

EPISODE # 18: EARLY MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS, BEN JORDAN/WINEMAKER.

SPEAKERS:

Ben Jordan, Fred Reno

Fred Reno

Ben Welcome to my Podcast, and I appreciate you give me the time this morning.

Ben Jordan

Thanks for having me, Fred. Look forward to the conversation.

Fred Reno

So, what's your story? How did you start in this business?

Ben Jordan

Yeah, so it was, it was a meander, I got out of college, moved out to San Francisco, kind of didn't want to do a whole lot other than enjoy San Francisco. So, I was a bike messenger, which was neat. But at the same time, I was working on dramatic writing playwriting, and wasn't as focused as I could have been there. So went and got my MFA playwriting and decided that I should do what you're supposed to do when you have an MFA in playwriting. So, I moved to New York, I needed a way to make money to pay rent. And that's how I landed in. In wine. I got a job working retail. And you know, at first it was a job, but like many basically caught the wine bug fell in love. had a couple of great mentors who showed me the world of wine. And you know, when you're in New York, there's the world of wine is there with you? And so really fell for it hard. And then as we all do, yes, yes. And so that was, you know, at that point, I knew it was going to be important. But at the same time, my family, we have a farm in the Shenandoah Valley, and my grandparents were, you know, kind of deciding whether to keep the farm or you know, if they were going to, what was it going to be? They were keyed into the fact that people were planting vineyards around the state, and that it might be a good place to grow grapes. What year was that? So that was the early 2000s. Okay, by the time, we didn't really do a test planting until 2007. But we had, you know, Virginia Tech, came out and looked at it and had a few things done to evaluate it and got some thumbs up, not as much kind of critical evaluation as is done today to sites. But by the time we planted our quote, unquote, commercial acreage, wheat, we did kind of deeper digging and had a geologist out and those sorts of things. But long story short, they were, they were interested, my brother was at Virginia Tech, getting his Master's and PhD in entomology, and was dealing with some vineyard projects with that as well. And so, we were all kind of just coming to this same conclusion. At the same time, like I said, In 2007, we did our first test planting of six different varieties, basically, a row of each. And that kind of kicked us off. We did test planting for about six years after that. And it wasn't till about 2013, that we did a small commercial planting, and then again in 2016.

Fred Reno

Well, prior to that, you were in California. So how did you start getting into wine in California,

Ben Jordan

right. So, it was in New York. And as great a city as it is, I wasn't having as much fun as, as some people, mostly because of the fact that wasn't getting paid very much. So, I had some connections back in San Francisco and moved back out there. And then a few months later, landed a job with a small importer. It was one of those kind of old school licenses that had an import wholesale, and that's called the Wine House Limited. And I think, you know, K & L might have.

Fred Reno

Oh right, Wine House Limited. Okay, sure.

Ben Jordan

So, they originally started with Bordeaux, kind of worked in all of France did Bobby Kacher's stuff for a while and did some of their own direct import stuff. So really got the lay of the land, working with them in terms of the different tiers, those three different tiers. But also, more importantly, because I was in San Francisco, some of our customers were actually winemakers from Northern California. And so got just got to talking to different winemakers as they came into the city to sell wine and buy wine. It was one of one group of winemakers that I was, you know, I had a dialogue with and eventually, along with the ideas that we might be doing something with my family realized that maybe I should explore the making of wine.

Fred Reno

So, was that at C. Donatiello?

Ben Jordan

Yeah, so I so one of my friend winemakers had their own side project, which I was buying, but their day job was at C. Donatiello. And he's like, you know if you want to learn it, come up and work. His name's Webb Marquez and Whole Farms was his job. He invited me up to work a harvest with him at C. Donatiello. And just kind of got to know his group of friends and the culture up there, fell in love in a different way with the wine industry again, and realized that was what I wanted to do, and got lucky that at the end of the harvest, there was a position that was suitable for me that was open. And that was basically a half and a half position of half cellar, half lab. And so really got introduced to the physical nature of making wine and then kind of the more, you know, the technical nature, but also, when you're in the lab, you talk to the winemaker and get to understand that kind of philosophy of what they're doing. So, it was very good for me learning the ropes.

