

EPISODE # 4 Michael Shaps/Founder & Owner of Shaps Wineworks

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Michael Shaps

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

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

Fred Reno Well, let's back up. And then we'll get into that down the road here. So obviously, I know your background having worked with you, but I think it will be fascinating for the audience. The story, you went to Burgundy, to learn how to make wine, here's an American kid going to Burgundy, trying to make wine. How did you get into wine start there, and then what sent you the Burgundy?

Michael Shaps Well, after graduating from college with a business and economics degree, I decided to follow my friends to Boston and having worked in bars and restaurants in college and not knowing what I wanted to do, I continued to work in the restaurant industry, and eventually was a manager of a real high end operation late 80s that was ahead of its time in terms of wine service, and eventually they put me in charge of the wine program. I was forced to really learn quickly. Study wine making, study wine regions, study everything I could so I can best represent the wine list. And over the course of a couple years, just got

fascinated with the wine industry and fell in love with Burgundian wines and eventually decided I was young enough and nothing to risk and so I wanted to learn winemaking and did some research into schools and programs and heard about the Lycée Viticole de Beaune up and left my job in Boston and dedicated about nine months to studying French, learning as much as I could before I went to France and then showed up in Burgundy and went to knock on the door of the Lycée Viticole.

Fred Reno It doesn't sound like you were afraid of the dark.

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

Fred Reno Did they ever charge you tuition?

Michael Shaps Nope, and I received my, well there it is right there my diploma from the Ministry of Agriculture in France, my diploma in enology and viticulture, so I was able to prove them wrong. And trust me, there were a lot of all-nighters studying. I had a Dictaphone, I taped every class and listened to them at night to make sure I was understanding everything. And fortunately, I was working as well. And you know, I had several weeks where I went through the Vendange before classes started and got exposed and met people who helped me and it just all came together. It was really Magical!

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

Michael Shaps Yeah, it was '95. When I came back from Burgundy, I was interviewing all over the West Coast, East Coast, I almost went back to France, I had an open door there to come back and stay as a full-time member at Chartron & Trebuchet. But I really wanted to strike out on my own and do something. And kind of same reason everyone told me I was crazy. To go to Burgundy without good knowledge of French. I decided to take a job in Massachusetts at a startup winery for a short stint knowing I was going to keep looking elsewhere. It was just something to fill the void till I found the right opportunity. And while I was there, through a good friend of my family, they knew the owners of Jefferson vineyards when Gabriele left, and so it was a short stint in Massachusetts, and I was still looking. And sure enough, they contact me because they heard about me, and I came down here. I had originally interviewed in Virginia tried to get a job in Virginia. But at that time, there was nothing open back in '93 or '94. And so, I always had my eye on Virginia. And, when I was in Burgundy back in 1990. I remember reading an article in Wine Spectator about Virginia this new upcoming region and so that kind of piqued my interest. I always had that in the back of my mind that Virginia had a lot of potential, so it came to fruition.

Fred Reno Then you're at Jefferson Vineyard, you're making high quality wine and then suddenly, how do you start your own brand? Somehow it ties to helping another winery get started I believe.

Michael Shaps Yeah, so after about five vintages at Jefferson Vineyards, people were calling me asking if I could help them with their winemaking the quality of the wine was making had been recognized in Virginia's as, you know, some pretty good wine and I kept getting calls from people to ask if I'd helped them. I realized that maybe there was a potential to be a consultant. And at the same

time, I started meeting with David King in 1999. 1999 in that range, and they had just planted a vineyard and I was looking to maybe branch out and start my own brand and do some consulting. So, we got together, I left Jefferson Vineyard and started doing consulting. Then we started the Michael Shaps brand together and the first vintage in 2000. I used their grapes. We made the wine together at Afton Mountain. And I was consulting for Afton Mountain. so, we just kind of exchanged, they allowed us a custom crush type setup there. And I help them with their wines. And so, the first two vintages of Michael Shaps wines were made at Afton Mountain with King Family fruit. Then the Kings saw the potential and decided to build a winery on their property. So, we moved the production there and that's when I started making my wines, as well as wine under the King Family label.

Fred Reno When did you depart King Family and just devote full time to your own brand?

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

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

Michael Shaps Well, there's some others now doing it but I definitely kind of started it as a you know, a business model in '07. There wasn't anyone doing it, and the laws were kind of prohibitive as well. We were able to get some of the laws rearranged and the farm winery laws allow it to be legal. We can't call it custom crush in Virginia, we must call it contract winemaking. So, there's a lot of regulations still in place in Virginia, which make it a little more challenging but as a winery starting to build its base and started to begin to see interest because here's a lot of beautiful properties here with people planting vineyards and they'd love to have wine made for them. So, I started that way with people growing the

grapes and bringing us the grapes and then they will eventually build their own tasting rooms and start selling.

