

EPISODE # 32 MIKE HENY/MICHAEL SHAPS WINeworks WINEMAKER

SPEAKERS

Mike Heny, Fred Reno

Fred Reno

Michael, welcome to my Podcast. And thank you for joining me this morning.

Mike Heny

Sure, thing Fred, great to be here.

Fred Reno

Well, the beginning is where I always start. And what I want to know is, what's your story? And I said this in the intro, how does someone who graduates from UVA after studying mechanical engineering, and comparative literature, find themselves with a career in winemaking? What's the background here?

Mike Heny

Yeah so, I'd say maybe backing up a decade before that, when, gosh, I think I was in the third or fourth grade. I grew up in the suburbs of Northern Virginia. My dad worked on Capitol Hill; they had come down from Pennsylvania for government jobs. My grandparents, particularly my grandfather had a great interest in history and genealogy. And they were taking a trip to Germany to see kind of where part of our family was from, and they really wanted to take me along. I was like, so excited. I didn't know what Germany was, but it was like this crazy thing I didn't know anything about that. For whatever reason the decision was made I think, Michael's a little too young for it, you can go on the next trip. I remember being a big disappointment, but maybe it really stoked my hunger and so when my grandparents got back, they get my Dad this little souvenir bottle of German wine. And there's no wine in the house. I mean, there was, you know, maybe, Riunite on Friday night. We were deep in the 70s and Middle America. My dad kept it in a sock drawer, and I would go up when he wasn't there. I would stare at it and kind of wonder what this stuff was, souvenir or something. Yeah, it was just like a souvenir bottle and had all the crazy lettering on it. And one day, he wasn't home. I cracked it open. I took like a little sip. And it was like, tart and bright. And then I put it back up and hoped no one would notice. So that was that's my first taste of wine.

Fred Reno

So, what an amazing story. And I bet you they were really happy to find out you open their bottle of wine.

Mike Heny

I think that the thought for them was it was like a souvenir like something that, you know, wouldn't really be tasted. And for me, I was wait, what is this stuff? What's going on inside?

Fred Reno

Well, so now you're graduating from the University of Virginia? What was the first pathways into the wine industry?

Mike Heny

as a kid I was good at math and science and at the same time my parents dream was I would become an engineer, and I end up in mechanical engineering at UVA. And, you know, I liked all that stuff. It all fit together nicely. And my grades were pretty good. But I also had this whole other side that I was obsessed by poetry and music. I had a lot of friends who were kind of musicians and artists. I was just kind of torn between these two worlds. So, I end up breaking my mom's heart and dropping out of engineering school. And I ended up getting a degree in something useless, called Comparative Literature as far as getting a paycheck. So yes, I'm out of school, and I need a job. I see that there's this winery who needs help during harvest, Montdomaine Cellars. And the cool part was, I could ride my bike down there on route 20. I could get there in about 40 minutes. Because my girlfriend at the time, she had a job out in Crozet, so she needed the car. So, I'd ride down in the morning. And Shep Rouse was the winemaker, (So that's when Shep was there was this 1990)? This is 1990. Yeah. So, yes, I'd go down, we throw some boxes around, grapes would come in and I have no idea what's going on. It was just fun. It was hard work. And of course, I had this very romantic view, we're making wine and I really didn't know what it meant. But that's my first harvest, 1990.

Fred Reno

So did you stay at Montdomaine at that point.

Mike Heny

Yeah so, here is how that played out. One day, we finished clean stuff. Shep, I remember he was kind of standing outside the tasting room. And he invited me over to taste with him. And I didn't know what tasting was, you know, I knew what drinking was, but I didn't know what tasting was. It was first time I'd seen someone swirl the glass and take it in and make all the funny noises and think about it and listen to it. I was kind of hooked. I thought, yeah, I can taste some stuff and there's some stuff going on. That really kind of made me think like, that was kind of a cool thing to do.

Fred Reno

When did you start learning to make wine then under Shep?

Mike Heny

I didn't at that point really the driving force in my life was get to Europe and have a shot at being a writer. The Berlin wall had just come down, the other part of my family is from Central Europe. My grandma lied to me and said we're from Czechoslovakia. It ended up being the Ukraine, but the borders have shifted. So maybe we'll give her a break on that one. I ended up moving. I had a friend living in Berlin and a friend living in Prague. So, I spent the next five years bouncing around Central Europe. But each year, I would come back to work harvests.