Fred Reno

Why did you get hooked up with Kerry Damskey?

Ben Jordan

So, Kerry, was when I applied for, he got a job at another small place in dry creek called Dutcher Crossing, where Kerry was the consulting winemaker. Basically, I did the day-to-day work, and then worked with Kerry on blending Kerry and the owner on blending Debra at Dutcher Crossing. And so, he was he was really cool. He was really supportive of me and moving before.

Fred Reno

I'm curious because I know, Kerry, but it's been years since I spoke to him. Do you speak to him at all? Do you know where he's at?

Ben Jordan

Well, when I was going back to California, I would always say, Hey, are you around? Would you know at least connect with him but try to have lunch with him? and Debra, obviously haven't been there in a while. But sometimes I'll just reach out and ask him questions about something he said.

Fred Reno

So, he's still back in California because I know he was involved in a project in India one time,

Ben Jordan

Yea I think he's still involved in that and is in his son is now in wine as well. And I think his son's mostly working in California now, but his son was helping out in the India project, as well. But to be honest, it's been a couple years since I've talked to him.

Fred Reno

So, that was basically up until about 2011 or 12. And then you ended up back here in Virginia.

Ben Jordan

Yeah. So, I had made contact with Michael Shaps, who has Michael Shaps. Wineworks, in south of Charlottesville, just told him that I was looking to eventually come back, because that was always the goal was to learn in California, and to come back to Virginia and be part of a smaller growing industry. And so, he would every once in a while, alert me to positions and either weren't appropriate, or I didn't get the job. But eventually, it's like, you know what, I've got a job for you. And it's working for me at Wineworks. And so, I came in 2012 and was his winemaker. And what that meant was he, in addition to his, his brand, Michael Shaps, he does effectively what is custom crush, what the world does is custom crush in Virginia, we have to call it contract wine making, but it's basically the same thing. And so basically working with a lot of different brands, many of them in the Monticello area, but all over the state to make wines for them. And so, I like to say that that was bootcamp for me because we made so many different wines in any given year that it was like three vintages for every vintage. And on top of that, he was, you know, working with both clients and growers from all over the state.

Fred Reno

So, you got, you get a chance to work with a number of different varietals.

Ben Jordan

And pretty quickly and so you get the lay of the land faster than you would at a normal winemaking job. I was always interested in I never worked with Norton worked with that. I feel like every other grape that might be going to Virginia, but never Norton, which one day I hope to work with it just because it's important grape. It's interesting and never came through there when I was there. But it was very fundamental to understanding Virginia because, you know, I it's obvious to anyone that's been to

California and Virginia that they're very different places. I know, I think the biggest differences are in growing grapes. But even the grapes that you bring in are different in terms of the winemaking, you're still turning grape sugar into alcohol. But in terms of the style, you go for and the way you treat things, it's it is a different ballgame.

Fred Reno

So then Early Mountain shows up how do you get recruited to go the Early Mountain?

Ben Jordan

Well, you know, I was actually talking to them actually, through a connection with Michael, back when I was in California, they were hiring at one was one of the positions that didn't, didn't quite match up for what they needed and what I was looking for. But I you know, because of that I made contact with Peter the CEO, and was already in conversation with them. So, when they needed to hire a winemaker in 2015, they reached out to me and it made a lot more sense from their perspective and a lot more sense from my perspective at that point to, to for me to start working with them.

Fred Reno

It just sounds like the opportunity came together at the right time. It did. Yep. So Early Mountain, of course, was owned by the Case family, the founders of AOL. They have a very open philosophy it appears to me about promoting all Virginia, not just Early Mountain wines. They own two vineyard tracks right now.

Ben Jordan

Yes. So technically, Quaker Run is a long-term lease. It's a 25-year lease. But we do all the farming, we have put in new plantings there. So, it's almost ownership, we certainly own the farming. And that's, that's about 20 minutes from the winery on the side of the Blue Ridge Mountains. And it really kind of Primo site for red wines, even a really good Chardonnay site,

Fred Reno

how much acreage is planted there?