Fred Reno How many wineries would you say you've at one time in your career in Virginia produced wine for them in one shape form or another?

Fred Reno Gosh, I'd say Oh, probably 30 to 40 different wineries I've either consulted for or we produce wine for over the past 26 years. So probably. Yeah, I haven't counted lately. But we currently have about 17 clients here at Wineworks. And we've had a few come and go. And then with all my consulting Virginia that's easily between 30 and 40 that I've worked with.

Fred Reno Well one of the things that I mentioned to you that I find interesting here is there are a number of winemakers who have trained under you and gone on to other horizons, if you will. To me, that is what Robert Mondavi did in Napa Valley that nobody really focuses as much attention, how many winemakers would you say, have come through here and then gone on their own?

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

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

Michael Shaps Oh, I believe there's so much potential out there and different sites. Obviously, most of the wineries who are currently out there were started because of their location in proximity to the agritourism aspect of the industry. Not necessarily where it's the best, you know, soil and best exposure, climate, elevation. So, there's still a big state, there's still a lot of potential sites out there.

Fred Reno You bought one of the first established wineries in the modern-day Virginia wine industry when you purchased Shenandoah Vineyards back in late 2018, I believe, November '18. So, let's talk about Shenandoah Valley, that winery, the history of what you're doing there and Shenandoah Valley now because I think that's an exciting growth opportunity that we're talking about here.

Michael Shaps Yeah, I consulted for Emma Randal, I believe it was 2010 '11 ish in that range. I helped them transition and train the young winemaker there. I saw the potential when I was consulting for them. I mean, great soils or white soils, lots of limestone. A drier climate than here. Shenandoah, that area is the driest part of the state, one of the driest counties east of the Mississippi, great elevation, and just everything is there in terms of potential for grape growing. And so, I always have, in the back of my mind, it would be a great location to do something. Now we've seen the expansion of Winchester, Harrisonburg population moving out there, and more people leaving Northern Virginia. So, you know, 10 or 15 years ago it was remote, in terms of tourism, but always had the potential for great winemaking and grape growing. I knew Emma had been trying to sell the property for a long time. And we were bursting at the seams here in Charlottesville and needed another location. Plus, we had a bunch of clients that we make wine for from the valley. And so, it's kind of all made sense to look for a separate location that we can accommodate some of our customers, have their wine grapes go there, and make their wines there and then also have this beautiful, historic property with great vineyard potential. That had been at times not well maintained. And so, so yes, we've worked out a deal and bought Shenandoah vineyards. And we've been revitalizing ever since replanted almost all the vineyard with some new varieties. And we'll have our first crop this year from there.

Fred Reno How large is the original vineyard site there?

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

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

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

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

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

Fred Reno, I see you mentioned Lemberger? Do you see any potential in any of those sites for possibly Pinot Noir or even Gamay?

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

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

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

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

Michael Shaps Oh, gosh, it goes back to my time in France and the attitude towards wine, European approach, and, you know, where there's wine making more and more style is more accessible for daily casual consumption, we started doing bag in the box under Wineworks brand. That was the first bag in the box in Virginia back in 2010, '11; 2009 '10, somewhere in that range. And so, I've always been trying to find ways to do this because economies of scale aren't really in our favor here. And we're always struggling from a value point. So, I have been trying to find a way to get some value wine out under a different brand. So, we started with the bag in box project. And that's always been a huge success. And then with technology changing and having the ability to get the disposable kegs, I didn't want to mess with a lot of stainless kegs and deposits

and keep track of kegs. So, the key keg and the other similar keg brands became interesting to me as a good way to package a bigger volume. We started doing that here first at Wineworks as an experiment having two taps in our tasting room, and then when we took on Avon street location, our other facility in town, it was a no brainer. So, kind of turning more into a wine bar atmosphere and being in downtown Charlottesville. Now we have six taps there where we have the growlers you get from Virginia wine or for Burgundy, which is fun.

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

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

Fred Reno Well, you've been pretty well decorated with wines that have been in the annual Governor's Cup. I think several years ago if I'm mistaken you had five wines that were in the governor's case out of 12. Either it was a Michael Shaps brand or a winery that you made wine for? That's phenomenal. The Governor's Cup is a rigid tasting contest. This is no frivolous you know, pin the medal on the cattle's butt kind of you event. You have Jay Youmans a prominent MW running

this thing. You got high quality judges; it's got to be really satisfying when your wine sings to the top.