Fred Reno

Oh, okay, so tell me about Archie Smith. When were you involved at Meredyth?

Mike Heny

When I came back in '91 to work harvest Shep had told me, there's this wild man up in Northern Virginia named Archie Smith. He's got a big farm; he probably needs some help. So, from '91 through '95, I'd come back and work the harvest at Meredyth

Fred Reno

Wow. What was Archie like? I'm curious.

Mike Heny

Yeah, Archie was great. We had this kind of connection where we were both, I think we both felt like citizens of Habsburg Empire that no longer existed. So, a big part of Archie was he had gotten a PhD in philosophy from Oxford. And, you know, he was like into Wittgenstein and stuff, like kind of heavy hitting philosophers. He was also really into music he loved the Rolling Stones. He had decided to give up the career of Professor to come back and help on the family farm. It was my romantic version of like, here's a gentleman farmer on his big estate. The Longer I worked there I saw some of the challenges of running a winery in Virginia.

Fred Reno

Well, and we talked about this earlier when I first spoke with you. I'm really curious. You worked at Calvert Woodley at one point? Yeah, Washington, DC. What year was that?

Mike Heny

That would have been when I stopped going back to the Czech Republic. I'd work at Calvert Woodley through the year. It's actually Archie's mom had lived in DC. So, they started Meredyth in '72, I believe. And I think they lived in DC before then and they were wine people. I think they did a lot of shopping. I can't remember when Calvert and Woodley kind of came together

Fred Reno

well, I remember the merge Boy that must have been an interesting. Was Tom McKnew there at the time.

Mike Heny

Yeah. Tom Mcknew was there. So, Mrs. Smith had said you should go talk to Ed Sands one of the owners of Calvert Woodley, so I did. My wife, Natasha, she was in grad school at George Washington at the time, so we lived in DC, and I could walk to Calvert Woodley. and I've gone from this kind of hands-on making wine in Virginia but not really knowing anything about the world of wine. I thought like, you know, Virginia, were making the greatest wines in the world. I had no idea. I had no idea. I quickly learned at Calvert Woodley.

Fred Reno

Yeah, I know what an excellent selection. So now your path leads you to working yet with another pioneer Dennis Horton. How did that all come together?

Mike Heny

Yeah. So, Calvert Woodley was such an amazing experience where, you had your Terry These, your Bobby Katcher and your Alain Juguenet. Every day a rep would come in and you get to try 20 Burgundy's and I'd be like, Oh, my God, what's going on here. And the people I worked with Tom McKnew, Lily Zenner, Allen Murphy, they were all super supportive, I really had some great mentors there. We had this really neat opportunity, when you closed part of the deal was you could choose one bottle of wine from the shelf. So, every night usually there would be about three people closing together. So, we'd each choose a bottle of wine, we brown bag it and blind taste it. And man, I loved that because there's maybe like two to 3000 Really cool selections, and oh my gosh, is it New World, is it Old World. What's the vintage and a that whole experience kind of really got me interested in the world of wine and the taste of wine? My heart was still in Virginia though. So, I still wanted to be on the production side. Chris Pearmund was at Naked Mountain at the time, which was a highly regarded Virginia Chardonnay producer in the '90s. He'd come in and make some deliveries, I got to know him. I tell him like, Man, I really want to get back into production. He said, call Alan Kinne, who was a consultant at Horton. And I'll tell you when the Horton '93 Viognier hit the shelves I remember Tom's saying, Mike, you have to try this; it is really good. The thought at the time that something from Virginia could be made that could compete with wines at Calvert Woodley where you could choose from Burgundy to the Rhone, and Tuscany. That there'd be even this tiniest of voices that would have something to say there for that I think was finally. Okay. They make wine in Virginia the whites are okay, the reds suck. That's it. That's where things were in 1990.

Fred Reno

So then Dennis Horton did you just call him?

Mike Heny

I hadn't met Dennis yet. So, I took Alan out to lunch. We went to a restaurant in Middleburg called the Fiddler's Green, he was also Consulting at Piedmont at the time. So, I said that was a little closer for me from for DC. So, I took him out to lunch. He said, the assistant winemaker at Horton just left, might be an opportunity there. You're probably going to take a big pay cut but think of it like grad school. I was like Yeah; I will think or it like grad school. So, I started Horton with Alan and winemaker Graham Bell in 1997.