Ben Jordan

It's just about 20 acres. When I quote, the number of acres that we have at any given place, it's always in flux, because we're one of the things we do at Early Mountain is evaluate whether something's working. And if it doesn't, we get rid of it and try something else, which is really important, too. I think Virginia, Virginia's growth, and our growth in Virginia. But then, in the blocks that are around the tasting room, and the winery, there's about 30 acres, most of which go into making rose, white wine, and lighter reds, just this, the soil difference is very great. And so, it's very easy to say it makes sense to make these wines here and those wine there.

Fred Reno

so, more clay based around the winery.

Ben Jordan

Yeah, heavier Clay So kind of colder soils that hold water more that are good for freshness, and kind of lighter styles of wine, but harder for big, structured reds.

Fred Reno

when I was up at the winery some months ago talking to you. I had an opportunity to taste your Sauvignon Blanc/Petit Manseng blend which is called Intention? Yep, that wine is fabulous. Where does the origin of the grapes from that? Why did we do that? What? No, I know why he did it. But I'd like to talk about where we grow them.

Ben Jordan

Yeah. Yeah. So those are grown in our Petit Manseng block, which is near the tasting room of kind of the first block you see on the right as you're driving in. And then almost the exact opposite corner of our plantings like diagonal is our Sauvignon Blanc, which is on a rocky kind of Western facing piece over there. And that is like very, that's one of the lowest vigor soils on our site. And so, we have this really kind of concentrated Sauvignon Blanc that we get off of there. And then Petit Manseng actually wants at least my theory and some other people's theory that Petit Manseng if you're trying to make it into dry wine wants to be on heavier clay soils where it has the ability to rehydrate instead of dehydrated, because when it dehydrates you get up into these alcohol levels that are potential of 17/18% pretty quickly.

Fred Reno

That makes a lot of sense. Yeah. What was the inspiration because that wine is just an incredible blend, the two varietals?

Ben Jordan

Um, the inspiration was kind of, we're on this journey at early mountain with Petit Manseng. And just kind of changing up the way we think about it every year coming up with hypotheses, testing hypotheses going again the next year. And so, we have this understanding that it is an obviously it's a concentrated group that has a lot of acidity, those both of those generally mean good aging curves with that understanding of Petit Manseng and then, you know, it's you look at White Bordeaux where Sauvignon Blanc gets blended with another grape. And it's not such a big leap to think that maybe those two come together. And in some other blending that we had done for one of our other ones called Five forks, we were realizing that those two grapes when blended well have an affinity for each other and that they provide counterpoints to each other. So Petit Manseng usually brings some of the riper fruit from peach mango, tropical fruit. were Sauvignon Blanc more on the green style of things and more mineral both have good acidity, but Sauvignon Blanc generally has lower potential alcohol and so it can bring in the balance of alcohol to the Petit Manseng. If you find that right kind of point where they meet, you have a wine that is both balanced and concentrated and amiable. That's kind of the progression that got us to Intention.

Fred Reno

Well, the wine is brilliant. I'm curious because I've noticed since I've been here, I don't see a lot of Sauvignon Blanc in Virginia. What is the reason? Is it just that the growing conditions are?

Ben Jordan

you know, I think it's a thin-skinned variety. So, it is something that if you tried to ripen to 13 and a half 14% alcohol it can be challenging in most vintages but especially as freshness in whites, and you know people are less concerned with how high your alcohol is. It's become more important and you're seeing more and more folks plant it. I just don't think that it was as important in the early days as something like Chardonnay. So, Chardonnay is ubiquitous around the world and in Virginia, but it's just taking a little bit more time to take off, but I do hear of more and more folks planting at Veritas, Stinson both in this area. do great things with it. Walsh family has some up north. I think Breaux has some.

Fred Reno

Well, Jim Law's Sauvignon is unbelievable.

Ben Jordan

Yeah. And Jeff White has Sauvignon Blanc and Kirsty over at Blenheim makes it as well. So, I think it's getting some momentum. It's just a little bit quieter about it.

Fred Reno

I'm a big fan of Petit Manseng. But I'm also curious about your take on hybrids. What's your feeling about working with hybrids? And what do you like to work with as it relates to French American hybrid?

