

Episode # 6 Jay Youmans, MW

SPEAKERS

Jay Youmans, Fred Reno

Fred Reno

So hey, Jay. Good morning. How are you?

Jay Youmans

I'm great, Fred, good to be with you.

Fred Reno

Well, thank you for your time this morning. So, let's start at the beginning. How did you get into the wine business? And what drove you and why?

Jay Youmans

Well, I was going to school at Wake Forest University in Winston Salem, North Carolina. I became really good friends with a guy named Gibson Smith, his family had an old monastery that they were redoing, there were like 15 rooms anyway, I needed a place to stay. Frank Gibson invited me to come stay with him and his family. They were all into wine at night, you know, with dinner or playing pool while drinking wine. And that's how I got the bug. Later on, I went to work for Gibson, he was managing a restaurant in Winston Salem, called the Salem Cotton Company. went to work for him as kind of his wine director and sommelier and never wanted to do anything else.

Fred Reno

How long ago was that?

Jay Youmans

This is back in the early 80s. 81,82, something like that?

Fred Reno

Well, it was a different landscape, then, wasn't it? My friend?

Jay Youmans

Well, I tell you, Fred, I spent most of my time working the floor in this restaurant, trying to convince people that California Wine was just as good as European wine. And it's so interesting, because now, you know, the parallel is we're busy trying to convince people that Virginia wine is as good as California and French wine. It's really come full circle,

Fred Reno

It certainly has. Well, I wanted to ask you, as I referenced in the introduction, the Master of Wine Diploma, I'd love you to take a few minutes and explain to people the rigor of this because boy, when I looked at it, to me it looks like the most difficult, quite possibly the most rewarding of all the wine diplomas that are out there.

Jay Youmans

You know, the Master of Wine credential was created by the Institute of Masters of Wine back in the 50s. And really, the whole reason why it was created was to have knowledgeable people that were really watchdogs of the industry. Wines always had a lot of fraud, as you can imagine, back in the 50s. They were still shipping Bordeaux in barrels and merchants were bottling their wines, then selling to customers. As you can imagine, there were a lot of opportunities for doing things that weren't so legal, let's say. So, the MW credential was really created as not a watchdog, but somebody that knew the industry and when they tasted something, they knew something was off. If there, was you know what it was supposed to be? It's continued to morph today. it's Back then it was strictly a British trade credential, then they started opening it up to people around the world. Now there's some 400 MWs around the world. There's like 40 in the US and Canada. But the exam is five days long. First day, you show up in the morning and taste 12 wines blind. The first day is always white wines. The first and second day you come back in the afternoon, and you write about winemaking, grape growing, the production of wine. The second day, in the morning, you taste 12 red wines blind. The third day you do kind of a mixed bag, which is usually fortified, sparkling, desert, but they can throw anything at you.

They can throw another flight of red wines. I think the big misconception about the MW exam. There's an entire day devoted to the business of wine, marketing, brand building, understanding how wine is sold, all over the world. And the fifth day is usually the one essay that you write for about three hours, and it's usually on topics that are relevant to what's going on in the world today. It might be genetically modified grape for example. I think you might see an essay this next exam about smoke taint, a topic of the industry currently.

Fred Reno

How long did it take to get to prepare for these this exam?

Jay Youmans

It took me eight years to get through it. It's interesting, teach the diploma here at the school, the Wine and Spirit Education Trust, there's four levels. I teach all four levels, but I actually never took the diploma. I never took the WSET because it wasn't available in the US. So, when I got into the MW program, I was trying to read everything I could get my hands on, but I was spending a lot of time on the wrong things. I passed the tasting pretty easily. It took me another four or five attempts to get through the theory. So, there's the tasting, practical part. There's the theory part and then once you finish the exam there is like a 10 to 12,000-word dissertation that you have to write on a topic you have to propose. Pretty rigorous as well and it took me about a year to get my paper passed. So, there are a lot of people who think if you pass the tasting and the theory, you're an MW but there's a whole another leg to the journey.

