

EPISODE # 37 AFTON MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS/ELIZABETH & TONY SMITH /OWNERS

SPEAKERS

Elizabeth Smith, Fred Reno, Tony Smith

Fred Reno: Elizabeth and Tony, welcome to my Podcast. I appreciate you taking the time to sit for this interview. So, what's your story? What was the inspiration behind why you decided to get into wine growing and making wine here in Virginia?

Elizabeth Smith: When we had a place over on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, we were drinking the Chardonnays of Church Creek and thought we might plant some vines, (TS: that was our house chardonnay at the time) something along those lines, but we were just too busy at that time. That didn't happen. But that was our first thought of planting vines. Charlottesville is our hometown. And so even though we spent 20 years in Hampton Roads, working and raising a family, we had a property here as a weekend getaway, and we had property as a potential retirement knowing that we'd be back home eventually. And as the kids were in college, we spent more time here than in Hampton Roads. We did UVA full weekend wine program. And then we got into the PPCC Viticulture and Enology programs, and that was like being the weekend warriors. It was so much fun.

Tony Smith

At that time in the fall, I was teaching here on Mondays and Tuesdays. And so, we would come to our getaway place on Friday. It became four days a week here three days a week there. And we spent our Saturdays doing the PVCC classes. I mean, what better way to spend your time then a few hours in the classroom, then grab lunch, and then go actually spend time in a vineyard or in a winery continuing to learn from some of the great characters teaching. I teach a second-year elective and real estate finance and development at the Darden school. I'm in my 15th year of doing that now.

Fred Reno

Oh wow. So, you really do have direct ties here to the community and everything surrounding it. We do yes, this is coming home for us. I'm curious, what was it like? Before you bought the vineyard, let's say because you're familiar with the whole winegrowing scene. You mentioned one of the best vineyards in Chatham Creek and Jon Wehner, those folks, in the early days in the Virginia wine industry, as consumers, what was that like?

Elizabeth Smith

Well, that was 15 years ago, easily that we were starting to spend some time drinking and learning about Virginia wine, and it had a ways to go.

Tony Smith: Just like any place where you get wine, there are great wineries, and there are some that are not so. That was, I think, early Virginia wine, it was like I've got dirt, I can plant grapes. But it wasn't the depth of knowledge on what makes a good site and what vines would grow on that site. And so that evolution to a great site and the

right grapes turned into great wine, and then other sites where they either had a bad site or had the wrong, grape selection than they were not as good.

Elizabeth Smith

and I think about 15 years ago was really when that almost tipping point of people understanding a lot of these factors. And it was a rapid improvement that we saw just even in those first couple of years that we were spending time here learning.

Fred Reno

Was wine something that was in your family when you were younger, or just something you just gravitated to.

Tony Smith

Only wine that came in the jugs.

Elizabeth Smith

Maybe family holiday meals, it was not a daily occasion in our household growing up.

Fred Reno

Well, that's not an unusual story that I've heard in my interviews in the past. So, when you bought the property in 2009, it was smaller, and you've doubled acreage, is that correct. 26 acres now in total?

Elizabeth Smith

Well, the property in total is 160 plus. But 24/25 acres in vines Yes, we've ripped out, we've replanted, we've reoriented, but basically 24,25 acres in vines.

Fred Reno

Well, your winemaker Damien started making wine for you in 2011. Did you make wine in '09 & 10?

Absolutely, So, I mean, there's a longer story, which I'm sure we'll talk about, but we ended up taking over on April 1 of 2009. And leading up to that we thought we had a winemaker. Sort of last minute it didn't work out. So, as of April 1, we were the owners, and I was the winemaker until Labor Day weekend. The finishing of the two thousand eights that were still in barrel, the Chardonnay and all the Reds were still in barrel. And then the whites and the early reds, at that time we made a varietal Pinot Noir, were all done by me under the tutelage with Michael Shaps as a consultant, but also some friendly guidance from Matthieu Finot at King Family because he first worked at Afton Mountain vineyard in 2003. So, if we needed guidance on how do you do this or that he knew and specific to Afton he knew that, where Michael had a much, much broader view. We also had the good fortune of Robbie Corpora, who was vineyard manager for his family, who stuck around. I think he agreed to two years, and he stuck around for four years. So, we had the benefit of that in transition.

Fred Reno

How did Damien end up coming to work for you in 2011?