Ben Jordan

Yea, so you're opening up, you're opening me up to a big conversation here. So, I have to go, this might take a little take a little while to get everything out my first relationship with the French American hybrid. So, some of the older ones, and even some of the newer hybrids was that I got, I landed in Virginia from California and like everyone else, I had a bias against them. I'd say most of that was because I just didn't understand them and didn't understand that. If you let them kind of, be what they are, instead of trying to make them be what they aren't, then they can really be something interesting. I think Chambourcin is a great example. You know, I love the fact that it uh, I always love the fact that it's really easy to grow. It almost doesn't, it's highly resistant to downy mildew. Me Maybe not fully resistant, but just doesn't really have much issue with downy mildew, which is a big problem in Virginia, until I realized that it basically makes white wine that has a bunch of color. So, there's very little tannin left in the wine after fermentation, where I like it grown is in the Shenandoah Valley where you get these really nice acids and real freshness to it. And you have this kind of deep color, lots of fruit, lots of good acid and it's you know, it's it almost feels like a carbonic wine without even being carbonic. We have a line of wine that we call young wine, which is there's a Chambourcin, and there's a Vidal Blanc,

Fred Reno

Well, I will interrupt you, your Chambourcin under the young wine is one of the best I've put in my mouth. And a lot of my big Cru Beaujolais drinker, right. And that wine is as good as any I've had from Virginia. So, congratulations.

Ben Jordan

Thank you. And our former coworker, his name's Patrick Egan coined the term. I'm pretty sure he coined the term Cham Beaujolais. So, we think it's that we see the similarities as well once I kind of

came to the understanding the Chambourcin didn't have to be Merlot or something else. And then it can be it can be this its own juicy thing. I really kind of I love it. But the kind of conversation about hybrids, I think it's a much bigger, broader one that gets confusing because there's the what is technically a hybrid is basically a multi species cross, right. And so, it means it could mean *Vitis vinifera* with some other *Vitis*. There's such a broad range of quality that has a broad timeline of breeding. And there's a lot of new breeding that's happening in Europe, because they are focused on lowering their pesticide inputs. But also understanding that things like downy mildew might be bigger issues for them going forward as the climate changes. And so, they're really putting a lot of money into breeding. And this is through kind of traditional breeding that's not any Crisper or GMO but breeding fast tracked by understanding the genetic code of plants and saying that has resistance that doesn't don't plant this plant, that sort of thing. But they're coming out with these new grape varieties, which are technically hybrids, but they're 96% *vinifera* parentage.

Fred Reno

so, are you familiar with Marselan?

Ben Jordan

I've heard of it haven't ever made any grapes. I haven't made any wine from it.

Fred Reno

Well, when I was interviewing Tony Wolf a couple of weeks ago, and I was up at the Extension Service in Winchester, over lunch, he pulled a bottle of Marselan out from, Uruguay. Okay. And I didn't know what it was. I thought that was a proprietary name, he poured it for me. And I tasted I said, Well, this tastes like a combination Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec a blend. He goes, Well, you're half right. So, what do you mean? He says, well, it's Cabernet Sauvignon blend with a different variety. Right? And it's Marselan. And it's got this resistance, everything, but that's what it tasted like to me. And they're planting some up at the extension service to see how it do here, Virginia. So boy, you're right on target. That seems to be a lot more of that going on.

Ben Jordan

Yeah. And I think, you know, I've talked to Tony about this. A lot of you know, *vinifera* was so important, I think to the American post prohibition, wine industry just like getting back on its feet, you know, comparing the wines to those made in Europe and being on equal footing and stuff like that. But when you look at simple agriculture, the smart thing to do is to plant something that was either, you know, you know, is either group just, you found it out in the woods, in your area or was bred for your area, and you've You know, you've, you've done some crossings, you said, Hey, that works well here. It's not a pain in the butt to grow. And so, I think the more that that's happening, you know, around the world, the more it's going to happen, the more that we're going to be able to embrace that on the east coast. And the less, it's going to be about, hey, it has to be labeled as Cabernet Sauvignon, or Chardonnay, which is really cool. And we'll be able to leverage it, as well as anyone.