Fred Reno

I saw that when I was looking at it and I realized at this stage of my career, I didn't have the patience to try to go through that. But I thought, Boy, this is really rigorous. Let turn our attention to Virginia because I really would love your point of view. You're back here in the DC Virginia area. You've been in the business as long as I have. When did you begin to realize that something was happening special in Virginia wine growing and what brought you to that point?

Jay Youmans

I was actually working for a wholesaler called Memes distributing in North Carolina, Raleigh, North Carolina at the time, I met a guy who was working for a winery called Montdomaine. Montdomaine is where Michael Shaps is now, Michael Shaps Wineworks. So, I worked for two years in that facility. My title was marketing, Sales Director, but basically, I was a delivery guy and the tour guide, I left the wholesale industry and went to work for this winery, because I was just so intrigued with fine wine being made in Virginia. You know you drive in; you drive up to these vineyards, and they're just amazingly beautiful. I did that for two years. But honestly, Fred, I kind of reached a point where I was like, you know, this is interesting. It's really an interesting local kind of story, but I'm just not sure the industry is ever going to amount too much to be honest with you. So, I left the industry and went did some other things, started a wholesale import business with some other guys. Here it is about 10 years ago, I guess it was back in about 2010 Jim Law, an old friend of my family had had recommended me to Luca Paschina, at Barboursville, and to David King at King Family to run the Governor's Cup wine competition which had been going on for a long time. I said, let me think about it. I started looking around and tasting the wines because honestly, I had not been paying a lot attention. Since I had left back in like the mid-80s. I was blown away by how much it changed, how much better the wines were, how much more kind of broad and diverse the wines have become. I kind of jokingly told David King, I'm really interested in doing this, give me a chance. I found myself no longer having them sell me I was trying to sell them on the fact that I wanted to do it because it was just really intriguing to me that so much had changed in such a short period of time. That was an eye opener for me.

Fred Reno

Well, Boy I find that interesting because that comports with my belief that when I look back, I realized the progress in the last 10 years, in the last decade has been exponential in quality. Were you an MW at that time when you took over running the Governor's Cup competition?

Jay Youmans

Yeah, I passed the MW back in 2004. I took over the competition I want to say might have been 2009 when I took over the competition or 2010 so I moved back, I was living in DC, in the area and kind of eyeing what was going on. But,

about the same time I took over the competition, Dave McIntyre who writes for the Washington Post had contacted me and asked me if I would come do a blind tasting with him and Kathy Morgan, who's a master sommelier and a guy named Mark Wessels, who used to run MacArthur Liquors. There was another a wine writer from Decanter. Anyway, we sat down, and Dave McIntyre poured three wines for us. I knew Dave was always banging the drum for the wines of Virginia and Maryland. I thought, something in here is probably going to be Virginia. As it turned out, he had poured Cos d'Estourel, Dominus from Napa and RDV. I got all three wrong, I got them completely mixed up. I thought the Dominus was from Virginia. Make a long story short, it was an eye opener. It was a real epiphany. And I think I kind of reached the conclusion that wow, Virginia really has come full circle and somebody in Virginia was trying to make world class wines. He's not the only one, Rutger at RDV, but to be in that kind of mix of that kind of ilk of quality wine producers is pretty impressive.

Fred Reno

Well, I'll tell you my little Rutger story when I first met him over a year ago and went up to the winery. He was apparently having a staff wine tasting he does once a week, and I was invited to sit in. I didn't know what the wines were. I figured one of his wines would be in there of course, the others were classified Bordeaux, all tasted blind. I picked his wine as the best wine in the tasting. It was more of a right bank tasting. So, his Rendezvous was in there. I had no idea. So, to your point I was like, it shined as the best wine in that tasting for me and I went, Okay, this is for real. There's something going on here and it continued to confirm my belief that there was an evolution in Virginia. That's why I came back here. Let's turn back to the Governor's Cup. You get involved in 2009 and 10. What's the criteria here? So, my audience understands, okay, in order to compete in the Governor's Cup, this is the criterion and how do you go about the judging?