Elizabeth Smith

We had an interim winemaker who was a lovely young man from France as well. But he moved on, his wife was not interested in living in rural areas, so he moved on.

Tony Smith

He grew up in the Malbec region in France. And '09 was a spectacular red vintage. So still, some of my favorites of our wines are from that '09 vintage with him. But he lasted two vintages before he got married and moved to DC because Afton wasn't where she wanted to be.

Elizabeth Smith

But we knew Damien in those years as that circle of regional French winemakers, that all hung out together. So, we knew Damien and we had been to visit him. At that time, he was at Old House in Culpeper, and we went to visit him. We had tasted some of his wines. And when it was time to find a new and hopefully more permanent winemaker because the fellow who was with us for those first two, vintages was here through training Ohio State intern program, and we were looking for a long-term winemaker to stay with us. When we met with Damien, we encouraged him to think about coming to work for us. Thankfully, for us, he did, he was willing to not only be closer to Charlottesville, where his social life was versus being an hour away plus, but also the opportunity for him to have a vineyard site that could really grow the vinifera grapes that he wanted to work with, which he really didn't have that much opportunity, previously.

Fred Reno

I understand. So, Elizabeth you're the general manager. That's my day job. Yes. Okay. What is that like jumping into that role?

Elizabeth Smith

Oh, well, it depends, these days between Damien and our retail manager. I'm,

Fred Reno

it's a well-oiled machine.

Elizabeth Smith

Yeah, exactly. I step out of the way. And I'm basically on the computer most of the day, like most office people, but our formative years and all throughout, we've been very active and hands on. This is not just sitting behind the computer.

Tony Smith

For the first two years, if you wanted to see the Smiths, you came on Sunday, and it was the two of us and our son and maybe one other person in the tasting room, and we were all behind the tasting bar pouring away. That was for years. And now Sunday's the day that we tend to go out because it's not as busy as Saturday. We know our staff can handle it. And that's sort of our day off. So, it's been a total about face from what it was to begin with.

Fred Reno

Were you intent when you were looking for a vineyard site to get one with elevation? I mean, you were talking about the Eastern Shore, basically which is flat but produces some exceptional wine, especially the Chardonnay from Chatham Creek. So were you intent on looking for something with elevation or did Afton Mountain happen at the right time.

Elizabeth Smith

In a roundabout way, we already had properties here and our intent coming out of PVCC was that we would plant on either both of those

properties in a small manner and work our way into a five-year program of eventually opening up winery. But working with Chris Hill,

Tony Smith

we were good students

Elizabeth Smith

And neither of those sites worked. the short answer. Oh, we would be sorry, if we were to plant those.

Tony Smith One was about a 450-foot elevation and good relative elevation, but it faced more West. And it was steep. And so, we really couldn't have gotten two and a half-planted acre. And we would have had to be successful if we planted hybrid grapes on it. And that's not really what we wanted to do. But that's when Chris Hill goes well, let me show you a good site.

Elizabeth Smith

This was 2008. He calls his broker friend, and his broker says, you know, what are you doing and the brokers like nothing. And so, they took us to Afton, which had been on the market previously, but was not at the time that we came and met with them. And we were like, well, we were really just looking to start a vineyard ourselves. But when we saw the property not only for its specific terroir and the excellent aspects that make it a good vineyard site, but it's just beautiful.

Fred Reno

Well, folks, I'll interrupt her here because I've been there. My wife and I enjoyed the grounds and it is gorgeous. It's just flat-out a gorgeous site

up there. So, congrats and obviously, having Chris Hill, you couldn't have had a better guidance from a vineyard standpoint.

Elizabeth Smith

Exactly, It was just a wonderful experience with them. And in that process, we went from our five-year program to a five-month program. So, it just turned on its head to buy an existing business and jump in.

Tony Smith

There was an interim step, we went to an unplanted site first, and actually put in an offer there. And it really was going to be a five year, plant the grapes, let them get producing in that process, build the winery, create a brand, but that didn't work out. And this agent sent me an email and said, I'm throwing this up against the wall to see if it'll stick. But if you're going to plant the grapes and build a winery and create a brand, would you be interested in one that already exists? And that's when we went up there? And it was like, huh, so it went from, Elizabeth's birthday, to our daughter's birthday, when it was under contract, to April, it closed, and me going and telling my partners well, I'm going to be working remotely from Charlottesville, starting April 1st, and not telling them that April 1st I was going to be inside tanks cleaning, doing other things that weren't part of the prior job.

