

EPISODE # 34 JENNI McCLOUD/CHRYSALIS VINEYARDS

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Jenni McCloud

Fred Reno

Jenni, welcome to my Podcast. And thank you for taking the time to join me in my studio today.

Jenni McCloud

I love your passion. You're very, very welcome. And thank you for inviting me.

Fred Reno I always like to start at the beginning. So, let's start at the beginning with your vision. What prompted this idea, this vision that you could come to Virginia reestablish Norton, and bring it back to its old glory and with it, Virginia wine growing in general, what was behind all that?

Jenni McCloud Oh, wow. It was an evolutionary process. Really, I didn't, at the outset of this whole, you know, game to play. I didn't really see myself even producing wine at the outset, I had sold a business and my mom had told me, Jenni, you gotta slow down honey you just work all the time blah, blah. And I bought into that for all of about literally one week. The next week, two weeks to the day of selling a business in Manhattan, New York, I was in Charlottesville, back in the town where I'm at now, at the Omni Hotel attending the A. S. E.V American Society of Enology and Viticulture, the eastern section meeting, the big ones out in the west in California, they move the eastern section meeting to different towns just to make it convenient for those up in the Finger Lakes, let's say or are in New York, or all the way down to Georgia. So that's why Virginia sometimes, you know, it's a good center. And the theme that year was alternative grapes. I like sitting up front at these things because my eyes have always been horrible. I learned that in school that you pay attention and be upfront. That way I was able to, to remember more. So, I was watching Dennis Horton, Alan Kinne up on the dais and talking in the morning session about Viognier. Pouring it around. I was like, wow, this is really good white wine? I'm surprised, you know, Viognier Condrieu. Right. And then, at lunch, I sort of glommed on to Dennis, and just sat right down next to him at lunch.

Fred Reno

You sound like me when I go to these things. I muscle my way right next to the most important person in the room.

Jenni McCloud

Well I thought, wow, this is high quality. And I like the fact that Alan the winemaker and consultant to Dennis was up there talking about growing Viognier, talking about irrigation. I was planning a vineyard at that point. And then the afternoon session happened. The morning were the whites in the afternoon were the reds. We had some usual you know folks, we had Atlas Peak bring in a Sangiovese we had people really from around the country that were attracted to this theme of alternative grapes. Because I think a lot of people Me included at that time had become a little ABC. Anything But Chardonnay.

Fred Reno

Unless it's White Burgundy? Yeah, well, alright, let's separate the two, right?

Jenni McCloud

Yeah, they're the world class, ultra-premium. I never get tired of a great Bordeaux. Never get tired of a good Burgundy. But you want to have a little variety. You know the term that variety is the spice of life. Well, that's true.

Fred Reno

So, that's the inspiration. But you were already planting a vineyard at that time.

Jenni McCloud

No, I was not. Again, it was just two weeks to the day that I closed the sale of Landmark Research, International Corp. That was my number 12 business.

Fred Reno

When did you buy your property then?

Jenni McCloud

I found it in 97. What happened was that I met Alan, kind of formed a friendship with Dennis Horton and I engaged Alan. So, this was in 95. I engaged Alan. And over the course of several months, he interviewed me, you know, what wines do you like? Well, I really love Bordeaux. But I also I drink a lot of Spanish reds. I like the fruit forward character of Spanish reds, they're affordable as well. He said, all right let's go to Spain. So, Wow. All right. Let's go to Spain. I am all over that. So, we did in January of '96. We went to northern Spain visiting Rioja, Riberira del Duero, Rias Baixasa and it was in Vigo a town in Galicia northwest of Spain, where I was introduced to Albarino. I had never tasted it before had not even heard of it. And it was like a slap in the face. We were at this little restaurant called El Mesquito. Oh, very cool. I remember. So, we tooled around Spain. Well, we took some cuttings.

Fred Reno

Oh, that old suitcase clone.