Jay Youmans

The criteria are any wine submitted has to be 100% grapes grown in Virginia, you know, we require that because there are wineries, and we'll talk more about this later, Fred, but there are a lot of wineries that just don't have enough grapes to produce to meet demand. So, some wineries have gone to California, or other

places, to source grapes and wines so they have enough wine to meet their business plan. But the competition requires 100% fruit from Virginia. The wines are made in Virginia, it has to be, I think we accept wines that go back four or five, I think five vintages back is as old as you can submit. We require that the wines and this is really important, we wanted to have any wine that was submitted and wins a gold and makes it into the top 12. What we call the Virginia Governor's Cup case, we wanted the wines to be commercially available. We didn't want wines winning these awards that nobody would ever be able to try. We've had as many as I think 550 wines submitted in a year. The other thing that's interesting about the competition is that we do it in two stages. There's a preliminary round where we take say 500 wines and whittle it down to the top 120. And then we bring in another set of judges 12, judges. We taste trying to figure out you know, scoring the wine on 100-point scale, trying to figure out the top 12 wines. What's really important is that the top 12 wines that make it into this case, the competition then buys 10 cases of wine from each of these producers. Then a mixed case is sent to wine writers all over the US and all over the world. Wine writers like Jancis Robinson, Hugh Johnson, Oz Clark, and Steven Spurrier, they all get a case in the UK. I think it's done a lot to change the perception of Virginia outside of this area. But the judges I have, either they've done the diploma as a master sommelier, their Master of Wine, or they've just got a lot of time in the industry, buying wine, judging wine, blind. We have Michael Franz, who wrote for the Post for many years and has his own website. He's done it every year. I mentioned Dave McIntyre. Steven Spurrier has come for many years. He's a phenomenal taster. And, I've had Peter Marks, who's an MW, I've had various MW's, and MS's over the years, but the idea is to really have people that aren't going to pull any punches, call it the way they see it and really determine the best wines in the group. It's been a lot of fun to do. I taste every wine submitted twice and I make my own notes. But my scores don't really count. But I do keep an eye on the judges and make sure that they're staying on task. One of the things that also is kind of unique about this competition is we submit a full tasting note to any winery that submits a wine, they get a full tasting note on their wine. I think it's important feedback, wineries don't know who the judges are, and the judges don't know who the wineries are. And we keep it that way. But this feedback, what I've learned is, these wineries tell you they want to hear what you have to say. But honestly, they only want to hear it if it's really positive

Fred Reno

Well, no I understand that. I'm curious. The origins of the competition, whose idea was this when it started.

Jay Youmans

The competition goes back. I want to say it's been going for about 25 years. I am not sure who originally came up with the idea for the competition. I should know that, but I don't.

Fred Reno

Who sponsors it?

Jay Youmans

Well, it's, it's sponsored by the Virginia Wineries Association. It's also sponsored by the Virginia Wine Marketing Board and by tax revenue. And so, I want to say David King was really instrumental in a lot of the legislation that was put into place but I'm sure there are a lot of others involved as well. But it was really smart because they carved out tax revenue to devote toward education, competition, promotion. This is something like, you know, Maryland, I know hasn't. I don't think they've fully embraced this idea. There are far fewer wineries, and the state is far less supportive than Virginia has been. But that's really who funds it, supports it, and gets behind it.

Fred Reno

Well, the next question is an obvious one. So, in your opinion, what is standing in the way of Virginia breaking out on a national and international basis? And by that, I mean, what got me excited about this several years ago, and I moved from California after 30 years to Virginia, because of what I saw here in Virginia in the wine industry, I've been continually surprised how many people I talked to that I respect in the wine business around the country and when I start talking about Virginia wine, they look at me or they say, what are you talking about? Then I'll send them some wine, and they taste the wine, they'll say, I had no idea. And I'd give them a little rib and say, Yeah, I know, you know everything about wine, and you had no idea. What's standing in the way here because there's a real quality

evolution. And it's almost like a secret outside the immediate area of the Mid Atlantic.