Fred Reno

Have you ever worked with Chardonnay?

Ben Jordan

Yeah, I like Chardonel.

Fred Reno

I been looking for bottle of Chardonel from somebody because I'm curious.

Ben Jordan

Yeah. So, my brother planted it at our farm, we don't have it. It's not producing yet. It's more resistant than Vidal. But like, Vidal it produces white wine that is, you know, I think unless you knew it was Chardonel unless you were keyed into what Chardonel tastes like, you might not know it was a hybrid, but it's also it's just it acts pretty normally like a vinifera wine in terms of chemistry. And so, you can do, you know, you can do fresh, fruity styles. You can do stainless styles, like With Chardonnay, you can do barrel, fermented malolactic styles. And so, it's, I think it's a, it is going to be useful grape for the for the state.

Fred Reno

back to Early Mountain for a moment. So, from the standpoint of capacity, what is volume these days at Early Mountain all rolled up? What is your production levels?

Ben Jordan

Um, so it's, it's growing year over year, and we made about 14,000 cases in 2020 20% of that is rose. Okay, so rose is important, because it allows us to utilize the red grapes that are planted on those heavier soils around us and make something that's that is delicious, instead of trying to make something that wants to be like something else, so instead of trying to make Bordeaux wine out of them, we can take Bordeaux grapes and make fresh, delicious rose. And it's obviously important in a climate like ours, where the months of June through August are pretty sultry.

Fred Reno

Are there more plans from the ownership there to continue to pursue and develop more vineyard land?

Ben Jordan

Yeah, but I think and rightly so. It's a very careful approach to it. And the idea is, you know, I think had we gone and tried to plant another vineyard and say, 2016, we may not have made as many right choices as we could now. And so we've In the meantime, we've you know, we find a Quaker Run, learned a lot there, and then worked with some really nice hillside mountainside vineyards in both the Shenandoah Valley and Northern Virginia, the experience of working with those growers on really nice sites has really been kind of eye opening and educational in terms of how we would go about finding the next spot to plant and so I think we're very, as eager as I was in 2016, let's say to go plant something else. I think every young winemaker in a new region is wants to plant another vineyard. But I it's been really useful to, to take the time. And so, I think from early mountains perspective, the next step is to identify, you know, you have to get somewhat you got to make the choice of where you want to be. Is it the northern Shenandoah Valley? Is it up north? Is it down in Monticello? And no matter what, it's not right where we are, it's you know, there is something to be said in a climate like Virginia

where you have extreme vintage variability to hedge your bets by being a little bit further away from your vineyards that are further apart. That can hedge climactic.

Fred Reno

Well, there's a lot more potential is there not in Shenandoah Valley, and obviously you and your family are up there. What are the growing differences? For instance, the audience would like to know, between Shenandoah Valley and Monticello AVA?

Ben Jordan

Yeah, so the first thing about the Shenandoah Valley AVA. It's kind of like some of the AVAs on the west coast, and then it's very large, you start to try to define it and then you're almost always have exceptions because of the fact that in the far north is very different from far south, but in general it is higher elevation than east of the Blue Ridge. Although as you go further north, you get lower elevation. But the thing is, as you go further north, you still are dealing with cooler nights just from your latitude. But in general, what the elevation does lead to both cooler daytime temperatures and cooler nighttime temperatures, which generally leads to wines with higher acidity, which also keeps you from being able to plant maybe some of the grapes that you want to be your ripest powerhouse grapes. So, I think Tannat unless it's on a particular slope that is very ideal. You got to be careful planting Tannat in the Shenandoah Valley because it is relatively cold tender. It doesn't like cold winters. The one grape that I think that does well across the state that you can compare in both Monticello and the Shenandoah Valley is Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Franc, let's say on a hot south facing site. In Monticello you might get these really Bordeaux, deep, tannic sort of wines. But in general, most of the Shenandoah Valley sites for Cabernet Franc are a little bit more about aromatics a little bit lighter in style, not without depth or concentration, just not as you know, we say a little bit more kind of Burgundy style, or you know, when we say Loire it, like their acidity is just so much higher than anywhere in Virginia so that sometimes I like to stay away from Loire, but Loire in body and tannin, but there are exceptions, like there's a site we work with in the Shenandoah Valley, that is a rocky south facing site up north that gets as deep a Cabernet Franc as, as I've seen, what is also interesting about the Shenandoah Valley is the fact that there is different geology there. There's a lot of so it's, it's what they call a mountain valley and that there's the true River Valley, which is mostly to the eastern side of the valley, where the Shenandoah River actually runs. And there is actual plains like river plains there that you might see in, in classic meandering river pictures. But as you move west, you really get into what used to be mountains that are now like small mountain ridges, so very large hills, with ridges that are running, kind of from the southwest to the northeast. So, all these ridges with the southeast aspect ideal. And then some Western aspect and on the side and these ridges generally are very rocky, relatively poor soils. So, the kind of agricultural spots that people are not putting corn, soybeans, and stuff like that. And so right, right now, a lot of them are, you know, just grazed by cattle, because that's the best use. But I think there's just a lot of potential for that, you know, that's, that's, that's good vineyard land.