Fred Reno

Graham Bell 1997. Wow. Tell me a little bit about working with Dennis Horton that must have been fascinating.

Mike Heny

I think about Dennis as maybe like, the Bobby Knight of Virginia wine, you know, very intense, driven. That's how you got going from Meredyth, which like a '70s era winery to Horton built in the 90s. There's beautiful new French oak barrels, there was nice equipment there. There were good tanks. So, the investment in both the vineyard and winery had been made that was an entire magnitude above what I had seen before.

Fred Reno

Wow, that's unbelievable. As you know, Dennis is famous for saying that he probably planted more different grape varietals and ripped them out than anybody in Virginia had ever planted before. Yeah. What was his mind like? What was he always thinking?

Mike Heny

So, he originally wanted to go to Napa. He and Sharon took many trips out to Napa. Dennis was like, you know, I think it's a really good time to get in. I think he had a really interesting combination of farmer and businessman mentality. He's sees all the infrastructure is there. So, he was really set on going to Napa. And Sharon said, Dennis, you can go to Napa, but I'm not coming. Well, he wanted to be with Sharon. So, he said, let's look around Virginia. He did an exhaustive tour of what was going on with Virginia. But just as importantly, they spent, weeks with the vineyard manager at Phelps and Mondavi. And that's when they learned about open lyre being used on the Napa floor to achieve high quality reds and deal with some of the vigor in the early 90s. I mean, there are a lot of issues. But one of the big starting points was what do with all the vigor and Dennis was an important part in exploring an open lyre trellising system. The idea there was the plant is going to have the vigor it has we need to give it some room to grow. So, there's been a lot of interesting experiments with everything in the vineyard in Virginia, but particularly vigor.

Fred Reno

Well, they also pioneered bringing back Norton the native Virginia grape. Yeah. What was it like working with Norton? Because it had to be a completely foreign varietal to you as well.

Mike Heny

So, Norton divides the winemaking waters, unlike any other grape we have in Virginia. You either love it or you hate it. I'm on the love it end of the spectrum, (by the way for the record, so am I) I mean, it's do I want Norton to be the only thing we do in Virginia? No, but when the winemaker from Cheval Blanc was visiting Virginia, and he was working with RDV. One of my best memories is seeing him when he came to the tasting room at Horton and he wasn't so interested in our Cabernet Franc, but he really wanted to try our Norton. I think for him, like, how many regions in the world get a an Aestivalis variety that's from that region. Are there native grapes in Napa that are from there? Nope. So, I love Norton for that reason. I also love a challenge. Like I love trying to create a wine where people think, oh, it's Norton, I hate Norton, or whatever. And I guess it brings up the contrarian in me, I really want to make a beautiful Norton

Fred Reno

Well speaking of Norton, who was really fun for me when I interviewed Shep Rouse, about a year ago for my Podcast. Unsolicited he opened a bottle of 20-year-old Norton that he had made there at Rockbridge. I tried it and was like, Oh, this is what happens when it ages. Yeah. And it was just mellow. It was balanced. It reminded me quite honestly, surprisingly, of some of the older Inglenook Cask Cabernets I used to get early in my career that would come from the '70s or some of the old BV Private Reserve Cabernets. There was a mellowness, this balance. I thought that's it. That is really interesting, because that sort of aggressive young tone that you get in Norton early on, subsided. And I was, wow, this is really interesting.

Mike Heny

Well, I say with any wines we make in Virginia, whenever you try to imitate, you're always going to be two steps behind. Certainly, there's important examples in the wine world. And we try to look at similarities between our region and elsewhere in the world. That's really important. But ultimately, what anyone needs to find anywhere in the world, but especially in Virginia, as we mature is its own footprint. And we have done this, we are doing this more and more, but we have to find that unique voice, be it you know, in the example of Norton, where it's a different grape. I think perhaps more importantly, moving forward, what does a Monticello Cabernet Franc taste like? What does a Monticello Cabernet Franc from a certain vineyard with a certain soil tastes like? That's the way forward for us is to more and more find those unique voices.