Jay Youmans

I think what's really holding the industry back to a degree is readily available high- quality grapes at a reasonable price, because Virginia's climate is so variable. 2018, you'll hear people talk about especially in the Northern Virginia area, it was a very, very difficult vintage especially for producing red wines, where 2019 has just been phenomenal. And I'm hearing that 2020 is looking pretty good as well as I bring this up, because the risk is entirely on the grower. Now they're the people who grow grapes. They just sell grapes and don't make their own wine. Then there are a lot of producers who grow everything that they make themselves. And then there are a lot of producers who really are dependent on buying all their grapes in a difficult year where quantities are shorter, and quality is not as good. You know, you're a little bit vulnerable to that. I used to have an ongoing debate with several winemakers. I won't say who, but their feeling was that we didn't need more grapes, we just needed better grapes. I disagree. I mean, you look at any industry that's been successful, you need to be able to offer consistent quality wine, at least around the \$15 mark. And I think one of the things holding Virginia back is the average bottle is about \$25, \$30. When you look at the reds, the whites, the roses, and part of that is there aren't the economies of scale, but a lot of it stems from the cost of grapes. You can go to the Virginia Wineries Association website and download. It's available to anybody. But there's a harvest report that's done every year. You can see what the average ton of Chardonnay average ton of Cabernet goes for. And it' \$2,500 to \$3,000 for the median price for a ton of grapes.

Fred Reno

Well, most people don't know what you just said translates to \$25 to \$30 a bottle.

Jay Youmans

Exactly. I mean, you know better than anybody Fred, how to do the math. And, you know, Mondavi was probably the first time I heard that equation, you take you take a ton of grapes. If it costs \$2,500 you move the decimal place over a couple spots and you're right 25 bucks. So, I think that's the main thing holding

people back. I think there's a lot of really passionate producers in the state. The figure is between 280, 290 wineries is what I'm told, I think there's 30, 40 wineries making world class wines. And I believe there's a lot of wineries that are making good wines. Sometimes they make a really, really, good wine, but they're not quite as consistent. Then there's some producers that maybe need to seek out some professional consultants to help them in the vineyard, in the winery maybe some investment in winemaking equipment that's just holding them back. I think what happens is a lot of people in the DC area and from abroad come in, they'd go visit one Virginia winery and maybe don't have a great experience and they judge the industry by that.

Fred Reno

oh, I see first impression kind of thing. Well, to vineyard side, I had one vintner say something that's stuck with me for well over year and I'd love your opinion on this. He said you know, Fred, some of the best vineyards in Virginia haven't even been planted yet.

Jay Youmans

I think that's absolutely right. I would I agree 100% with that, I think a lot of the wineries are positioned where they are for really two reasons. One is that they, either inherited the property or they bought, you know, a weekend home and they planted vineyards or, it was a property that was in the family and they're just trying to figure out other uses for it because you can't grow, you know, tobacco, you can't grow corn, you can, but they're looking for other ways to make the land profitable. The second reason is that a lot of wineries position themselves within two hours of Washington DC because that's about as far out as you can get and have somebody come visit you. Maybe, spend the day and get home without having to stay in a hotel. Honestly, I think there are a lot of fantastic vineyards that are out in the Shenandoah Valley as you go south. We haven't even seen those vineyards planted yet. Yeah, I would agree with that statement 100%.

Fred Reno

What you just said comports with what I've heard from people, they all point to the Shenandoah Valley for several reasons. They say as an AVA it has generally the lowest rainfall, it's the coldest climate, and a lot of the soils are limestone.

You know, to me, what I'm fascinated with is some of the grape varietals that do so well here in Virginia, produce compelling wine that people aren't familiar with. I certainly had no exposure to the Petit Manseng. And when I came here and started tasting some of the better dry Petit Manseng I was like, Oh, this could be really big.