Jenni McCloud

Yeah, the Samsonite clone. Although we did it a little bit of in a bigger way. We sent back boxes and boxes of aromatic barbecue sticks. Gotcha. Probably, I'll deny it.

Fred Reno

So that was the beginning then of the formation of the vineyard.

Jenni McCloud

Yes. Right. So we went back to Spain in '97. Went back to Spain and Portugal in '98.

Fred Reno

Wow. So you planted Albarino that early on.

Jenni McCloud

Yeah. So I believe that, I don't know for a fact, I know that Brian Babcock out in California was growing some Albarino, and he had been friends, or at least in communication with Alan. And interestingly, I think it was Brian, potentially, that directed us to Morgadio in Rias Baizas And so we visited Morgadio, and that's where the cuttings came from.

Fred Reno

Well, very interesting. Then how did the Norden come in to all this?

Jenni McCloud

Well, that was a given. As soon as I had tasted Norton, at the A.S.E.V. I'm like, Okay, well, that's a given. And in fact, that's really what brought me to Virginia. But you can't just grow Norton so it needed a white, it needed some other stuff. We are one of the first, I think the first producer of Albarino. We might have bottled the first Albarino in the United States. Not sure. But certainly, we were one of the primary sources of Albarino early on for budwood. And Viognier. To this day, we still do produce a fine Viognier, and a couple different iterations of Albarino.

Fred Reno

Well, folks, I'll interrupt here, this Viognier is world class. I've had it. Buy it. It's really good. Thanks for the plug. No, I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. Well, Thank you. It's really good. So back to Norton. You have the largest vineyard planting of Norton, correct? Yes. 40 acres?

Jenni McCloud

40, a little over 40 acres. Yes. Those are true acres. That's not including any turn around space or anything, how I calculate acreage is, you take your rows and vine spacing, and multiply those. And that's the square footage per vine. So, we have a couple different trellising systems for Norton, Geneva Double Curtain, and single high wire. Interestingly, both of those have 72 square feet per vine. And so that's how we get to 40 acres.

Fred Reno

Well, for the audience's edification, because a lot of people still think that Norton is from Missouri. Who was Daniel Norton?

Jenni McCloud

Yeah, I have a funny little story. I won't tell any names because frankly, I don't remember his name. But there was a Board of Directors of, I think it was Wine America, it could have been another organization. But I was doing a pouring for them. There was a kind of a special event when they came to Virginia. So, I'm pouring some Norton's. They go, Oh Missouri's grape. I'm like, well, actually, it's Virginia's native grape. Oh, that's what the Missourians say. And what's it called? Norton. Oh, you mean like Daniel Norbourne Norton of Richmond, Virginia. Daniel Norton was a medical doctor, but he was hell of a lot more interested in being a great hybridist and playing around with grapes. You know, that was an interesting time in our history. There was a lot of guys, gals, that were creating new varieties to beautify the new country. They were exploiting the territory not in a negative sense, but with the idea of using the land in a productive fashion. And I think enough time had passed, where Thomas Jefferson had failed to have a successful vitis vinifera, the European grape vineyard that Daniel Norton said well we sure as heck have a lot of native grapes around here, can't we get something that will make a fine red wine? You know that quote from Thomas Jefferson, where he says; I'm going to botch it because I don't remember it verbatim but something along lines of, you know, we can in these United States make wines as good as in Europe, perhaps not of the same kind, but doubtless as good. And I taped that, and it sits right above my desk and has for 20 years.

Fred Reno

Well, I have that quote, you're talking to the owner of the Thomas Jefferson Wine Company here. So I clearly remember that. Dig into this a little bit more because I'm really curious. What was it like in the early days with the Alan Kinne's and Dennis Hortons, what was that like and what was going on? Tell me a little bit about that experience?