Fred Reno

So, is all the wine you produce Estate bottled. Is that correct? Yes. That's wonderful.

Elizabeth Smith

Yeah, we have worked our way into that. As we've expanded the vineyard when we first bought the property in 2009, it was 11 acres of

vineyard, but with the opportunity to buy more property contiguous and expand the vineyard. It's all estate fruit.

Fred Reno

What varietals did you put in yourself as you're expanding?

Elizabeth Smith

Specifically, Albarino and then more of Cab Franc.

Tony Smith

That was 2010, we had a north facing relatively steep slope. And so, for the Albarino, you know, that's, you know, good afternoon shade, not as much sun. And it was 2010. So, nothing like planning almost an acre on a hill. And it was a drought year, so hand watering all of these Albarino vines. And we didn't really get good fruit until at least the fourth leaf, almost the fifth leaf, but it's just amazing fruit.

Fred Reno

Where did you get the inspiration for Spanish grape or Portuguese?

Elizabeth Smith

This is crazy. Yeah, we were doing the research. And because of that north facing slope less sun, we're like, okay, the whole climatic comparison of the Albarino, native land. But interestingly, the Corpora's had actually thought of that themselves. So, we're working with Robbie, we were like, we both agree.

Tony Smith

We're just talking to Tom and Shinko. About what were your thoughts on the hill, and they said Albarino, were like, well, that's what we were

thinking. And it's planted in up down rows. I think Robbie, Tom and Shinko had been talking to Jim Law about a crawler tractor and all that which we didn't end up needing. You have to be careful; the sprayer can't be too loaded. If you're spraying to go up and down that hill, you need to go do something else first, or only fill it halfway. But it's a great little site. And we ended up planting another round of Albarino in a different area A couple of years later,

Elizabeth Smith

just expanding Petit Verdot and well, Tannat, Merlot those are all new.

Tony Smith

We learned very quickly that Merlot is a really great grape in Virginia. It's way under appreciated.

Fred Reno

Well again, I'll interrupt because my wife and I had a bottle of 2017 Afton Mountain Merlot last night for dinner. Oh nice. And it is terrific

Elizabeth Smith

It is just really hitting its sweet spot. It just went on our tasting list this past week. I mean, as a matter of fact, but it's really coming around.

Fred Reno

Well. What you said Tony resonates because I said to my wife about halfway through battle, I said this is absolutely purely classical high-quality Virginia Merlot.

Tony Smith

And the thing is the Merlot has a shorter growing season, it tends to get nice and ripe before the tropical storms and late fall weather come in. So, year in and year out Merlot is going to consistently be good. And so, as a base for a blend, or even as a varietal of wine. It's just really great. And there was no Merlot on the site when we bought it. So that was an important addition. We had old cab sauv vines from the late 70s and 80s. So, ultimately replacing them with some more cab sauv and PV.

Fred Reno

Do you have any of the original vines that were planted still producing?

Elizabeth Smith

We do we have about an acre and a half of this core old vine plot in the midst of our existing vineyard that has cab sauv, Pinot Noir and Gewurztraminer.

Fred Reno

Really? So, you have over 40-year-old vines.

Elizabeth Smith

Yes, do they still produce. I feel like every year that we get closer, pulling them out, they feel threatened and do a little better. So, they do still produce, and we do still use it. We set aside those particular grapes in the winemaking process and track them to make sure how we want to use them and so forth. But the vines themselves are just art.

Fred Reno

Do you produce a single varietal Pinot Noir, or are you just use it for your sparkling wine?

Elizabeth Smith

We have in some years. 2014 was the last year we did a varietal of Pinot it really is just so hard to get fully ripe for a varietal wine, but we use it still these days in our sparkling and our Rose. So, we still have Pinot, and we still use it, but not as a varietal. And I don't perceive doing that,

Tony Smith

Afton's done sparkling traditional method since 2003. And so we've kept that going with typically a blend of Chardonnay and the Pinot but you know, the varietal Pinot was good to very good in the right, vintage, but you know, I hate to get known for the varietal wine and then choose not to make it in some vintages or just put it out there when it's not as good as it should be. It adds a lot of body to the rose. And it's just lovely in the sparkling.

