both obvious, but has been quite a challenging market for a Virginia wine. And to your a bit earlier question about what changes I've seen in three years, you know, I feel very, very good about the moves that Early Mountain has made to be able, you know, in partnership with our distributor Williams Corner Wine has been able to make in the DC market, of really opening the eyes of some of the Somms and the wine buyers, to the quality that's right in their back door, and they're in their backyard. And that's been through, you know, kind of the dragging the bag and tasting, tasting the wines with buyers, but also having this wonderful welcome for them just 90

minutes away, you know, bring your teams down, and we'll lead trainings at the winery for them. Or, you know, come visit us and you know, stay in our vineyard cottage. And we'd love to really tell you the story ourselves. You know, we host dozens and dozens of buyers throughout the year.

### **Fred Reno**

of the lineup of Early Mountain wines that you produce. If there's one wine in that portfolio, and I know it's tough to say one wine, but if there's one wine that you would say, to the consumer and or the trade, hey, you must try this. And this will really give you a snapshot of who we are from a qualitative standpoint. I know it's a tough question. I'll give you two what are the two that.

### **Aileen**

I would say right now a Eluvium which is our Merlot led red blend is a really really critical wine. because it tells, you know, when I first came to Virginia, and I would talk to everyone saying, you know, what's our story? What's our one variety? You know, I kind of came from this, you have to focus, you have to have the one thing, what's the signature, and I would have these, you know, 20-minute responses of, well, this and this and this and this and this. It was a little, I would say frustrating. But then the longer I was at it, I really realized, wait a minute, no, diversity is the key for Virginia. But there is still an elevator pitch. It can be two words long mountain fruit; mountain fruit is what's key to quality in Virginia. And the transition and quality in our industry has really been moving from these very tourism-oriented decisions of where we're going to put our winery and thus, maybe plant our vines to moving up into the mountains in the foothills, away from you know, the easy tourism dollar, but towards where really, really high-quality grapes can be grown. People can still have their tasting room, and you know, an easy destination for consumers, but our planting you know, increasingly up at altitude. And so, Eluvium helps tell that story for us with its big brother Rise, which is really our Icon wine. So, it's coming from older vines at our Quaker Run vineyard, and merlot is very much its core, but with the addition of Petit Verdot to really add structure and intensity. But then the second wine I'd choose is another blended wine. And it's our rose it is critical, because it's an ambassador. So, from a marketing standpoint, it's the wine that we can make more easily in larger quantities. It's the wine that can be made from the grape vines directly surrounding Early Mountain. That's kind of the more rolling hills not mountainside fruit. And it's also the wine that when you're out on a restaurant wine list or next, you know, on a wine shelf. Generally, rose is a global set. So, it'll sit side by side with Provence, with Italian Rosato, with California rose. And it really gives that consumer who maybe has never visited Virginia or doesn't know that they're interested in Virginia wine, a chance to try it before, you know needing to go to the Virginia section. And it's delicious.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, it is delicious, folks, I've had it, it is wonderful wine. So, let's talk about you and something I'm intrigued by, you're in the MSW program, the master wine program, I consider that to be the gold star, if you will, of all wine, diplomas, degrees certificates. If you can become a master of wine to me, that's the one that impresses me personally more than a because of the I guess you could say the whole nature of it. You know, it's not just knowing something about wine, it's being able to write and understand completely the history of wine. So, talk about that program and the rigors that you're going through. When you might complete it, because it's a four-to-six-year program, at least I bet.

**Aileen**

Yeah. Yeah. So that was the other really motivation and transitioning to winery, transitioning to Virginia wine, was being able to really add to my experience that because as you say, the master of wine program, which is a certification that's based out of an institute in London, it's very much a global program. And there's an expectation that, you know, it's it's a generalist program, there's an expectation that you know, everything about the world of wine, meaning that a culture vinification quality control, marketing and sales, as well as really current events, current issues, and that you know, them at a level that you're not just rattling back facts, but that you're really consolidating you're, you know, forming opinions about it. And then you're making an argument in your in your essays. So, it's an essay-based program, even the blind tastings. You're writing your responses. And so, you know, I think a few things are really key to know about the program. One is that the exam is entirely anonymous, you know, there is no, and I say that because of some of the challenges that the MS. The master Sommelier program is going through where people are face to face. It's a verbal program. It's a rather opaque testing system where, you know, personal determination is made of who passes and who doesn't. The Master of Wine is the exact opposite. It's anonymous, they release what the questions are and what the what the answers are, in the sense of the the wines themselves. So, so it is this really intense program. Yes. And I really thought that being in a role where I could be close to winemaking and viticulture would set me up a lot better to be able to attempt it. The question of when I might finish.