Jenni McCloud

Wow, you know, things change. Industries evolve, industries grow. But that was a period of time when there was just great camaraderie in our industry. Dennis Horton was the most oh, gosh, you're gonna get me emotional. Please, go. No, I mean, he was my friend. I spoke with him two or three times a week for years. He use to say to me, I don't know why they don't

teach copying 101 In college, find somebody that's doing something successful that interests you, and copy them at least to start, learn the ropes and then take it in the direction that you need to take it and that made a lot of sense to me. So, I listened to him on irrigation. I listened to him on the amount of water to put on the vines. We had been friends over the years and I was crestfallen when he passed away in 2018.

Fred Reno

Yeah, I've always lamented now that I've been back here in Virginia and really learn the history that I never had the opportunity to meet the man.

Jenni McCloud

He was an interesting guy. He was really outspoken, and he was a very self-assured, but an innovator. I mean, he brought Norton back to Virginia. He was the guy that introduced Viognier, and then in concert with Alan, who I think is one of the unsung heroes of Eastern viticulture, I mean, if it wasn't for Kinne, I wouldn't have even known about Viognier. We did a chart of the texture, aromas, flavors of Viognier, kind of a flavor wheel getting into the peach and the apricot and the cantaloupe, and that's in the permanent collection of the Museum of American History, Smithsonian. So, and I'm glad because, in my opinion, I mean, Alan taught America how to make good Viognier.

Fred Reno

Interesting. What's it like farming Norton versus vinifera?

Jenni McCloud

Well, in a way, it's night and day. We pride ourselves on being good viticulturist and treating all of our vines carefully, not over treating them if we have to deal with a fungicide. But Norton is just bulletproof. I mean, you go to the vineyard, we have a lower area where some of the Albarino had gone through a really bad winter and killed off some of the young vines, you'll look to the left. And there's Norton, it just is a model of vigor and health. I tell people think about growing, if you want to have a low environmental impact, if you want to have something that's going to thrive, plant something that wants to grow there, not something that you have to coax and cajole to grow. And so, the idea of being involved in the restoration of a grape that was renowned around the world. Norton, won gold medals in Paris. It's claimed in the Vienna Universal Exhibition in 1873, that it was declared the best red wine of all nations. And, then it got forgotten about for, well I have theories about that. In Virginia, prohibition proceeded national prohibition by a number of years, right. And of course, when they did that, nobody knew they were going to end it. And when they did end it, there's a couple little quirks about Norton, that I think were key in it not being picked up again. It's very tough to propagate from cuttings. It has difficulty developing adventitious roots before it breaks bud. So you'll see the we have a commercial nursery and it took me two, three years to figure out how to properly

propagated because it required heating, bed heating, so that you can heat the root zone to foster root development, but keep the tops cold to suppress budbreak. Otherwise, it breaks the bud, starts go on looks great. And two weeks later, it's just dead and on investigation there's just no roots.

Fred Reno

That's fascinating. Well, another subject that's tied to all of this, and I know it's your passion so let's talk about the Ag District. What that represents and why you did that?

Jenni McCloud

Okay. Let me just back up, just to say the second factor. I think that may have been a reason that Norton get didn't get picked up, it's a little slower to get established, really takes an extra year. And so when you think about everybody's racing to plant grapes, and they're looking at the list, they go okay, Norton, tough to start, slow to grow, you know. So, it was kept alive in Missouri. Thank goodness.

