

EPISODE # 29 SHARON & SHANNON HORTON/HORTON VINEYARDS.

SPEAKERS

Sharon Horton, Shannon Horton, Fred Reno

Fred Reno

Sharon and Shannon, this is an absolute pleasure for me to meet you and have the opportunity to document the story and history of Horton Vineyards. So, thank you for your time this morning. You're welcome. Well, I'll start in the beginning, as I always do what's your story? I mean, let me ask you, Sharon, why did you and Dennis, what was in your mind when you moved from Missouri, to come to Virginia? What prompted that move?

Sharon Horton

Actually, we came down here, he had a business in Northern Virginia at the time, okay, we wanted to move to the country we both like the country atmosphere. And some of his sales to the government were so prolific, I guess that he had money left over that he wanted to start a different business. He was crazy, of course. And he loved wine. And then he started a lot of, I would say, research, and studying what types of grapes he thought would grow well in Virginia and present themselves well as a wine. He was not a Chardonnay fan at all. He wanted to try something out a white wine that a red wine drinker would love. So, he picked the Viognier grape, which was very, very rare at the time, hardly any planting in the world. We started out here with 14 acres. Everybody thought we were crazy. Even Tony Wolf and Jim Law, we had a tasting of different Viogniers, the French Viogniers at the time and one from California. And they said, how are you ever going to sell this? Well, his major was in marketing, and he says, I'll sell it if we can grow it. Okay, so he did the research figured that the climate here in Virginia was very similar to where it's planted in France. We took a trip to California and visited several different wineries out there that were also growing the Viognier at the time talked to the different vineyard managers and owners, and then that's whenever it got started.

Fred Reno

So, you started commercially farming or at least planted in vineyard in 1989. Is that accurate?

Sharon Horton

The spring of 1990. Okay, we started with the posts and layout in the fall of 89.

Fred Reno

And then you strike lightning with the 1993 vintage and your Viognier blows everybody's mind by how good the quality was.

Sharon Horton

Yes,

Fred Reno

I'm just curious, do you still have bottles of that in your cellar? Yes. Wow. What a wonderful treasure.

Shannon Horton

Yeah, there's one on display at the winery that 1982 which was the first vintage there's one on display with all the metals that we still have record of in a museum box with the Nikon camera, because the original labels of the wines the Cab Franc, the Malbec. The Viognier Yeah, a Vidal, were all the very first harvest that they came in Dad took pictures on his Nikon, and those pictures became the labels. So, when you're looking at the label, a lot of people say, Oh, it's kind of a dated label. And I'm like, Yeah, but there's history behind it. That's the first commercially grown Viognier, in the state. And so, in the museum boxes, like all the metals, the original bottle Dad's signature on it, and the Nikon camera,

Fred Reno

that's fantastic. Yeah, that is great. So, you started with 14 acres here? Yes. Originally, how did you find the site? By the way? I mean, what was it about this site?

Sharon Horton

We wanted some land that would be comparable to the grapes with a bit of elevation. It's not as great here as you would think. But it's 600 feet at the top here. And everything slopes down? Right? He didn't want to buy the property. He wanted to lease it. So, we do not own these 53 acres here. We still lease it. Oh, my God. Yes. Yes. Okay. Been here. 30 years? Yes. We had 25-year lease with five-year options after that first option to buy if the lady wants to ever sell the property.

Fred Reno

Oh my god. So, I have to ask you, Sharon, how does a nurse become a vineyard manager.

Sharon Horton

Very easily. Those plants don't talk back to me. They may talk back to me and some kind of diseases, but then I can get on top of that.

Fred Reno

So then, Dennis decides he wants to pioneer and bring back Norton. What was the thought process there?

Sharon Horton

Well, we were both from the state of Missouri. Okay, got our cuttings from Stone Hill. Stone Hill. Yes.

Fred Reno

Oh, so you did get them from Stone Hill. Yes. And wildly successful clearly.

Sharon Horton

Well, I would think so. It's native up here. Right?

Fred Reno

Well, yeah. I'm curious about that. So, what's the difference in the vineyard of farming Norton versus your classic Viognier or vinifera?