Jay Youmans

Petit Manseng I think it could be what Chenin Blanc is to South Africa. I think that could be what Petit Manseng is for Virginia. You know, you're a little dependent on what Mother Nature gives you every year, but I'm sure, well I'll let the winemakers tell you more about how to make it into a dry style. But when you know the beauty of Petit Manseng, it has just incredible acidity, wonderful flavors, but you can make it in the dry, off dry, or sweet style. It is relatively bulletproof in the vineyard. It stands up to rot and mildew pretty well and the rain that we get late in the harvest. Yeah, it's an exciting grape. But I tell you, there's a lot of exciting grapes. I told somebody the other day, when I said this a couple years ago at the Virginia wine summit, that I felt like Virginia is experimenting with more grapes than any other wine region in the world right now. And what I mean by that is, we have Hybrids. We also have semi-indigenous grapes like Norton. We have hybrids that are doing pretty well like Chambourcin, Seyval, Traminette and others. We have grapes that are being planted here from Spain, Italy, France and from Germany.

Fred Reno

Yeah, in fact, I know Michael Shaps is bullish on Tannat and I can see why.

Jay Youmans

Tannat is pretty exciting. There's pros and cons for every grape. Pro to Tannat is it's pretty dark, the tannins get a lot softer and riper than they do say in France or even Uruguay. The downside to Tannat though is it's pretty susceptible to really cold temperatures during the winter and a few years back I don't know 40,50 vineyard acres were killed because of the really cold temperatures we got so it needs to be planted in a spot that's not going to get hit hard with really low temperatures. But I couldn't agree with Michael anymore. And you can look at some of the some of the interesting grapes like Barboursville's Vermentino.

Fred Reno

is that a stellar Wine? Or what?

Jay Youmans

It's amazing and honestly, it's as good as anything coming out of Italy. I've always been a big fan of his Pinot Grigio and his Barbera. And I think Andrew Jefford came and visited a few years ago. He's a wine writer for Decanter magazine and he was here tasting with Annette and her team. They took Andrew around and he came away saying he thought that Nebbiolo was maybe the most exciting grape that he tasted here so who knows? I think Petit Verdot is coming on. There's just a lot of a lot of exciting grape varieties. But it's not just the grapes, it's also the styles. We've got people experimenting with Peti Nets, which are basically sparkling wines that haven't been disgorged, and maybe they're a little gassy and have some sediment in them. And we have people doing skin contact with grapes like Viognier, and Petit Manseng, pretty interesting things.

Fred Reno

Well, you're right, there's just a wide range of not just wine style, but wine grape varieties here. And to me, again, I think that is nothing more than a real asset for Virginia. Because you know, these wines will get you into why your intellectual curiosity can just take you to a lot of places. I've watched people who get hit by the wine bug, just the average consumer, and they don't trade down, they're always looking for what's new. In fact, when I started in retail wine in the very beginning, that was the number one thing every one of my customers said to me the day they walked in the door, hey Fred, what's new, the consumer is always what's new. They're always interested in trying something different. A new varietal, a new producer, and I think that could be an asset handled correctly for Virginia in this environment. No question. So, I've got the \$64,000 question for you. What was the wine that you had that turned your head and changed you? You said, Oh, I get it now. What was that one wine, everybody's got one wine?

Jay Youmans

You mean here in Virginia,

Fred Reno

No just in general, you personally, professionally,

Jay Youmans

Well, the wine that was the Epiphany for me was a red burgundy. I was working as I told you about this restaurant in Winston Salem, North Carolina years ago. 1980, maybe was the year I was there. And we Believe it or not, we had a Cruvinet, and we were doing wines by the glass. At that time Reynolds Tobacco was in Winston Salem and Reynolds own BV, Beaulieu vineyards, they owned Inglenook, they owned an auction house I want to say they owned Heublein Yeah. So, a lot of Reynolds tobacco execs would come in and were trying to taste some of the wines that they now were involved with. And we had all these great wines by the glass. The wine that just blew me away was a 1969 La Tache which is part of the Domaine Romanee Conti. And that wine is, you know, if you tried to buy current vintage of that, it's probably a couple \$1,000 a bottle. But at the time, we were selling that for I want to say \$10 a glass, \$10 a glass for a five-ounce pours. We weren't making any money on it. But people who knew wine were coming to have dinner with us because of it. That wine was the Epiphany wine but the wine that really sold me on Virginia was Montdomaine. They had made a Merlot and I was just blown away by it. And that's really the reason why I went to work for that winery was how good that wine was.