Fred Reno

So, let's talk about your family project. Midland Construction, as I understand that was the name of your father or your grandfather's business at one time?

Ben Jordan

our Father's business, little point of clarification that that bottle that you had was labeled Midland Construction, but we have dropped the construction. That was the first vintage, we wanted to, we wanted to pay homage to our dad, but the idea was always going to go to Midland, so we call it Midland now, but you will see bottles that are labeled as Midland Construction after his business. Unfortunately, we never got to hear the true story of why he called it Midland, but where we are in the Shenandoah Valley is the middle Shenandoah Valley. So, we're kind of equal distance north to south, and even east to west in some way. And we're in the watershed of the middle River, which is a tributary to the to the Shenandoah. So, the name works for us, right. But it is a small project that my brothers and I basically inherited, we started with our grandfather, and our father. Now the idea is to keep it nimble, were selling about we'd have been selling about half the crop, to pay the farming costs, and then just making a small amount of wine under our label and growing it slow, as opposed to, you know, really having a business plan that is on some exponential curve. It's been a lot of fun. It's very hard, because it's mostly my brother, Tim and I are doing it and we both we have jobs.

Fred Reno

Well, Yeah. Where do you make the wine?

Ben Jordan

So that's been a really good, great thing about early mountain, as you mentioned, they're very supportive of the Virginia industry as a whole. But they've also allowed us to, to custom crush, we're effectively clients of early mountain, but they're supportive of that sort of thing supportive of the industry in general, in terms of new projects and highlighting those and I'm sure when you talk to Aileen, she mentions that.

Fred Reno

Oh, yeah. Well, yeah. Because you're one of the few wineries I know that has other wineries wines in their tasting room and features them, for sure. And you have a wine club going on right now, as I understand it also has various wineries. I wouldn't call them experimental but somewhat experimental wines.

Ben Jordan

Yeah, I mean that there was Aileen's idea. And the idea was to get wines to people that people wouldn't normally get. It's it's a cool idea. And it wasn't something that I think you could have done. Maybe 10 years ago, there wouldn't have been enough wines, but there seems to be this movement of folks, either doing something on the side or just being a small kind of startup project that are interesting. You know, it's coinciding with the world, becoming just the wine world being very just kind of blossoming into all different directions. And I think we as an industry are taking inspiration from that and we, we, our foundation is very kind of classical and that was important to getting a lot of stuff, right? But now there's this kind of these kind of creative branches in our tree that are I think it'd be fun to watch.

Fred Reno

I think it's consistent with what I've seen here in Virginia. I mean, there's more experimentation. This is the most exciting wine growing region, in my opinion in the country because of all the diversity. Right? Definitely. I'm still trying to taste through it all. Yeah. And it's taken a long time.