Sharon Horton

A lot less management. It doesn't take as many herbicides or fungicides per se. We have it on the GDC which is looks like a clothesline, tee on a post, train it down. To brag a little bit this last harvest I got the most tonnage I ever got off a Norton, I got seven and a half tons per acre. Wow. Which is phenomenal. Yes.

Shannon Horton

Which equates to 75 tons yes. Just to do the math. She's got 10 acres. Yeah. 75 tons of Norton.

Sharon Horton

So, we did you know, the winery was a little upset. We're not, we're running out of space. You are going to preserve it. Write another tag. We will never be able to do this again,

Fred Reno

What led Dennis on his quest to just continue to and yourself to plant different varietals and different varietals. You're successful with Viognier. And as I understand it, you bottled the first commercial bottling of Cabernet Franc? Yes. So now you've got three wonderful wines. Why not just stay focused on that?

Sharon Horton

Oh, no, he always had to plant something and do something different. And always be ahead of the game. We have put in a lot of plants that we've had to rip out and it didn't work here. Try this one. Try that one. Try this one.

Fred Reno

Oh, my God. Yes. Shannon. So, you grew up with this? What was this? Like?

Shannon Horton

It's just that's just what it was. Everything was just normal. Like it was just, that's just what we did. We worked in the winery, and mom in the vineyard and Dad had his things. And it's just, you know, it was just part of the family.

Fred Reno

I'm assuming that Dennis and you Sharon had some consultant who came in initially in the winery.

Sharon Horton

No Dennis learned to make wine from books, Janice Robinson books, all kinds of books on viticulture, and we did attend all of Tony Wolf's classes that he gave, you know, that's remarkable. Yeah. He self-taught. Yeah. No there was no consultant. It was him and it was his ideas and what he had read it a few things that he had done in the basement. Yes, like little batches from his little hobby vineyard and that he was starting out with, and they were always there. There were some years things didn't work. But before he did a lot of experimenting, and he read a lot. He read the what is it? The Janice Robinson, read the Encyclopedia of wine, he read it, it's like a dictionary or encyclopedia, but he read it like it was a book and has notes in the margins and everything.

Fred Reno

That is remarkable. Given the success that you've had, and where you've come from, I mean, this is classic self-made Old-World winemaking going back to what used to be,

Sharon Horton

and he asked lots of questions when we traveled to France. And he asked the winemakers and he asked, you know, the winery owners like How have you been making it for 20 years or 30 years?

Fred Reno

So, he must have had a really good recall a really good memory. Yes, yes, he did. You know, like almost photographic memory.

Sharon Horton

Yes, I think so.

Fred Reno

I'm curious in the vineyard today. Do you work with hybrids as well?

Sharon Horton

Well, I would say Vidal Blanc. Yeah.

Fred Reno

Have you worked with any of the other hybrids in the past?

Sharon Horton

No. There are some very nice ones out there that are grown in Virginia that we just don't have room for. Understood. We have 53 acres here, seven and a half acres in front of our house in Madison County and six acres in front of the winery.

Fred Reno

The hobby vineyard you planted was it planted purposely to see if grapes would grow.

Sharon Horton

Yes. Mostly all the stuff that you see on the shed side. We have one or two rows of these one or two rows of that. Then we expanded. He tried the Nebbiolo we expanded to six tenths of an acre at our house because he liked how that grew. Tannat, we experimented with that first. Now we have the Tablas Creek clone, and Syrah but Syrah is not really a good grape for Virginia. And then came Pinotage as a substitute because of the smoky flavor.

Fred Reno

Why does Syrah not do that well?

Sharon Horton

It's the winters which are cold--trunks split open one winter, the SAP was coming up earlier in the year and then all of a sudden you get a boom, a burst of cold nights, two or three in a row. There went all our plants on the Shed side, but that didn't make him quit. He had to plant some more Syrah down there. And he wanted to blend it with the Mourvèdre Yeah, he wanted to make Grenache for a while. So, he had a GDC or GSM. So, he had the Grenache/Syrah/Mourvèdre which was our Cotes de Orange, which is model Goats do Roam. So, because we're in Orange County, so it's a Cotes de Orange.