We've now, not that we don't have further to go, but we've hit a certain level of proficiency in

the vineyard, and the winemaking where, yes, unfortunately, there are still flawed wines out there. But there is a sizable magnitude of folks in the vineyard, folks in the winery, who are doing top grade work, where there's not going to be any dumb flaws, there's not going to be any sloppy grape growing. There's not goanna be any sloppy winemaking and just being able to find that unique voice. So that's what I love. That's why I'm here.

Fred Reno

Well, that is interesting, because that leads me to this question I have, what do you see for the future of hybrids in wine growing here in Virginia? I'll preface that by saying what Ben Jordan said to me, one day. He said, you know when I came back here from California, back to my native Virginia, I thought I had to make vinifera because that's what everybody made. He then learned that if you just make the wine the hybrid will give you, you can make some very compelling, interesting wine and not try to make it something that it's not. You alluded to that earlier. So, what do you think about hybrids? The future? I mean, it's more sustainable agriculture, is it not?

Mike Heny

Yeah, so the way the way I look at it is, they're all hybrids. So, Cabernet Sauvignon is a hybrid from Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc it's just an accepted hybrid that's been grown for four or 500 years.

Fred Reno

That's brilliant. That's absolutely brilliant.

Mike Heny

Lots of hybrids out there that are not acceptable for, you know, the highest quality wines that we're attempting to make. But I think the work that Ben is alluding to and say, Nate Walsh, and a lot of folks out there is really to discover those hybrids, and how to grow them and make them so that, that the thought isn't, you know, oh, this is a hybrid. It's just like, oh, man, that's good. What is that? What is that? Yeah,

Fred Reno

They're just another grape, right?

Mike Heny

Yeah, Just another grape and with any grape ultimately just being a conduit for the voice of the land.

Fred Reno

So then, you've been in the business for over 30 years. What have you seen yourself that is measurable or detectable with regard to climate change?

Mike Heny

Yes. So, with climate change the work with future generation hybrids and vineyard techniques, where we can assure clean ripe high-quality crop With a lower less on, like fungicide and insecticide input is Yeah. So, something that we're all working towards. You got back to the old Montdomaine facility by going to work for Michael Shaps, who is what was that like? And what specifically were you brought in to do? What is your role? What are your responsibilities at Michael Shaps Wineworks? Yeah, my first harvest, and Wineworks is 1990 when it was Montdomaine. And my second harvest was 2019. So, 30 years later, so left Horton in 2017. And spent a really interesting year working with Ramisol, which is a project in western Albemarle County. And then Michael had been generous, enough to talk about. I was starting a consulting business and he was extremely helpful with kind of what worked for him and what hadn't worked for him. He'd kind of had some changes there was looking for a winemaker, I talked to Michael about the position. I talked to some of the previous winemakers like Ben Jordan about how Wineworks worked and also Joy Ting we had some really good conversations about if it seemed like it would be a good fit or not, and seemed like, at Horton we made quite an array of wines from a bunch of different vineyards and a lot of different lots. So there, there were a lot of pieces to manage there. And at Wineworks there's even more pieces to manage.

Fred Reno

It's got to be really interesting plus a challenge because you get to work with different varieties, different fruit from different regions all over Virginia.

Mike Heny

And I really love that because I love being able to work, say with merlot from 10 to 15 different vineyards around the state or, or work with 30 different plots of Cabernet Franc. So, it's kind of my sneaky way of being able to you know, kind of explore these different sites and kind of learn what different characters come from. And I love the kind of logistic puzzles that's kind of putting them all together, and you're trying to make a unique, awesome wine with each one.

Fred Reno

Well now and also because Michaels put his stake in the ground, finally in Shenandoah Valley. That's got to be pretty exciting future for what you see happening in Shenandoah.

Mike Heny

Yeah, so I guess I've been saying for a few years now, I think the big new thing in Virginia wine it's not a new grape. It's not a new trick or gizmo. It's a new place, and it's the Shenandoah

Valley. So yeah, there's, you know, with the combination of the limestone you know, you get the limestone on that side of the mountains we're more granite based over on this side of the mountains. The just kind of the farming tradition in the valley. Yep. Makes definitely a really exciting place to work. And there's, there's a lot of neat work going on out there.