Fred Reno

Gotcha. So, the Ag district,

Jenni McCloud

the Ag District. Wine has a wonderful way of stirring the creative juices. I was talking with a friend of mine, who was the President of, e Brains an advertising agency. At one point, they were producing internet, social media leads for, I believe the Virginia tourism Bureau. I had engaged them to help me with a marketing campaign early on with Norton. So, We're sitting at my house, and we're drinking some Norton. I said, you know, I created an agricultural district on my land. I had enough land that I could actually form a registered agricultural and forest district in Virginia. Now that's public hearings. And you know, it's kind of a big deal. He goes, what? I said an ag district, he goes, I love it, it's a district. It's bigger than a town, but it's not as big as so, he's carrying on. And he says that's what you got to call it because you've got all this stuff going on. You've got the grapes going on. We had been starting the Creamery and the dairy operation, I have 10 Cow cheeses in production at the Ag district. So, this idea kind of harkens back to why I named my acquisitions of land which were two separate purchases in the original purchase. I named it Locksley Estate after Robin Hood. Robin of Locksley. Not from the steal from the rich and give to the poor. Although, I kind of feel that way, Personally. No, but the idea being is that the land provided the playing field for life. It was the land that people lived on, and the evil Prince John had taken over the Locksley Estate, when the guys had gone off to fight wars. It was like he pulled the rug out from people's lives. So I thought that idea of the Ag District, dovetailed and blended well with that concept, because I grow grapes and make wine I've been passionate about wine, I've collected wines, my whole adult life, but I had a bunch of other land that was not suitable for grape growing. So, I reached out to find

somebody that might do something productive agriculturally with the other land, and fortunately, just out of kind of serendipity. My original partner was consulting for a creamery in the area. He said, Hey, why don't we raise cows and make cheese? I'm like, Hey, and so the idea of the Ag District, really my roundabout way of getting to the answering your question is that it draws people to the land that are passionate about a particular part of agriculture, that we can add some value to the raw commodity product and produce a high-quality artisan food product. For me it's wine. We do cheese, we also have a bakery. We're doing artisan flatbread, we've have our own cheese on our pizzas. So, the idea of utilizing every bit of land that you possibly can to produce a commodity that can be transformed into an artisan food made sense to me.

Fred Reno

That's fantastic. So, I'm curious about what was the reaction from the trade that you experience? When you say well, I'm going to reestablish Norton, and I'm going to plant all this Norton. What was the reaction?

Jenni McCloud

Oh, insert Eye roll here. You know what you know

Fred Reno

Well, let me interrupt you for a second because when I was interviewing Mike Henry, and I asked him about Norton because he worked at Horton for a long time. He said, Norton is the one grape that parts the seas in the wine industry. You either love it or you hate it.

Jenni McCloud

Yeah, I'll tell you what, I've heard that a lot. And I think that that's not an uncommon perception. But I think that that perception is a little stale dated right now. Because as we're able to craft Norton wines that, in our view, and in our mission, not to try to make them taste like something else. To support the aromatics, support the flavor of the grapey wild character, but to work on improving the mouthfeel and texture of the wine so that it more aligns with what those that love wine, see as a characteristic of fine wines. In other words, make it more drinkable by handling some with of the acids to raise the mid palate. And we've done that in the vineyard. We've done that through viticultural and enological practices in the cellar. And I think we've made great strides.

Fred Reno

Well, I agree with you, I look at it from this perspective, the grape will, it'll evolve. There is no reason why it cannot evolve and reach heights that are unknown today. Just like Cabernet Sauvignon has, just like Pinot Noir has. Norton can do that. No question about it.

Jenni McCloud

Yeah, Europe had centuries to figure out what their grapes were, and how to grow them and how to make fine wines.

Fred Reno

Well, and also, this is a little bit of my own opinion. Some people think it's controversial and think I don't know what I'm talking about. But ultimately, a varietal will mutate in a vineyard with its site, and it will start to reflect the site. I think that's what happened in Europe over time, with certain varietals. They found they were best suited for this site, and then they evolved into that wonderful flavor profile that everybody loves today.

Jenni McCloud

I agree with you. I don't think that's crazy. Look at Albarino as an example. Who knows, maybe that had some Riesling ancestry in it or whatever. And it went into a humid region of Spain, Spain's mostly dry and certainly southern Spain is, Galicia, Northwest Spain is humid. They had that that mountain ridge not unlike the Pacific Northwest where a lot of rain and humidity gets hung up in those hills and drops. So Albarino developed either it came with some thicker skins and more loosely clustered, looser berries so that they're not pack really tight allowing them to dry out and that the thicker skins would fend off the more humid climate and the potential for fungi and other pathogens. Do you know that the Galicians EAT MORE SEAFOOD than anybody else in the world per capita. More than the Japanese and what are they drinking with that Albarino.