Fred Reno

That's terrific. Well, he was obviously a marketing genius too.

Sharon Horton

Yes, very much so.

Fred Reno

So, I have to ask you about climate change. You've been farming now for well over 30 years. What have you seen in your vineyards? If anything? What changes? Have you seen? What's the differences?

Sharon Horton

This past summer was very, very, very hot and dry. So, I don't know if we are going towards, I've always said we there isn't anything like climate change, but you might have to think about it in the agriculture, you know, in the winter, the winter was a little bit milder. and the winters are getting milder.

Fred Reno

So, are you seeing earlier budbreak?

Sharon Horton

Yes, some more a lot more. Insects, insects, because they're overwintering before it'd be cold enough that they would die off.

Fred Reno

So, this forces a bit more spraying things in a vineyard early on?

Sharon Horton

Yes. Okay, more vigilance.

Fred Reno

But something like Norton can really handle that pretty well.

Shannon Horton

Yes. Dad always said it was a no brainer. It was born here and knew how to grow here. You needed to plant it. That was his philosophy.

Fred Reno

Well, I had a bottle of your '18 Norton on Sunday, and I drank the rest of it last night as well. I thought '18 was supposed to be a disastrous vintage for red wine in Virginia. But that one was quite good.

Sharon Horton

Norton didn't care. It doesn't care, usually.

Fred Reno

So, Shannon, your role here at the company? What have you been doing? And when did you start in that role?

Shannon Horton

I guess maybe five, six years ago, actually, I lose track. Mom and I became more involved in the cellar aspect. Mom was always in the vineyard, but left the winemaker and the winemaking to their own instructions. And because we had had a winemaker that had been with us for so long. But then I got a lot more involved in 2016, 2017 started getting into the cellar a little bit more. Started with sparkling wines and some of the white wines because then you can get the product on the shelf, and you got the results a lot quicker. If you got a 2016 you might still be in the barrel, you know two years later so because we barrel aged our stuff for quite a while. So, it you know, people always ask me, what do you do? And I'm like, whatever my mother tells me, however, I can help. I think you're your own boss. Sometimes, I guess you would call a general manager winemaker, whatever. But it was 2016. I started to do little parts to take on little things. And then my role has just evolved.

Sharon Horton

Blending is her forte. Okay. Yeah. She knows what barrels to put with what it is phenomenal. She has a very good palate. She takes it after her father.

Shannon Horton

Yeah. used to drive some of the winemakers crazy. I would be like, No, you need that third barrel back in the corner. Go get that one. I need 5% of this 2% of that. Yeah, they're like really, really? And then they put it together they go. Yeah, that's exactly what we needed.

Fred Reno

Oh so, they became used to it, and they understood Hey, I better listen. There's something going on here.

Shannon Horton

I mean, they don't say they want to admit that. But yeah, a lot of times I'll just be trying stuff in the cellar just to do see what's left and what's out there. And I'm like, Hey, let's just make a blend. And let's put this together and this will be great. And then they're like, but you don't have a label. Okay, well, we'll find an old one. So, like in the last few years, there's three or four labels that were retired we hadn't used in 20 years. Then I made new blends with and then I reintroduced the label again.

Fred Reno

What's the overall winery production at this point?

Sharon Horton

I don't know somewhere around 30,000 cases

Fred Reno

is that all Estate or do you buy any grapes at all?

Shannon Horton

We were buying some Chardonnay because Dad didn't plant it.

Fred Reno

You have no Chardonnay here at all?

Shannon Horton

Well, she's got like, what four plants? Well, a few plants. Yeah. They came by mistake. Yeah, we ordered one thing and Chardonnay came instead. So, we were buying some Chardonnay. But now I've got a good supply that for a couple of years, we wouldn't need that. And we were buying some Petit Verdot, and sometimes some Norton, we were supplementing our crop and I was also experimenting with bringing back a wine that hadn't been around for about 20 years, a Norton Port that dad had and so that takes four or five years in the making. So, I needed a little bit extra than what we were getting in as our supply. Our demand for Norton is high every year.