Ben Jordan

Yeah. Yeah, you know, I was, I was talking to some folks the other day. And one of the things I've heard outsiders say is, you know, what you need to be like New Zealand, you need to one have your, your grape variety that you stand behind, and two, you need to have big production houses to get your stuff out in around the world. And I think that has obviously been successful for New Zealand. And so, if we want to be like New Zealand yes that's what we have to do, but I personally have come to the conclusion that what we have is a lot of small kind of boutique producers. And because the state is relatively big, and it has a lot of different terrain, and therefore different sort of, you know, mezzo and microclimates, it makes sense for us to have a lot of different grapes out there. And on top of that, we're at a time where the wine world is so open to experimentation and, and new grape varieties. And we've almost made it our brand to bring you the grape variety that you've never heard of not you personally, but the average wine consumer has not heard of Tannat has not heard of Petit Manseng. But we're just saying, Okay, well, they work. And so, you're going to like the wine. And now you've heard of it. That is almost our thing, in a way. And that's actually a lot more fun than just making boat loads of Sauvignon Blanc.

Fred Reno

Well, you made me think of something Ben when you're talking about the size of Virginia. It's almost like a country, you can almost say well, it's like France. Yep. diversity in France and different grapes in a different region. Well, Virginia is like that's like a country.

Ben Jordan

Right, Yeah. You wouldn't expect France to plant Pinot Noir all over France.

Fred Reno

Yeah, exactly. So that's, that's consistent. How did this Lightwell Survey project come to be? What was the genesis of the idea behind that?

Ben Jordan

When I was back in California, this kind of small bootstrapper bootstrap producer, idea was taken off, you saw it happening, a lot of it happened with Pinot Noir, you know, back in the early 2000s, small producers, getting a little money together and making a couple barrels of Pinot Noir, for instance. So that was already, like, ingrained in me that, hey, that's kind of neat. But when I got back to Virginia, okay, let's learn the lay of the land. Let's forget about that sort of stuff for a while. Plus, I had my family thing. But I met someone who's now friend and partner, Sebastian Zutant, who basically wanted to make some rose for his restaurant. And so did that with him realize we had some similar feelings about wine and making wine. And then a year later, he came back, he's like, hey, my brother, and I want to start a wine project, do you want to start a wine project, so it was as simple as that. And none of us knew, you know, we we've taken on two more partners since then, who, John and Julian who help us with the packaging and the labels and stuff. And so, it's basically this, this group of partners that we all

have our different angle that we bring to the table, when we started in 2015, we did not have the plan to do all the things that we're doing now it was very much alike, Okay, let's try this now. And so, the ethos of the project has become, the only rule is that there is never a rule that you have to make the same wine as you made the year before. If you can, and it was successful the year before and you want to, that's fine. But you know, what we're doing is it's it is the California model of were a small producer working with other small growers. And so right now in Virginia, it's almost impossible to get much more than a one-year contract on anything. And so, fruit access comes and goes, and so we've, instead of just complaining about that, and being unhappy, we've decided that, okay, if we can't get something, then we change it up. And that's, that's the rose that we make is emblematic of that but even some of our other wines really show that as well. And what that does is it kind of frees your mind to like, be creative year in and year out. Instead of saying, okay, we've landed on the recipe for something, let's just do that every year. It's, well, what can we do, that works that will work with with what we have. And in a way it's, it's, it's really just a kind of amplification of what you have to do at a young region like Virginia where things are still being figured out you. If you try to apply what other people do to something that is in evolution, then you're going to it's going to result in awkwardness or failure. But if you're open to taking the current situation and finding a way to think about it in terms of improvement, doing things better than you're going to evolve.

Fred Reno

where do you make the wine?

Ben Jordan

once again early mountain So that's great. Also, a client of Early Mountain well, that's great. Yeah, yeah. So that makes it easier on me as a winemaker to not have to be running around and makes it less mixed. I don't have to. Because I can always do my work at early mountain well, as well. So, it's actually, in, in some ways, you know, you have to be careful that you, you're, you're maintaining focus. But the situation allows me to maintain focus and actually results in this kind of three-way dialogue between the different companies where, you know, Midlands over here doing this kind of thing, Lightwells over here doing this kind of thing, Early Mountain doing these kinds of things. And I learned from different things from different places.

Fred Reno

And that's not unlike the experience you got early on at Michael Shaps.