Fred Reno

Well, the Locksley Estate planted bearing fruit, what's the size of the acreage in total of everything?

Jenni McCloud

I have two separate properties, number of different sort of blocks on Locksley estate. There's 50 acres of grapevines at our site in Middleburg. And I established a very fine vineyard, a kind of high vineyard between 1100 & 1200 feet in the Blue Ridge. And so that's 20. So, in total we have 70 acres.

Fred Reno

That's what you call Hollin.

Jenni McCloud

Hollin. Yeah.

Fred Reno

What's behind that name?

Jenni McCloud

For those that live in Fairfax, I'm not exactly sure where it is. But there's a planned community. One of America's first planned communities called the Hollin Hills, and Bob Davenport, Robert Davenport was the developer. He bought a large farm just south of Sky Meadow State Park back in 1950. And he named it Hollin.

Fred Reno

Oh, okay. You grow Nebbiolo over there as well. How do you like Nebbiolo?

Jenni McCloud

It's tough. I've made three in the last 21 years so. But I tell you what the 2010 was crack ass good.

Fred Reno

I was thinking this morning that this is quite possibly your 25th year anniversary of growing grapes.

Jenni McCloud

We started. Well, that's a kind of an interesting story as well. The first grapes were planted in '97 but I didn't have land in '97 they were planted at Doug Flemers' place, okay Ingleside because Alan was consulting with Doug. And then we planted everything in '98. The first wine with the Chrysalis vineyards name on it was an Alan Kinne Chardonnay back in '96. Then we had our own label the one that everybody knows which I've kept it all these years, Viognier, we made a '97 Viognier, but we made it at Piedmont Vineyards, which no longer unfortunately exists because it had the oldest planting of Chardonnay in the Eastern US. And then everything came after that our first vintage was the wines we produced in '99 out of the garage. Built the winery in 2000.

Fred Reno

So okay, so well over 20 years, what have you seen in your experience as it relates to climate change and growing grapes?

Jenni McCloud

Not a whole lot. I mean, if there's any change, it's been minimal. I mean, this morning, it was nine degrees. I was looking at my phone, I have the little, you know, weather app on it. I am like, oh, man, that's cold. I think maybe we are seeing, you know, today not withstanding a little bit less severe. I remember one of the first I think was '99. That it got into the negative numbers. I think it hit negative seven on the farm. That's pretty cold. But other than that, you

know, we've had some late spring frost and early fall frost we lost 2003 was disastrous, so from cold anyway, I don't know. I don't really see a tremendous change.

Fred Reno

Looking forward. What do you see as your biggest challenge with Chrysalis and what you're doing with Norton?

Jenni McCloud

I think it's pushing the awareness of Norton, more for people. I mean, when people try it, it's our most popular wines. And, I don't think, I mean, obviously, people like Norton, they're probably going to come to Chrysalis Vineyard, so that they get introduced to Norton there. And our number one and number two most successful wines are 100% Norton wines. So we have a little bit of this conundrum of the sort of wine snoots, you know, oh, I only drink Cabernet Sauvignon or something like that attitude. But I tell you what, let me describe it to you, think of Norton lovers plotted onto a bell curve. You have the beginners and the time curve is the length of time that people have been enjoying wine in their lives, right. So, you've got your newbies on the left. And they love Norton, it's, you know, it tastes like a grape, hey what a concept. And then you've got this long tail of those, like me that have been drinking wine for decades, and like, what the heck is this stuff? You know, the idea? Remember, our governor, Mark Warner had sort of charged our industry, I think it was this 2020 plan, or I forget what the year was, but the idea of celebrating the uniqueness and quality of Virginia wines. And I thought, Well, my goodness, that speaks to Norton, that speaks to Viognier, that speaks to Albarino because these are unique, somewhat in the world of wine. And that's been a personal mission. Let's try to make wines that we can craft at the highest level of quality so that they can stand on their own on the world stage without any supporting commentary. You know, like when people say, well for a Virginia Merlot, it's really good you know,

Fred Reno

I'm curious then because you've had this experience and I've only had it once since I've been here. What is the oldest well, age Norton wine that you've had? Talk about the evolution of Norton in the bottle?