Fred Reno

Well, given his curiosity and driven originally by Rhone wines and obviously with Viognier leads me to ask a question. Have you ever done any co-ferment with the Viognier in the Norton?

Sharon Horton

No, not the Viognier with the Norton but we have done Viognier with Syrah. We've done that Co-fermentation. This year we even did some Norton skins with cab franc.

Fred Reno

But no white wine. (No not at this time) I mean classic Cote Rotie can have up to 5% of Viognier and it tends to drive the aromatics in wine. Yeah, and I would just be curious to know what your experimentation is like when you do Norton with Syrah or, Norton with Cabernet Franc?

Shannon Horton

The Norton with the Cabernet Franc. I found a bottle in the cellar not too long ago. The 75% Norton, 25% cab Franc or the other way around, I think vice versa. And they do well together, the earthiness with the Norton, and then the aromatics and the fruit forwardness of the Cab Franc, and then the peppery finish with it. That black pepper finish is really kind of a great synergistic relationship.

Fred Reno

You mentioned Tony Wolf earlier, did you get help, initially from the extension services out here? Or did they just sort of like-- what are you doing?

Sharon Horton

No. They were very helpful. And they had a lot of meetings here. You know, they bring other wineries and have the meetings here because we had so many, I think different varieties for people to be able to see we have kept in touch with the extension agent, you know, very, very much. So, they have experiments going on out here all the time, with different types of bugs and stuff and see the leaf roll virus here. They're working on that.

Fred Reno

So, I'm wondering, I'm going to butcher this name. And how did you get your hands on some Rkatsiteli? Okay, Rkatsiteli, what was that?

Shannon Horton

Rkatsiteli, you're supposed to roll the R, but I don't I took Latin not Russian so okay, I'm not good with that. So that little pocket of land in front of the winery is literally in a pocket between like couple of mountain ranges. And it's only six acres so to put some sort of heating system I mean, like fans or whatever through there is not...

Sharon Horton

our neighbors were, right. No, yeah, nameless with a bird alarm then it's in such an area to residential. So, I just considered that nature agriculture, but their houses are close. No, we had Viognier planted out there. Then we got the winter of 92. Okay. It was minus 22 out there. Three-year-old Viognier didn't like it. They were just split open. So, we took it all out. And Dad said we're going to put something in we're going to put some in. It's going to last. So, he researched this. Rkatsiteli was growing in in Georgia region. Of course. He said it's cold up there. We should be able to survive here. So, he called Dr. Frank. Right. Yeah. Constantin Frank and got the cuttings from him.

Fred Reno

That's fantastic. Well, the ones I've had, most recently from Blenheim because they bought the fruit from you was fantastic. And I understand you just did a little event, and I did want to go to it, but I was preoccupied with a project I was involved in, so the weekends have me in my office, but I really did. I saw that my Wow, that's going to be interesting.

Sharon Horton

It was very interesting. Many producers were here. Kirsty was there and Rachel from Stinson because she buys fruit from us. And then us and then Megan Frank was on Zoom call from Constantine Frank's place. And she had two of her wines to taste right. Everybody brought their wines and then the Georgian Embassy brought about four different ways. Oh, they leave it on the skins and the stems some of their one of their types. Yes.

Fred Reno

That must be dark. Yeah,

Sharon Horton

it was a bit dark. Yeah. But anyway, it was very, very interesting. And they were so nice to us. You know, people

Shannon Horton

they gave me a gift. Oh, yeah. A model Gvevri the Clay Vessel it's at the winery. We're going to get a plaque that says it was a gift from the Georgian Embassy.

Fred Reno

Yes. Terrific. Yes. So, your daughter Shannon is the winemaker. Now Caitlin? Yeah. She jumped into that. So, she was drafted, right? Yeah.

