

EPISODE #3 LUCA PASCHINA/GENERAL MANAGER & WINEMAKER BARBOURSVILLE VINEYARDS

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Luca Paschina

Fred Reno

Hi, this is Fred Reno, your host for the Fine Wine Confidential podcast. For this episode, I'm excited to have Luca Paschina, the general manager and winemaker at the renowned Barboursville Vineyard located in the Monticello AVA in Central Virginia. We're here at Barboursville today to learn the history of the property and Luca's winegrowing experience at Barboursville for the past 30 years. Luca, welcome. And thank you for your time this evening.

Luca

My pleasure to be here.

Fred Reno

So, let's start at the beginning. You were born and raised in Piedmont, correct?

Luca

Yes. Torino.

Fred Reno

And did you grow up with a love of wine? Was it in your family? I mean, how did this start?

Luca

Well, my father was a winemaker, as was my uncle. And therefore , I was exposed to the world of wine, and actually, to the world of spirits, also vermouth and grappa and, bitters. And so, it was very fascinating to me from a very young age, to be exposed to the beauty of viticulture, of the beauty of learning how to use your sense of smell. And I was a very curious, inquisitive type of kid. When I was 14 -year-old, my father told me, why don't you come with me in the cellar, we didn't have a wine that he had as a family. But my father worked for a fairly large winery in Canelli, which is the place where a lot of Moscato is made in Italy and Asti Spumante and he said, Why don't you come with me this summer and work a little bit and help me. And so, I remember, I was at the tail end of my vacation, we started the harvest in Piedmont and he let me basically to do my first batch of wine at age 14, and I got hooked.

Fred Reno

So how did it come to be that the Zonin family and Gianni Zonin and you hooked up? How did that all develop.

Luca

In the spring of 1990, I left my relationship with the company I worked for eight years. Just because I didn't fit in the company anymore. I was fortunate in those eight years with this company, I had a chance to travel and do a lot of internship. I worked in in Napa Valley for six months, six months in Finger Lakes, three months independent desk outside of Barcelona, I worked in South Italy and work in North Italy. So, I work also quite a bit of time both in the cellar and doing quality control. I did two years strictly in grape growing. I did two years sales in a trade company in Switzerland in 88-89. But then when it came to my

late 20s, I really felt my heart was in the vineyard as a farmer. I told the company I was working for I want to be in charge of your fine wine division and your vineyard division. I can take care of the vineyard, I can take care of the winemaking. The answer was no for reasons I don't need to discuss. And then I said, well, then I guess I will have to leave and then I was on my own. I started working as a consultant. My second client was the Gianni Zonin the founder of Barbourville Vineyard. I had a phone conversation and I was asked to attend a meeting just outside of Verona. And in the meeting. I was told Well, we have an estate in Virginia we started in 1976. We need to implement some changes, although we need somebody to help us with this. We agreed that I would spend three months here, July, August, September, helping for the harvest. I went back in early October, and I was asked what are the changes that were needed. I told him well the main change that has to happen if you want to see your quality increasing is that you have to pull all your vineyards out, and replant everything. And the reason wasn't that the vineyard weren't planted properly. The main reason was that the source of the plant material that was put in the ground in the 70s and 80s was of a lesser quality, and I learned of that when I was working in the mid '80s in Napa Valley that a lot of new clones coming from Bordeaux, when it comes to Bordeaux varieties of course, and also from parts of Italy were finally coming in through UC Davis in Fresno and being certified through the FDA quarantine process. And so, I learned of that, and I put it to good use in my conversation. I say, you know, I was here in 1990. I look at the vineyard of Merlot that has big cluster big round berries it made a red wine with very little color, very little structure. When we then subsequently planted a clone 181, for example, small berries, thick skin, it produced wine with such depth of color and intensity and

strength. So, I think that was the main reason that Virginia took a bit longer to be established,

Fred Reno

I see so the wrong plant material had been planted early on in that period. Well, they didn't let you just rip their whole vineyard out. This must have been a process.

Luca

It took 12 years. We had 42 acres when I came, we started removing some vineyards. But also we started planting new vineyards. As we were planting new vineyards, some older vineyards were removed as the new ones came into production because we could have not afforded to go from 10,000 case production to nothing. So, it was gradual. And we finally hit the jackpot. And honestly with the '97/'98 vintage.