Jenni McCloud

That's an interesting question. I collected Stone Hills Norton's John Held of the Held family. I think the oldest one that I had was an '85. I still have several. When I started I bought every single vintage and I talked John into opening up the library and selling me these on and my trips to Missouri. I probably have Oh geez. 100 more than 100 Norton wines still.

Fred Reno

So ,what is the evolution like in the bottle?

Jenni McCloud

our first wine the 2000 Locksley Reserve, just 6,7,8 years ago was just starting to develop some bottle bouquet. So, I think they're like 30-year wines. When they are well crafted and they're kept in proper storage conditions

Fred Reno

When I was interviewing Shep Rouse well over a year ago at Rockbridge Vineyards and unsolicited, he pulled out a bottle of 2001 Norton that he had made. And it was delightful. It reminded me of some of the old Inglenook Cask Cabernets I used to get from the early 70s When I first got in the business. Some of the older B.V. Private Reserve Cabernets. I was like, it was mellow. It had balance. It was subtle but yet perfumed? I thought, so this is what happens to Norton after it has some bottle age on it.

Jenni McCloud

Absolutely does. Interestingly, as a side note, the first wine I ever bought by the case was an Inglenook Limited Cask Cabernet Sauvignon.

Fred Reno

Those were pretty damn good wines in those days. Well, that leaves you my favorite question that I asked every vintner. What was that one wine? Because everybody has it? Where you had that bottle of wine. And you went Oh, wine can be this interesting. It can be this ethereal and can be this good. What was that wine?

Jenni McCloud

I totally remember what that was. Alright, so I have to tell you a little story. Sure. I grew up in Miami in the 60s and in 70s. It was a pretty wild town. You know, pot was coming up from the South America and everybody you know, people were doing stuff right. My high school for goodness sakes was in Look magazine. Yeah, for not in a positive sense. Anyway. So here was my problem. Every time I would take a sip of wine with folks that were enjoying wine. I was like, Oh, it just gave me the willies. Oh, I thought I guess I don't understand this. I'm drinking what everybody else is drinking Ripple, Boons Farm, Strawberry Hill, Mogen David. And I go, I don't get it. How is it that folks that have a lot of wealth and they're educated and well traveled. I mean, they carry on about this stuff. They spend lots of money and they save it. I must not be drinking the same stuff. So, in 1977, I walked into a Big Daddy's liquor store on Miracle Mile in Coral Gables, Florida is Miami. And I told the guy, you know, I don't have a lot of money, but I need a really nice bottle of French wine. And he says, I have just wine for you come with me. I follow him over and he hands me this bottle of wine. Shoot he could have handed me anything. Right. This is good. He says, Oh yeah, it's really good. Historically good as well. You're going to like it. I took it home for Christmas. We sat down at the Christmas table

and had some food and poured the wine, took a sip and I went oh shit, I get it Man. This is fantastic. It was a 1971 Chateau Leoville-Las Cases. It's a Deuxiemes Cru, a second growth. It's still one of my favorite wines. And thank goodness, that sales guy gave me that bottle of wine because it set me on a lifetime of pleasure and exploration.

Fred Reno

Well '71 was a underappreciated Bordeaux vintage.

Jenni McCloud

'70 was a great year. But '71 was a good year.

Fred Reno

There's absolutely no question about it. Sometime I'll tell you my story about my '71 Bordeaux experience as well, because it's very similar in some respects to what she just articulated.

Jenni ,this has been terrific. Thank you. Thank you so much. I think we covered it.

Jenni McCloud

Well, you're very welcome. I'm always interested to share a story about Norton. I think it's, you know, it's ours. It's our grape, it's Virginia's native grape, and we can and should be proud of it.

Fred Reno

I agree.