Shannon Horton

Yeah, she's always had an interest in the winemaking. And she'd been in the cellar a couple of times years ago. It just it just happened that way. And our winemaker needed to leave for other issues. And so, we were like well, so instead of trying to find one this close to harvest because that was May, we'll just put Caitlin in. So, 26 years old. 400 tons of fruit very first harvest. Here you go have fun. She did Well, She did well. And I went over to help in the end and did the night shift kind of to help her. It was almost 20-hour days for like 60 days straight. I mean, it was

Fred Reno

we'll switching to the subject of distribution. What type of distribution Do you have outside of the state of Virginia?

Shannon Horton

For outside the state of Virginia, there's we do bulk if a winery calls us and says they need bulk wine because they've run out of wine or the didn't have a good crop. We've sold fruit outside the state. But we've also sold wine outside the state. For bottle sales It's mostly directly to customers, our online site, we can ship to 38 states, we use a platform system that obtains the licenses for us, and then just takes a percentage of it. We have 38 states that we can distribute to, to someone's door directly to the customer. And then we are in a store that does take us that has they're in a chain and they go forth with it. So, you can find some of our wines. I know I was in California, went to a store bought some wine, ha ha my own. But dad used to be very prevalent beyond the Mississippi, and we are looking to try and get that back.

Fred Reno

Well, given the early acclaim you had for the Viognier. I would think that there would be quite a demand for that.

Shannon Horton

We do get calls from restaurants and that kind of thing for the demand. But it's trying to get it back into the distributors once you lose that shelf space. And once you lose that, it is very hard and the distributor that we had in California was no longer in business and then it didn't get pursued to find a replacement.

Fred Reno

So, I'm assuming Sharon that the ripping out and experimenting with different varietals has stopped.

Sharon Horton

It sort of has that there's someone pushing for Saperavi

Fred Reno

For What?

Shannon Horton

Saperavi it is the bookend to our Rkatsiteli from Georgia. Oh, Georgia and red and it's big and it's earthy and it's spicy and got huge mid palate, and it's just delectable and I would love to see that in Virginia. I know that there's one other winery that already planted it over in there's two of them. Okay, yeah, Ox Eye has got it. And I think Montifalco has got it. Ox Eye got it because they're right on the same plane as the Finger Lakes, like their elevation, so they need to plant things that are very similar. Did a lot of patterns of Megan Frank has it in Yeah, I love her Saperavi And I just love what it does. And I would like to put some here.

Fred Reno

I'm going to have to research it this first time I've ever heard of that grape myself personally.

Shannon Horton

Yeah, it's just phenomenal.

Fred Reno

Well, that's interesting. Yeah, so favorite question I always like to ask a very simple one. And you said earlier in the interview, Sharon that Dennis loved wine and assuming you did as well. What was that one bottle that you may have had independently or together that you that the light bulb went off and said, Oh, now I get it. Now I understand how Ethereal and interesting wine can be. Is there one wine you remember early on?

Sharon Horton

Probably the Viognier it would be.

Fred Reno

so, it would have been from obviously from France. And what so it's either going to be

Sharon Horton

what's down in the cellar.

Shannon Horton

Oh, the Condrieu

Fred Reno

So, it's going to have George Vernay who saved Condrieu. Or you're going to have if you're lucky. Okay. Chateau Grillet

Sharon Horton

Yeah, I think that's the one.

Fred Reno

Oh my god. Okay. It's Chateau Grillet it doesn't get more interesting than that. Do you realize that's the that's the one winery that has its own appellation. It's the smallest appellation in the world. Chateau Grillet.

Shannon Horton

Dad didn't mess around. Yeah, not clearly did not mess around. He didn't just go for whatever he read a lot and figured out who were the ones that were the crux of things. And then he went and got their wine.

Fred Reno

I mean, now I get it, Chateau Grillet I get it.

Sharon Horton

Yeah. And I think like when he went to California, he met with Mondavi

Fred Reno

talked to all the right people, and he figured out for himself what the answer was for your situation.

Sharon Horton

Yes, he did. Because he had been drinking some Virginia wines and thinking, scratching his head and saying, is this what we got, we have got to do better?