Fred Reno

What is the total acreage today that is bearing fruit here at Barboursville?

Luca

At the moment in September of 2020 we are at 165 acres simply because we removed 15 acres last fall. And the soil has been worked to improve with chicken litter and Lime. So, we're going to take about three years but in three years, we're going to be back to 180.

Fred Reno

And everything that you produce, is it all a estate?

Luca

No, the only thing that we do not grow in entirety here is Chardonnay. With the high demand of other varietals out of our acreage I rather invest in different varietals, although there are some very good growers of Chardonnay in Virginia. So, I'm helping some growers.

Fred Reno

Well, I will tell you that I had a glass of your Chardonnay with my Salmon this evening before I came here. My wife loves Barboursville Chardonnay, and she buys it. And it's one of our rotating Chardonnays on a daily basis. And so yeah, it's a crowd pleaser.

Luca

Our interpretation of Chardonnay since 1979, the first commercial vintage was entirely fermented in stainless steel, no malolactic, no wood. And still, we do it to this day, and it's our best selling in volume.

Fred Reno

But I can understand why I mean, it's again, it's a crowd pleaser. So ,you been here 30 years now. Correct? This is your will this almost be the 30th harvest.

Luca

This is actually our harvest 30/31.

Fred Reno

So, your over-arching philosophy sounds like to me about winemaking is what I've always believed as well. It's wine growing, it's in the

vineyard. What do you try to accomplish with that once you get it into the cellar and what you're trying to do?

Luca

Yeah, throughout the years, I came to understand more and more that winemaking, it's a very important step of the process. Although if you allow me to say it's happening in a more controlled environment, I'm not saying it's easy, I'm just saying if you apply yourself, if you're passionate, you can really control the environment and you understand better the cause of things. When it comes to grape growing, you really have a lot more to learn because of the variability of the weather conditions, the variability of the soil, and therefore it's for me in the last few years, something that I'm being more attracted to get more involved into how can I improve the quality of the life of the plant and the quality of the grapes, so we've been working in depth into researching different pruning techniques, different fertilization techniques. That's why I said earlier, I go from 160 to 180. I'm removing some vineyards that are still in production because I think I can improve the wine by changing the variety that grows on the specific parcels. Keep in mind when I started planting some vineyards here in the 90s. I didn't have yet a deep experience on this soil and all this on all the parcels we have. So now I am at a point where we can afford to say okay, this vineyard is in full production, but we can remove it. Work the soil for three years and replant it with a different variety and the outcome is going to be a very good result.

Fred Reno

What do you think is the strongest varietal in your vineyard for red wine that you like working with.

Luca

For red wine It's tough to choose. I have to choose one because it's a fair question. I would say that the founding grape for Barboursville it's Cabernet Franc. It's the most resilient, adaptable between vintages it can produce in a, let's say in a more simple vintage and more average vintage it can produce, a very fragrant more gentle red with a medium body. But that's the lowest threshold. Even in a challenging season I can ripen Cabernet Franc here well. Where in a warm climate, we learn how to keep the load on the vines at the level necessary. And it doesn't fear shift in in weather meaning we may go through a dry period, the wet period, some grapes don't take that very well, they split, they tend to deteriorate Cabernet Franc is more resilient.

Fred Reno

When I interviewed Chris Hill and had first met him well over a year ago, I spent some time with him in several vineyards, and I asked him because I was trying to understand his perspective on what is terroir in Virginia, and he just looked at me and said, Fred, in Virginia, it's RAIN. He said that that determines terroir in Virginia to a large extent. What do you think about that?

Luca

Yeah, it is, we're in a region where rainfall, it can be a problem. I like to summarize giving a 10-year average. In a 10-year average that I've been in Virginia you have two vintages where you have too much rain, two vintages where you have not enough to no rain and you have to irrigate. The other six are just where you want to be and is less effort, meaning you don't have to irrigate. You don't have to worry about not sleeping at night because you live in a house with a tin roof and the roof is making a bang with rain coming. But you take all this together

and then you pause, and you think well, I am from Piedmont, Italy, and it's an area where we do have a rainy vintage for sure at least one or two in every 10year time frame. And we have some that they're so dry and so warm that you have to pick Nebbiolo in mid-September when you used to pick it in mi- October. So, Virginia is not much different from my experience growing up in Piedmont.