Fred Reno

Will talk to me about your efforts in the vineyard, where I read about ecofriendly, trying to really eliminate or at least reduce the use of pesticides and sprays. Talk about that a little bit, because that's a very hot topic, but an important one long term, right?

Elizabeth Smith

And I have to we have to give a lot of credit to Damien, we are simpatico. Tony and I said that we consider ourselves the stewards of this beautiful property. And we've treated it very carefully in our own ways. But under Damien's philosophy, we've really expanded that. And

he uses herbal teas and decoctions. Yes, and also, he knows he's vineyard and winemaker, this is not just a separate, two separate roles, he was absolutely familiar with each block. And then being super conservative, we're not following given spray schedules. On any year, we are probably doing 50% Less spraying than those who are following standard spray schedule. So, it's knowing what's going on. Even to the extent we were talking last year about the number of spider webs in the vineyard you can see on a dewy morning, which is a beautiful thing, because they're helped capturing helping to capture some of the fruit flies and other things. So, spider webs in the vineyard, because we don't use insecticide, actually show a healthy vineyard and help us maintain a healthy vineyard. Oh, that's fascinating. Yeah. And again, we don't pull grapes, the first second, third leaf, typically a little bit on the fourth leaf versus asking the vines right off the bat. How quickly can you give us grapes because we want them to establish root systems, not start producing fruit, and the vine will last much longer if you don't tax it. So right out of the gate, and also not teaching the vine, Damien would be much better to expound on that than I But teaching the vines not to be reliant on what we're going to give them. You're not spraying, spraying, spraying, so that they are weak unto themselves, and waiting for you to come help them. But they are growing naturally resistant, and we see it we see the leaves in our vineyard in the fall last longer than other places they're healthy. They're not going into decline as early as vines that are dependent on having fertilizer and spray that were given to them, they're stronger vines unto themselves. Well that jumps to my other topic. I think some of the vintners I have asked this have misinterpreted what I was saying, but what have you seen in your time, as far as climate change? What has been the differentiation that you've seen? I don't mean it's gotten warmer necessarily. I know like, what have you seen of anything in your vineyards? Well, earlier

budbreak for one and later frost. So, you're just you know, Mother's Day, of course, is the day by which we all start to breathe again. Well, most years, other than 2020. But yeah, it's an issue. So being where we are part of what makes it such a good vineyard side is We are in the rain shadow of the mountain. So, we're protected from a lot of the spring and summer we have great air flow. We are not as prone to frost as some places.

Tony Smith

At our elevation.

Fred Reno

Because the elevation mitigates a little bit and you're right.

Elizabeth Smith

And we have three creeks on the property. If you look at our property from the Blue Ridge Parkway, you can see down on our property, and it's sort of an isthmus, if I can say, right, there's, there are creeks on either side of it. And we have a 13-acre lake as well, that helps mitigate temperature.

Tony Smith

It's, it's 30 feet deep. It's a high volume of water. And so if it's been warm

Fred Reno

Get that next to the microphone, we're going to pour a little bit more of this Meursault.

Tony Smith

So, if it's if it's already been warm then the lake water has heated. And so, we planted the Tannat on the best place on the site for the Tannat. But it's also closest to the lake because the Tannat is more frost susceptible, right. And you know, if the water is 45 degrees, and it goes down to 32, it may be 33 or 34, closer to the water. You do get that little bit of extra protection for being there by the lake,

Elizabeth Smith

But, not only the water, but the fact that we're at the confluence of two natural breaks in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Rockfish Gap and the Humpback Gap on one end and we are in the middle. Tony's talking about the mitigating factors and the Lake, but we can't burn

Tony Smith

If we burned hay bales, we'd catch Nelson County on fire.

Elizabeth Smith

But we count on that breeze to keep the air flowing. We are less frost prone than others. But it is very windy and Afton. Circling back to your question about climate change, that Rain Shadow helps us through spring and summer. But then the fall storms that come from the south, seem to be getting more frequent and stronger and those affect all of us. I don't know that there's anybody who's immune to the tropical storms.

Fred Reno

Yeah, the weather just seems to be more severe when it happens. As I said to my wife, it's the wind. Right? I mean, that's essentially what has driven the California fires. It's the intensity of the wind,

Elizabeth Smith

right? Yeah, anecdotally, we were on the trip, several Virginia wine people did a trip to Napa in 2014. And the main Inn where we were all staying, we watched in 2017 go up in flames. And yeah, that was oh my god, we all stayed there three years ago. Yeah, that's crazy.