Fred Reno

Well, I will tell you, in my estimation, based on of course, I haven't tasted all of the reputedly 300 wineries or so in Virginia, obviously I haven't tasted them all. I'm trying my best. At the end of the day from what I tasted; my belief is a good 10 to 15% That could be a little higher of the wineries now in Virginia produce as good a quality of wine as anybody in the world. From a qualitative standpoint? Obviously, the varietals are different. We're talking about different varietals here today at Horton. But

the pure quality is equal to the best in a world. Now I do reserve the term great for that 1/10 of 1% of all wine made in the world, right. But then after that, then you have a high level of quality being produced around the world. And Virginia is absolutely right there today. And it continues to surprise me that wine lovers at large, both trade and consumer, aren't aware of it.

Sharon Horton

No, they aren't. No.

Fred Reno

And that's what I'm trying to do is to change that awareness and get people to pay attention. I mean, to me, it's the most exciting wine growing region in the country today.

Shannon Horton

That was a bottle of wine that we had right after dad passed away that I found in the cellar from 1989. My god, that's a Viognier.

Fred Reno

Yeah, and it's a Katcher Selection, Domaine. Okay.

Sharon Horton

It actually was quite good. Had some butterscotch notes to it, because it's of the age, but it

Fred Reno

1988. Yeah. Wow.

Shannon Horton

And then look at the color. It's not even that dark. No, like, I mean, I thought it was going to be poop. And I was like,

Sharon Horton

You even told the winery they could join us. Yes. And they were surprised that it lasted that long.

Shannon Horton

I sent the pictures and send it back to the winery said, Hey, we just had this today, like in 2018. So just wanted you to know, so.

Fred Reno

Wow, that's fantastic.

Shannon Horton

Yeah. So, I mean, that's, that'll tell you something about that grape. Like how many white wines do you know, I know that the winemaker needs to make it that way. And he needed to add some chemistry, but how many white wines can last that long and not turn into like a sherry or get oxidized or you know, just

turn on? Yeah. So yeah. Some big testament to the grape itself. And definitely about what dad was getting after that it was a red drinkers' white because of the complexity of it, and what it has going on,

Fred Reno

because of your efforts and what you did, the Virginia wine board declared Viognier the signature grape of Virginia back in 2011. Yeah. That's pretty remarkable.

Shannon Horton

A big surprise. Yeah. Yeah. Quite a big surprise. Dad was part of the Viognier Guild out here on the East Coast, which then merged with the Rhone Rangers. Oh, so yes, yeah. He was the East Coast. Lone Ranger. Yeah. Wow. That's amazing. Pretty remarkable. And then he got connected with a lot of experimenters in some people that were very much kindred spirits out in California, like Randall Graham with Bonnie Doon. Who I started my own friendship with. Back in 2017.

Fred Reno

Well, looks like he's just signed himself into an interesting project.

Shannon Horton

Yes, Well, he has been working on creating those grapes for a while in the dry farming thing and not requiring the water and what he could do what he could experiment with. And so

Fred Reno

well, they're going to need to learn how to dry farm in California because there's no water

Shannon Horton

there. Yeah. That's why he was going after what grapes you could, and I had a sip of that wine that he made that first came out of that field, back in 2018. At the Smithsonian, because the Smithsonian's honored the Rhone Rangers and Rhone grapes in Virginia. We were asked to be a part of that dinner and to try that and I was like, Randall Where do I get this? He goes nowhere it's not on the market. I'm like, That's not fair. You can't like give us treats. And not let us have any.

Fred Reno

Oh my god. Oh, that'd be like Randall. Yeah,

Shannon Horton

it was it was amazing wine than he did after some of those grapes. I can't remember what the name of it is now.

Fred Reno

Sharon and Shannon. This has been a real delight. I'm telling you, thank you. We're here, folks. And she's right in the middle of harvest. You're making wine and pressing grapes. And I just busted into the vineyard farmhouse here. This is like, like California in the 80s. I remember the farmhouses in the vineyard in California in the '80s When I was going out there as a buyer from Washington, DC in retail

at that time, and you get that feeling? It's really great. But thank you again for your time. Really appreciate it.

Sharon Horton

Thank you.