Fred Reno

Well, I'm glad you address that. Because when I do talk to people that are in the wine industry and who really should know more about Virginia wine, they say well it's too hot, humid, and wet back there to grow grapes. And the way you explain it is very simple. It's like Europe.

Luca

Yes, it is, in the end, what you taste in the glass, does it taste good, or it doesn't taste good. If it doesn't taste good, then we have a problem. But if it does, then that speaks for itself.

Fred Reno

I always tell people who are not in the wine industry, most often businessman, when they ask me what's it like to be in a wine business? And I say, you have to understand at the base of it al--It's just farming.

Luca

It is farming. Absolutely.

Fred Reno

It's that simple. And they always go really. Yeah, it's farming. What do you think it is? Yeah, there's a lifestyle. There's all that, but it's farming.

Well, it sounds like the Zonin family has, as I like to say, given you the keys to the car and are letting you drive it

Luca

Pretty, pretty much. Although I have to recognize that, you know, in the first years, I did have a lot of feedback, a lot of support from technical information, on research, on equipment, for the vineyards and all sorts of other areas. So that was very instrumental. I was fortunate to work for a company that had eight estates, and they had a Chief winemaker and Chief viticulturist. So, I already had experience, but to have even further access to great and updated information was vital for me, for my growth. And to put this information and this great connection between Italy and Virginia.

Fred Reno

Well, they are obviously a terrific family and have a long history in the wine industry. And they have resources. Yeah, absolutely. So, 30 years here in Virginia. What do you see has changed and to some degree, I want to overlay that with what is Climate Change done? If anything, have you seen in 30 years? To the climatic patterns you're dealing with are extremes worse or is it just all modified over the last 30 years?

Luca

I have not seen a major different when it comes to the year. If you take the year as a whole, what are the results? What does the wine taste like at the end of the year? In the past 30 years? I've seen like I said earlier, the one with too much rain. The one with too much heat or drought. What I've seen different clearly here is actually that most of the springs in the past, let's say 10 to 15 years have been, for the most

part very short. So, you go from a gradual warming up to a quick warm up. You go from 70's to 80's to 90's sometime. That is something that didn't recall seeing in the early 90s. I'm an avid mushroom hunter for Morels, and they're very driven by spring condition. So, I know that I was finding a lot more Morels in the 90s. In the 2000s I find less now because as they heat up, they stop. So that is different. Although Virginia always has been this more erratic pattern, because of the jet stream on the other hand in Italy, I'm very aware that like I said earlier, we used to pick Nebbiolo in mid-October sometimes end of October and now they pick in mid-September to end of September. So definitely there in the Mediterranean it has created a lot more warmth. And the harvest is being earlier and earlier here it is still very variable.

Fred Reno

Well, here is an interesting question. Given the fact that you're so successful yourself and Barboursville, and as an operation and in winegrowing. I had one vintner say to me a while ago here in Virginia, he said, Fred, it's entirely possible that some of the best vineyards in Virginia have not even been planted yet. What's your thoughts on that?

Luca

Virginia is a very large state. Therefore, we do have a lot of different sites that yet have to be discovered. The main thing when we discover a new site, you need to be capable of understanding what is the best grape you can grow on it. Because if you find a great site, but then you plant, let's say Merlot in a very weak site, you will not make a good wine. On a weak site you have to plant Cabernet Sauvignon, you have to find a more vigorous variety. But it's absolutely true that we still have a lot of different terroirs in Virginia,

Fred Reno

I'm biased because I believe in the quality of Barbourville wines. However, 45 years does give you some insight into what is best for this site. You can maximize this vineyards potential. And you really frame it pretty well when people are trying to find new sites there's no shortcut.

Luca

That's where we have seen that on our red clay and by the way, here there are the different slopes on facing northeast all the way to the south. And then some more water retention, less water retention some are on steeper slopes, some are very gentle slopes an array of different parcels. We have seen that actually what really does grow best is the Cabernet Franc, Merlot, and Petit Verdot. We seldom produce great Cabernet Sauvignon. Because Cabernet Sauvignon is not known to produce great wines in clay. For that reason, we are no longer investing vineyards in Cabernet Sauvignon. We did in the early 90s as we were investing heavily in Merlot, Cabernet Franc, along with Nebbiolo which is the other one that is an outlier and does very well here.