**Fred Reno**

Put you on the spot there.

**Aileen**

I took the stage one exam and passed it the first time. So that's great. I would have taken stage two this past June, but the exam was canceled, you know, they they host the exam in three cities throughout the world, people are traveling from all over, you know, it's totally understandable that they'd have to cancel. So, I'll sit that for the first time this coming June.

**Fred Reno**

Oh, I see. Okay. All right. What is the impact that you've seen at Early Mountain now that we're, we're not quite a year, but we're certainly 10 months in the COVID? What have you seen, as far as the impact on Early Mountain Vineyards itself? Are your sales your consumer What's going on?

**Aileen**

Yeah, I don't want to in any way be dismissive. But my main conclusion is that COVID in many ways, has been, you know, quote, unquote, good for Virginia wine and for Early Mountain. And I say that because consumers, there is never been a moment in modern history that has had such a dramatic impact on consumer behavior ever. Just this wholesale change, and how people are buying, consuming how they're relating to products. And what we've found is that there has been an increased value placed on local, on personal connection, on wine, as this, you know, wonderful, you know, kind of easy escape and luxury. And so, when we opened the tasting room, because we're blessed with being on over 300 acres could open safely, you know, largely outside hospitality, the increase in consumers coming to visit was dramatic. I mean, we were building waitlist of 100 plus people, most weekend days, kind of the the peak of summer. And the increase in the purchase of wine online, has been really, really



dramatic. So, wine has always lagged behind other consumer goods as far as online sale, for several reasons. You know, one is its heavy and expensive to ship, it's temperature sensitive, you have to sign for it. So, it can be quite annoying to receive the packages. And also, it's a very confusing, confusing consumer product. So only a limited number of consumers really feel comfortable going to the, you know, 10s of 1000s of possibilities of wines that you can buy online and confidently saying, This is what I want. But through COVID, you know, a lot of wineries have really invested in free shipping. You know, some of the the regulations have changed that sometimes it doesn't require a signature. Plus, if it does, everyone's home. And, you know, they're really going into these tried-and-true many wineries is that they've had a connection with because they want to feel like their dollar is supporting people that they know. And so, the increase in online sale for Early Mountain for many other Virginia wineries has been absolutely incredible. And we've supported it collectively as a community through, you know, a better shopping experience online through virtual tastings. You know, we did dozens and dozens and dozens of corporate virtual tastings over the last month, because of how much wine can form connection and community for people. And the ability to do that online through a virtual platform is really powerful.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, I have one more question for you. What was the one wine that you had in your life that went that you went bingo, that's it that one wine that you still remember? That was so a ethereal an such an experience that you just like, Yeah, that's it?

### **Aileen**

Um, well, I think I mean, there have been many different experiences. But definitely the the experience that was the most dramatic for me was a trip that we took to the Loire Valley when going back to Legal Seafoods days. So, we were going to direct source some wines and to create a program for our guests all about the wines of the Loire. And we finished up in Pouilly Fume and visited Didier Dagueneau and you know, not only fell in love with this, you know, kind of intense, you know, style and really, really dramatic experience, but had actually his wine from the Jurancon called Asteroid that was just absolutely eye opening that was actually made partially from Petit Manseng.

### **Fred Reno**

well, Aileen. I think this can be a great episode because again, another angle here and Just wants to say thank you for your time today. This is fantastic. You're going to add a lot and I'm hoping along the line here people are really gonna wake up and understand Virginia is as I've said, in my opinion, the most exciting wine growing state in the country today. It's happening. It's happening.