Fred Reno

What do you what is your biggest challenge daily at Wineworks that you're dealing with? You know, what's the biggest challenge you face? That you're always like, Okay, this is it. I got, I got to deal with this. I got to deal with this.

Mike Henry

With the nature of our business there. I have no idea how many different sub lots of wine we have. It's a lot three or 400.

Fred Reno

How do you keep track of that?

Mike Henry

So, the decision making is pretty rapid fire certainly with Michael's wines, he, you know, he'll taste and retaste, and retaste, and retaste and retaste is just the nature of our business we need to make decisions quickly. So, I guess the neat part there is usually every day I'm blind tasting 30 to 60 different wines. I mean, that's really the only way to, to learn what each piece is. I'll learn like small signatures on each one. Full disclosure, I'm not super taster. So, I don't I'm not I wouldn't consider myself to be like super-duper sensitive taster. But I listened really well. And I've been listening for a long time. So, I find these kinds of little signatures that kind of helps me

Fred Reno

well, I'm curious. As long as you've touched on this, are you a taster? And I'm going to categorize this but is it the smell of the wine? Or is it the taste of the wine that most influences you and your decision making?

Mike Henry

It's smell and texture I'd say are really the two things, so I say with smell. It's more like kind of thinking about it and with texture is more like a visceral feeling type of thing. Yeah,

Fred Reno

gotcha. Because I learned a long time ago just to throw this into the pot, that if you hand somebody, a glass of wine that has a wonderful aroma, they're predisposed to like the wine on the palate. If you hand someone a glass of wine and it is dumb. And doesn't really have much

aroma, they're predisposed to not really enjoy the wine texture later on their palate. Yeah, yeah. And that's just been my own personal experience. And so, I that has guided me, I'm more of a nose smell, Guy. Yeah, there. But then to your point, Michael, you have to have the texture, you really have to feel that mouthfeel ultimately, in a wine tasting, I will smell everything, smell, every smell everything. But ultimately, I'll do the guzzle test. Yeah, it's got to go down to gullet at some point.

Mike Heny

You might have heard about the research group; we have in Virginia. Yeah, and that was making me think back to really cool trial that Matthieu Finot did with Sauvignon Blanc, where, you know, there's all sorts of commercial yeast that you can use that kind of enhance aromas and kind of do this, that and the other. So, he did a really cool trial, looking at some of the commercial yeast for, you know, aroma enhancement, versus native yeast fermentation. And that was such a cool trial because you smelled the commercial yeast, you got that big showy flowery thing, but on the on the native yeast, it was just so interesting in a quieter kind of way, probably like in a wine competition, probably like, like, oh, you know, boxwood and grapefruit and all this on the commercial yeast. But I think ultimately, the more interesting wine, what was the ambient use, because it didn't have all that obvious kind of makeup on it. So, you know, I think sometimes we have to be careful of some of the tools we have where it makes more like a makeup wine than what I would call like an honest or true wine. And you know, certain certainly with oak we just have to be, you know, just as careful with that were oak is a really important part that you can you can easily go too far with it. And then maybe the wine is impressive, but maybe it loses some honesty,

Fred Reno

what's your favorite varietal if you will, what's your favorite wine to make yourself?

my favorite wine is just always Cabernet Franc from a good site and a good vintage. Especially freshly pressed Cabernet Franc and like that, that just that smell of kind of warm juice going into the pan just coming off of the skins and these type of aromas of rose petal and crush red fruits. I just love that for me. That's my little Burgundy moment. So, when we're kind of pressing, pressing off, ripe Cabernet Franc.

Fred Reno

What do you think it was White Burgundy we have here some Mercurey Blanc?

Mike Heny

Yeah, that's good doing well. So yeah, you could dissect it for me. Okay, so first of all, like I love just like the purity of fruit. You know, this is just kind of an honest, true wine, the aromas

coming off of it are so interesting because they don't, they don't easily fit into like, this is lilac, or this is honeysuckle. It's something more subtle, and ultimately interesting there. So, my brain is going into kind of like, kind of like citrusy kind of bready like fresh, baked bread kind of smells. And you know why your brains kind of thinking about that. When you get in your mouth. There's just this kind of wonderful, not quite piercing, but like tight minerality and kind of feels like a voice to me. So yeah, so you open this up? I don't know. 30, 40 minutes ago.