Fred Reno

Speaking of vineyard, this Goodlow planting and the Goodlow Mountain is that a new planting or was that

Luca

it's a planting that is fairly recent. It is only 10 years old yet is showing some great and unique characteristic in the wine produced from this vineyard. So, a few years ago in 2017, we chose to use some of the grapes from a three and a half acre parcel to produce a single vineyard Cabernet Franc. Very elegant, it is not a wine of power, its a wine of

great elegance most Caberent Franc is like that. Some goes in Octagon in the blend, and some goes by itself as a single vineyard bottling

Fred Reno

Well as long as you brought it up I was going to ask you that question. Octagon, which is your flagship wine was that your creation? And how did it come to be?

Luca

When I came to Barboursville, I thought to establish an estate you have to produce a great wine of the Estate. And so, I started looking at what was available in the vineyard to produce the best wine I could. And keep in mind I'm still talking about vineyard planted with the clones that were not as great. The 1991 vintage came about and was a great growing season. We made some good to very good wines and up coming was 1996 which is when we would have celebrated the 20th anniversary of Barboursville. And I thought, let me do a small bottling of the best I can produce from 1991. And I blended basically Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. I would say the wine was good too very good but was not a great wine, yet it gave me enough reason to do a bottling to use to celebrate the occasion. I bottled the wine and had no idea how I was going to label it. I didn't ask anything from those in Italy and they just went on my own. I start thinking about how can I name this wine. Of course at that point, I knew already a lot about Thomas Jefferson, and his many attempt to create wine growing. I know, he was an oenophile, and he loved the food and the wine of Europe. He tried to basically bring here to Virginia the same lifestyle when it comes to food and wine. He also designed a historic landmark on the estate within that building there is an Octagonal room, like he had in all of his

drawings. And so, I thought, Well, why don't I call the wine Octagon because it's a name easy to remember. And it's a symbol of perfection and balance. It's also connecting a lot of the old world that with a new world, meaning Jefferson going to Europe trying to bring a tradition here in New World and failing unfortunately. And this one I thought was a good example how actually, it can be done, how it really happened, that there was a possibility that now we can drink a great wine like Jefferson saw possible. That's how it came about.

Fred Reno

That's fantastic. That's a great backstory

Luca

I went on, I produced it, I made a label myself, basically very little graphic designer experience, I went to a local print shop in Charlottesville, T & N Printing and we printed on a parchment paper type of label. It was in two color red and black on this parchment paper. And I presented the night of the event. Nobody knew it existed, and everybody was very pleased about the story and the thing. So, the idea was there, the desire was there, the great wine was not there. In '97 & '98 we produced it. So much time had to go by. And why because I produced this wine for an occasion. It was good to very good. But I only produce it again as Octagon when I finally had the great wine coming from this new planting, of this new clone and that's what really made our flagship red wine take off and become recognized nationally, internationally media in early 2000 when the wines were only three or four years old.

Fred Reno

I've had a few vendors mentioned me that were here and understood that 1998 here in Virginia was this incredible vintage.

Luca

It was a very good vintage. I still sometimes prefer '97 because it was a little cooler. But let's say they were both very, very good growing seasons '98 was a bit was dry, but hot. '97 was ripe but cooler. In the 90s you know, above 100/105 degrees some days. So, it was an easy growing season for farmers. And keep in mind, by then we did have experience but most other people didn't have as much. I am not complaining they were good years.

Fred Reno

You know, you have the benefit that a lot of wineries here in Virginia don't, and certainly a lot of us in the trade don't, of back vintages to see how your wine ages and how Virginia wine ages. I'd love a comment on that. I mean, here we are enjoying the 2013 Vermentino it's as fresh as the day it was bottled far as I'm concerned.

Luca

Yeah, it's one thing I've done diligently throughout the years, I kept thousands of bottles in aging starting specially from the 97- 98 vintage, I still have a decent amount of wine from the early 90s. They're drinkable, but they're not great wines. But starting '97 on we have a decent amount of bottle from the 90s, a lot from the 2000s even currently, like we're now releasing 2015 Octagon, although we kept 5000 bottles 2014 in aging, because I believe that that's a testimony for the next decades for this estate.