Fred Reno

Who was the winemaker at Montdomaine at that time?

Jay Youmans

Well, there was two. When I first got there was a young guy. I can't remember his name. He wasn't there very long. But Shep Rouse took over not long after. Shep owns Rockbridge Winery and has been making great wines down there for a long time. Well, Shep came in and really took us up another notch. It was interesting. We were making Riesling, we were making Merlot, Cabernet a really good Chardonnay. I want to say there were only at that time, there was maybe 30 wineries in the state.

Fred Reno

Well, as a plug for one of my future episodes. I'm going up to see Shep next Wednesday to do my interview.

Jay Youmans

Oh, that's great. Shep, is an old friend. Whenever I see him, I make a point to go say hello. He's a wealth of information and one of the hardest working people in the industry. Please tell him I say hello.

Fred Reno

I'm looking forward to it. I've been told that I'll have an interesting discussion as well. I'd love to turn the attention back to you professionally. So, the Capitol Wine School? When did you establish this and what drove that and where are you at today with it?

Jay Youmans

I started school back about 12 years ago, the idea was to offer Wine and Spirit Education Trust courses. And we were for a while doing wine courses and certifications for the society wine educator, we are doing courses and classes for the Wine Scholar Guild. But we also cook up a lot of classes and courses, you know, that don't involve certification or exams. Just because there's, you know, especially with this current situation with a pandemic, people are just hungry, to be able to still taste and do things and connect with people and everything's gone online. We do curbside pickup one of the things that the DC government did to kind of help. I mean, without it we'd be out of business, but they allowed us to do curbside pickup as long as it was in a closed container. So, we broke all the wines down into one-, or two-ounce bottles, and labeled them up. And you come by and pick up your wines and then you join us for a tasting online. We've done some really interesting tastings. I was telling you we did a first growth Bordeaux tasting recently, we did a super Tuscan tasting where we tasted Sassicaia and Ornellia and others. We've got a champagne tasting coming up. I'm going to do a tasting on the wines of St Emillion. We're also going to do in November a class on defects and faults in wine, where you'll pick up a kit of 24 little samples. And we'll go through all the most common things that can go wrong with wine, you know, in the vineyard and winemaking. Once it's bottled things that can go wrong like storage. One of the cool things that will be in that faults and defects tasting is

we'll also be showing people what smoke taint smells and tastes like because that's going to be a big, big topic for the next couple years as these wines from California that are coming out of this vintage, start going into bottle and into the market,

Fred Reno

Putting the tastings aside for a second, are your classes online available to people outside of the surrounding area? I mean because picking-up wine is one thing but then reaching a broader audience. People can go online; they can go to the Capitol Wine School and get certified and do all that right.

Jay Youmans

We are doing classes for people outside of this area. And we're trying to find creative ways to get them to wines. Probably the less I say on your podcast.

Fred Reno

I understand totally. I am familiar with the WSET, you may or may not know this, but we became when I was running Henry Wine Group site number 51 WSET in the world. We were the only entity certified west of the Mississippi at that time. And my good friend, I'm sure you know, Peter Neptune was who conducted it. It was fascinating because we put all of our customer service people and anybody else within the company who wanted through the first and second level of WSET.

Jay Youmans

That's interesting. I don't think I knew that.

Fred Reno

I think our program was established in 2004, if I'm not mistaken and we were the only site west of the Mississippi. This is a term Peter was called an Invigilator. Yes, exactly. Yeah. That's the proper English term. Right?

Jay Youmans

Yeah. It's very British, very British.

Fred Reno

Well, I know you're busy Jay. I really appreciate your time and the Governor's Cup is an important piece of what's going on here in Virginia. I wanted to get some perspective on that. Let's just keep plugging the Virginia story. I'm going to do my best to get this history out there and you've really put some groundwork around some of the historic stuff I was wondering about.

Jay Youmans

well thanks, Fred. Good luck with your podcast