Fred Reno

Yeah, it's been about 40 minutes. Yeah, open. Yeah. Yeah. Like,

Mike Heny

I mean, gosh, this this, this wine would be just so interesting through a week.

Fred Reno

Yeah, right. No, I think that's my favorite way to taste new wine is have a glass. Put the court back in, put in refrigerator go. Don't gas it. Don't do anything. Go back the next day, have another glass and follow it, especially when it's young. Yeah. And that's what I've been doing with Virginia wine for last couple years. To try to understand the, I love your terminology. I'm goanna steal that. Understand the voice. I used to call it the footprint but I'm liking the voice better. I like that terminology. It speaks to me. But what is what is it saying to me? What does is this wine? That's the beauty of wine it is an art. And, to some degree, it could be a performing art on its own can't it.

Mike Heny

Absolutely yeah, I'm so glad you've opened a white burgundy here is certainly some of my in my career some of my most highly regarded wines have been say some Viogniers or Petit Mansengs and things like that. But I have such a deep love for Burgundian style Chardonnays I think of Chardonnay is like the kind of the quiet hero of Virginia wine. So

Fred Reno

I have to agree with you on that. I think it gets a bit overlooked in the fact that Virginia makes some very high quality, credible Chardonnays and to your point you made earlier as we start to learn about sites even more deeply and start to identify and we're going to find more and more compelling Chardonnays that are representative of that particular site. You know, I mean, you know this your winemaker, but Chardonnay is like the most neutral grape there is you can shape it and form it. But if it comes from a really good site, you have to do a lot less of that right?

Mike Heny

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. So, I think like, like you're talking about with a with being one of the most transparent grapes. There are two different directions, you can go to it, it easily can lend itself to manipulation, be it, you know, kind of big, big oak or, you know, butter bombs and all that. But at the same time, it's probably the clearest transmitter of terroir, just because it's like, sing through me, you know, like, I'm just like, Yeah, sing for me I'm Chardonnay.

Fred Reno

they're very cool. Well, I guess the biggest challenge here, what do you think about? Is it possible that at some point, we're going to identify more sites where we can grow credible Pinot Noir here in Virginia, and I'll put a plug in for my friends at Ankida Ridge, because right now they make Pinot Noir that in my opinion, is high quality Cote de Nuits Village wine. And I'm like, Okay, how many sites are there out there we don't know about that can produce the potential for really interesting Pinot Noir. You would have had to have that discussion with Michael Shaps, I would think, I mean, what do you think?

Mike Heny

I'm 55 now so I hope to get another 10 or 15 vintages maybe some more in me but that's going to have to be someone else's grail. For me Cabernet Franc is our Pinot Noir. And so, you know, if you look at some of the really interesting Appalachians in the Loire for Cabernet Franc, for me, it's much more suited to our climate and can express site just as well. So, my heart will remain with Cabernet Franc.

Fred Reno

Well, it's interesting you said because some time ago I started buying a lot more Chinon and Bourgueil and wines from the Loire, because I really want to understand that footprint of Cabernet Franc, and then how that related to Virginia, because I see the differences here. I mean, the difference in a Cabernet Franc from Central Virginia and even the Monticello AVA versus a Cabernet Franc from Shenandoah Valley. I mean, miles apart, structurally, texturally. So, I can't even imagine as we hone in on that even more and more, how much more interesting Cabernet Franc will be. And continue to be.

Mike Heny

Yeah. And I'd say just like with the Loire with Cabernet Franc, you can't fake it. So, we've all had under ripe Loire Cabernet Franc that's really not such a great drink. And we've also had just, you know, wonderful expressions of Cabernet Franc from the from the Loire. And I say with Cabernet Franc being such a pyrazine, you know, kind of green pepper driven variety. If it's not ripe, like, if it's not, ripe, you can't hide it, you, you can't blend it away. You can't oak it away. We have all sorts of tricks available to us, but you can't hide it. And by the same token, when it's kind of ripe and beautiful, you also can't hide that. It's just a really, really big, beautiful thing.

Fred Reno

Well, Michael, on that note, I want to say thank you once again for coming to my studio here this morning, sharing a glass of white burgundy and telling my audience your story.

Mike Heny

It's been great being here.