Fred Reno

Let me put you on the spot a little bit. I know most vintners hate this, but what do you see here for this year's harvest? And the potential for this vintage 2020.

Luca

Hmm Well, it's been a challenging season as a grower. We had a warm March then we had a cooler April. Then we had a very cold early May. We had frost and we lost grapes in lower areas, in aggregate we only lost 7%, and then we had actually have kind of a rainy May and then it was a very good blooming season with good weather. We wound up between a drought in July, and then all of a sudden August it started raining with some sun which was good. And then August 31st we got a big storm, a freak storm dumping almost four inches of rain on grapes there were already fairly ripe. What's the outcome, basically the outcome is for this year, we finished just about picking all the whites, but Fiano, which wasn't a big problem by that morning. We have wines with a bit lower alcohol content and the aromatics of the wines are very fragrant, they might not have the richness, but yet they're fragrant, they are refreshing. So, I'm very satisfied, despite the challenges we had with the reds is going to be a toss-up we don't know yet. At the moment we're going through a couple of vineyards we have some Barbera which is only three acres. That's the one that suffers the most from the rain, and we know that that's why we only have three acres. But for the rest of the Merlot, the Nebbiolo, the Cabernet Franc, and the Petit Verdot they are very wholesome, they're in great shape. So, we still have a good chance to actually have a great vintage. 2004 was not much different than this one when it comes to August, September. Very similar. And we just pursued that we had to drop some grapes on the ground. But like 2004

Octagon is right now in our libraries still available to taste by the ounce, and is a spectacular wine. It just was a very tough growing season.

Fred Reno

You are one of the very few Virginia wineries who has national representation and is out there in the marketplace, relative to the majority the Virginia wine industry, what are the challenges you've seen so far to the national distribution, and getting the word out?

Luca

Well, the biggest challenges are finding the right network to distribute your wine. In our case, because the quality is there but the region is not as well known yet, so it requires the acumen of the distribution system to target specific restaurants that are open to be more audacious about their wine list, but also intelligent more intelligent buyers. So, Virginia wines they cannot belong to a large distribution system outside of Virginia, they belong to the fine restaurant, to restaurant where the sommelier actually is seeking novelty but quality. When it comes to price. I remember years ago hearing other people well, Virginia wine overpriced. Now actually I'm hearing a lot of time, the opposite, especially people that come here to Barboursville that really are major wine buyers, and they drink great wines, I hear the comment many times they say gosh your wine so good, very affordable, I have to spend three times as much for a great wine from a West Coast district that I'm not naming, because I just don't want to single out anybody or even some parts of Europe. So that's the reality. I still think Virginia wines in the long run that the Mid Atlantic is going to be the biggest market. We are have about 12 million people within a three hour drive. So that's our biggest market. Yet is very important to be in great restaurants in Chicago, in Miami in New York, in San

Francisco, because this is the best way to expose the wine and bring knowledge to consumers.

Fred Reno

Well, and I agree with you on the wine quality. That's been the thing that has driven what I've been trying to do. When I hear this comment, I've heard it before, well, you know, Virginia wines are expensive, right? You know, they're really expensive. And I'm like, No, they're not. Essentially the sweet spot for Virginia wine, you can buy high quality Virginia wine between \$18 to \$35 all day long that competes with and does much better in a lot of cases than its counterparts from all over the world. In fact, the statement I've made is, and I would love your comment on this--I may be understating this I don't know. But I tell people in the trade when I'm talking to them, that of the 300 or so wineries that are in Virginia right now, today, at least 15%, maybe 20% at this point, because I haven't had a chance to taste from everything, But at least 15% of these wineries produce as good a quality of wine as anybody in the world right now. In overall quality Virginia competes with anybody in the world right now for its quality. Some of the varieties we know are different and that type of stuff. That's regionality and the difference, but the quality is there. There is no question about that, and it can only improve and grow. I believe that Barboursville for me sets the standard about what everybody could aspire to. To make larger amounts of wine than the normal Virginia wineries and yet retain the quality and I'm just wondering, okay, what is it going to take Virginia, to

breakthrough around this country? Because this is a secret of what is going on here.