Ben Jordan

Yeah, it's a little bit different. But yeah, definitely less overall wines, which allows for more focus, but in some ways, yes. It helps you; you learn something over here that you can apply over here. And that's been really useful, like keeping everything fresh and evolving, everywhere. But, you know, it's been especially important to the Petit Manseng program at early mountain. I've learned so much from the other projects that I don't think I would have known about that I've been able to apply to Petit Manseng. And are, it's not just me at any of the projects, which is a really cool thing. So Early Mountain, you know, I work closely with Maya White, Dustin Wade the vineyard manager. But there's these intellectual conversations that we have that drive us forward. But at Lightwell there's a different group, and then my brother, Tim, and I at Midland. And so, it is, as long as you're up for being on you know, kind of staying

on your toes at all times, and you're interested in things evolving and changing. It is exciting, and fun and refreshing. Obviously, if you're just trying to like, you know, clocking in and out, it would be a

Fred Reno

very, yeah, you have the passion for it. Yeah. Speaking of which, my favorite question to ask every winemaker. So, what was that one bottle of wine that you had in your life that you went? That's it? That is so unbelievable that your head went. Okay. I get it. What was that one bottle?

Ben Jordan

Yeah, that's a that's a good question. I mean, I think back in the day, where I was just kind of blown away by what wine can do. My boss gave me a wine from his cellar. That was a 1961. Hermitage from Jaboulet-Isnard, which was a second label of Jaboulet. And that just did these things that I didn't know that wine could do. And so, it was just kind of the way that this wine had transformed in the bottle and turned into these different aromas and flavors was and textures was amazing. But I think more recently, you know, the kind of wine that the thing that really got me like, wow, about Virginia, I think was probably tasting some older stuff from Jim Law. I'm not unique in that, like a lot of people have been wowed by his wines. But you know, for instance, the way that the hardscrabble Chardonnay and the hardscrabble Red Blend can age I think are pretty, pretty eye opening and show you that, you know, obviously, he's spent a lot of time getting to where he is, it's not something you can just turn on overnight, but show you that there's such deep potential and if you find the right place and have the right approach, you can really do something neat with

Fred Reno

that, to some degree. That's been the one highest level of frustration I've personally had since I came here. There's just not enough older. Well, age Virginia wine to experience yet.

Ben Jordan

Yeah. Yeah, for sure. And I think, you know, even folks that make the wines that will age, you know, the financial aspect of keeping a deep library is challenging. And you know, when you when you've got a willing group of customers that want to drink more of that wine, you really want to sell it. Luca at Barboursville, that whole crew at Barboursville has done a really good job of keeping a library so you can drink older wines from there and you can drink older wines from Linden, but it is hard to find. I think Matthieu at, King family has slowly built up a library. You know, the other thing is that I think like all wine regions, you know, a lot of the there's a certain amount of ageable wine that we make, but then some of the wine we make, especially these days is meant to be drunk, young and fresh.

Fred Reno

Yeah, but I will take the oldest Virginia wine had when I was up at Rockbridge and interviewing Shep Rouse, unsolicited he pulled out about 2002 Norton that he had produced. And the wine was really a treat. tasted like, like what I used to remember the older California Cabernets, like when I started the business in late 70s get some of those old Inglenook Cask or old BV. It was just this really balanced mellowed, wonderful wine. And it was beautiful. It was just gorgeous. It was, you know, not quite 20 years old. And it was a treat, cool. He pulled out a 2001 Meritage he had made. And it was delightful

too. And I thought, Okay, this is great. How do I get more of these older wines? So, we have these types of experiences to understand that Virginia has that potential?

Ben Jordan

Yeah. And you know, like people ever forgot. But Michael Shaps keeps a good library as well. So that he and he's pretty good about bringing stuff out from Time, time to time. So, but yeah, there's, for the most part, the average Virginia producer doesn't have a deep library.

Fred Reno

well, it's a young industry, yep, still a very young industry. So well, Ben, I appreciate your time. This is really good. We've gotten into some areas I really wanted to hear from winemaker about. And this is fun. This is really fun. Thank you.

Ben Jordan

Yeah. Thanks for having me. I really appreciate the chance to talk to you about Virginia.