Michael Shaps Yeah, we've been consistently top medal winners. Most gold, most medals for our wines, our customers wines. And so, it's really, again, tribute to our staff. They take pride in it; we have a fun time with it. We have an annual tasting, our cellar staff gets together, and we taste all the wines decide what we want to enter and if there's enough consensus, we'll enter it, so they take pride in it. We have a competition in house that everyone picks which one you think might do the best and they could win some wine if they guessed the right gold medal winner or, such thing. So, it's a lot of fun. And they take pride, which really helps, again, with the winemaking here, and the grape growing, so it's fun for us to get recognized. It's great for our customers, for me it is most rewarding when our contract wine making customers win gold medals for the first time or get in the Governor's case. It really is so rewarding for me.

Fred Reno I think that recognition, validates and backs up the Motto, It's all about the wine. So, looking from your vantage point, where is Virginia headed? In the wine industry? What's this going to look like in five or 10 years?

Michael Shaps Well, it's hard to say. With what's going on, I thought for sure, we kind of would go into a little bit of a wall here with the whole COVID situation and economy. But believe it or not, we've had three new customers this year, sign up for a contract winemaking in the middle of the pandemic. And so, it just shows you there's still a lot of interest, it's something that's going to continue to grow. It's a matter of finding the niche, the right varietals, the right sites, I think we're still learning quite a bit. Nobody would have guessed, you know, I would have never guessed, 15 years ago that Petit Manseng would be some of the hottest wines in Virginia and, really a big success story for me. So, who knows, but I think we're learning a lot about what varietals work in this climate and the proper viticulture and so people are constantly experimenting, which is so important.

Fred Reno I know you have been knocking on the door for national distribution, attempting to get your wine and your reputation what you're doing out there. What do you think, has held Virginia back? I mean, when I talked to a lot of

people, I know who should know something about wine. They always looked at me kind of like Virginia, what are you talking about? What is holding Virginia back from this wider recognition nationally?

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

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

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

Fred Reno Well, that that is wonderful. There's no question about that. I would agree. What a packed 20, 25 years you have had here in Virginia. Wow. I mean, this is 25 vintages

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

Fred Reno What do you think? I always hate to ask the winemakers this in the winery owners always I say oh don't say anything you're going to jinx it. But what do you think this harvest holds in front of you here right now? You must be getting close. What kind of quality? What are we looking at?

Michael Shaps As far as some samples this morning from one of our vineyards? And yeah, we're about to start with sparkling here within the week. We had as you know a real hot spell there in July, dry hot spell in July. almost too hot. I think it's slowed some things down. And now its classic Virginia we have been hit with a bunch of rain in the past 10 days. Not the ideal timing. But here we have a beautiful, week ahead of us, I think we'll be able to bounce back. And right now, it's looking to be a strong, strong vintage. It really depends in Virginia. It all depends on what happens in late August and early September, whether we get any coastal storms and hurricanes, any fronts that sit on us, and that will make or break the vintage. We were fortunate last year, fantastic. Vintage no rain pretty much the whole month of September. And so, we'll have another really stellar vintage.

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

Michael Shaps Oh, gosh, that's hard. I mean, obviously, I'm proud of the Petit Manseng the dry Petit Manseng is something unique that I kind of helped to develop here in Virginia. I've gotten incredible recognition from all kinds of publications, international publications for it. And it's still turning a lot of heads

and surprising a lot of people. But if I had to say one thing which will probably surprise a lot of people that I'm really, most proud of is my Wild Meadow Chardonnay, a single vineyard Chardonnay that we grow up in, in Purcellville It's a unique site. A unique expression of Virginia Chardonnay, that really has a lot of people fooled for Burgundian. And so as Burgundian winemaker and Virginia winemaker, I'm most proud that I can kind of get close to replicating something that's somewhat similar style to what we do Meursault

Fred Reno Switching to red varieties I'd love you to weigh in about Tannat because I know that you're a big fan of what you think can happen with Tannat and you produce a very outstanding example of that here so why Tannat?

Michael Shaps I've always been a big fan of Madiran going back to the days in the late 80s and early 90s I got turned on to Maderan wine and we're also an importer of a producer from the Maderan, so I've always been a fan of the wines and didn't really have any Tannat to work with here in Virginia until we took over the Honah Lee property and started leasing and managing the vineyard. Dennis Horton had planted Tannat there and, and I really got lucky that we were able to get our hands on that. It's been a huge success for us. I mean it just has. What's really important for me is high, higher acid varieties here in Central Virginia that can hold up to the humidity and maintain the acidity and balance and so Tannat has everything you want for a big structured red and it does well in our more heavier clay soils than say Cabernet Sauvignon so it really for us that and Petit Verdot can help us produce a bigger, heavier, or more structured red that we couldn't do with some other varieties

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

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

Fred Reno Thank you.