Luca

What It's gonna take is time. That's it. There are other means don't get me wrong, that are very important. What we're doing tonight is very important. Receiving people here and explaining to them about the state and the soil is very important, but still time. It's what it takes. And therefore time, patience, passion, dedication. That's what we have. We have a very good group of very talented winemakers, guys and ladies that come from all over the world now. They're bringing all this experience here, the more you work in a vineyard. In a specific area, the more you gain knowledge on how you work in that area. What I tell people all the time is hey, look, this is not like making beer. I like beer and I respect beer makers, but you can make a batch of beer every day. To make wine from a parcel. A one acre parcel you have one shot, one time in the year and then we have to wait another year. And if the weather is not cooperating, well, guess what? You have to wait another year. And then you have to age the wine for three or four years. So that's where I say you need time. And I'm not in a hurry. If anybody goes into the winemaking business and wants to rush to get results is making a big mistake.

Fred Reno

Well, you do have the advantage of Barboursville because you have a wonderful restaurant, Palladio. So you have a showcase that is Italian focused and can drive that expression of your wine. Wonderful B&B, if you will so you've got some hospitality here. You have the whole package here. To some degree, it is European.

Luca

It is and the reason why we have a restaurant is simple. I remember when we made the first great wine in 1997. That wine was so good. And then we blended the Octagon I remember telling the owners say look. We now have a great wine that we're seeing is better than I thought it could be. It was that good. And I remember saying is not going to sell on its own we have to market it and I don't believe we can just market it by having a big PR firm and then doing major advertising, we're a small estate. I think we should open up a great restaurant. Because if we create here on this estate an environment where people can come and enjoy to the fullest and understand to the fullest why we make a great wine. We will create through the year ambassadors and they will travel, they will tell others and that's exactly why we opened it. I think was one of the best investments when it comes to marketing the wine that we ever did here on the estate. Later on we refurbished some of historic homes that we have on the estate and opened a luxury Inn. It is only nine rooms. And so, I have seen a lot of people here. Coincidentally during this lockdown I received so many couples here staying a day and having dinner and coming down to the Wine Library, they see an old bottle of wine, and a lot of them say well we're supposed to be in Italy and we couldn't go and we researched where should we go and your name came up. All of them admit It's like being in Italy. I say, I know. That's why I'm still here.

Fred Reno

A moment about the collegiality, if you will, in Virginia, of the winemakers and the wine community, is there a pretty open attitude of sharing?

Luca

it is extremely open, and I can pick up a phone like most other vintners, pick up a phone and call or send emails, and ask can you help me with something I need, I need a reference, I need to find something. And that's something that really was, was beautiful. When it came to Europe, we respect our competition, but we don't help it. I hope we don't get to be like that here one day, but I understand why that is like, you know, there's so many vineyards there is more competition. But that's something I've very much enjoy, when it came to the early 90s was finding this collegiality, and this camaraderie, and people genuinely wanting for everybody to do better. And that's still happening, that is still there. There are a few outliers, but they're really, you, I can count them on half of my hand, because then, you know, some people are their friends. But otherwise, my gosh, it's a great place to work, great place to learn and exchange information. Indeed,

Fred Reno

To me, Virginia, reminds me of where Oregon was 25 years ago, that's what I see. That's where Oregon was. And now that's where Virginia is. And it's just about ready for people that really understand, it's going to break out. Unfortunately, that's going to end up bringing some more larger players in here. That's what it's going to take. But that's when it takes off. Serious players, not just commercial, but serious players, like the Zonin family. Somebody comes in here puts a stake in the ground and says, okay, we see it, we're gonna help move this thing along.

Luca

I like to give people an understanding, using enough numbers in California, of all the wine that is consumed in California above 60% is produced there. In Virginia's it is five and a half percent, if we were to grow tenfold, we couldn't do it in five years, because we cannot plant so many grapes. But what I'm saying there's still a lot of growth within the state and the mid- Atlantic I'm referring to. It's a very healthy position to be in because there's a lot of growth we can gain. If we continue to be very diligent and make the right decisions in the field as growers, it's going to happen.

Fred Reno

Well, Luca, I really appreciate your time this evening, cutting into your dinner hour here. But this has been very instructive. And I've learned quite a bit in this short period of time we've had to talk here. So, I just want to say thank you again, and it's going to be a great contribution to my new project.

Luca

Thank you so much.