Fred Reno

Well, so you've got an important wine writer, a Som, a trade person, whoever you want to impress them. One wine of your wines, I know it's tough to ask for one wine. But what wine would you pull out and say, taste this. This represents who Afton Mountain Vineyards is?

Elizabeth Smith

We might give different answers. Because it's personal preference. Sure. What would you do?

Tony Smith

I mean, I would probably say Tradition, which is our Bordeaux style blend. 16 was our first vintage of that blend, and 17 was a fabulous vintage. So that's probably what I would pull out. That is best reflective of who we are now as Afton. For somebody that likes bigger reds, our '09 Cab Sauv is pretty fabulous. But you know, I've personally got maybe 18 bottles of that left.

Elizabeth Smith

That's not something we're going to promote. The red blends are what the forte is certainly for us and the opportunity for others in the AVA to really shine is the red, are the red wines. And then the Albarino. that's was going to be mine. I absolutely love our Albarino. It sells out so quickly. We planted it into 2010 I think our first vintage was 2015. And

then we planted more, our second block in 2016. That's just starting to produce so we only have it for about six months a year. And we've bottled the 2021 but we won't release it till April or May just to try to get through our busy season and have it in stock. But that is probably my favorite.

Tony Smith

But it has got so much character to it.

Elizabeth Smith

Yeah, it's got that savory mineral white peach.

Fred Reno

Wow. It's really fascinating. What's the biggest challenge you see at this stage of your career and your vineyard and your winery? What would you like to achieve next? Or have you just felt okay, we're just going to steady the ship. This is us.

Elizabeth Smith

Well, we've planted, and we have ripped out and replanted very heavily since 2016. And in another two or three years, we'll see all that fruit really come.

Tony Smith

We sell out of our Cab Franc as well every year. And it's an older block. And so, when we ripped out some of the old cab sauv an old Gewurztraminer that was not producing well, we replaced it with a block of Cab Franc and another block of Albarino. And so that's sort of our future is when the Franc gets into production. When that Albarino gets into production. We've got younger Gewurztraminer vines that

were the replacement that's just barely getting into production. So, when all that is going...

Elizabeth Smith

The Tannat has been slow to start, because the first year we planted it, and then a couple of years subsequent it's cold sensitive, right? And it's really probably fifth leaf this year. It's really just starting to produce.

Tony Smith

Because those young vines, the fruits so acidic. Tannat is going to be that way anyway. But you know, as it calms down, I think that's going to be pretty spectacular.

Fred Reno

What I'm hearing here is a, an evolution. And the wines are evolving. And there's some future not just potential greatness, but really interesting wines are on your Horizon. Is there a generational pass here, is one of your sons or daughters? I mean, your Son is in the craft beer business, right? Yes. Champion beer.

Elizabeth Smith

Yes, he still helps occasionally with marketing for Afton. He has, you know, a lot of connections out there. And he helps us from time to time, our daughter and son in law actually own Monticello Wine Company brand, which we haven't talked about, I was going to get to that. So, there's hope for either or both, or at

Tony Smith

least the possibility that they would have an interest.

Fred Reno

Well, let's, let's talk about that, because that's something very much intrigued me when we just talked on the phone, Monticello Wine Company label that you own. I mean, this was historic. There's a lot of history here. This is a potentially, to me, I see it as a potential national brand. And with a lot of potential, obviously, Virginia's challenges, with not enough vineyards. Well, why did you purchase and get the rights to this label? And what do you want to do with it?

Elizabeth Smith

That's a really great story and an interesting question. A little bit of the backstory, obviously, the Monticello Wine Company, originated in 1872. It was a co-op in downtown Charlottesville, and at the time, they their focus was on native grapes and grape brandy. They had the capacity as a four-story building downtown for 7000 cases, and their extra Virginia Claret won a gold in the Vienna International Competition. Anyway, it was the largest winery in the south at the time. It was really interesting story. So fast forward to 1913 between a fire and prohibition, it ceased production. And it was dormant for a while. And then Shep Rouse from Rockbridge picked it up for a little bit. And then it kind of fell dormant again. In 2013 maybe 2014. A couple of brothers, one of whom was a winemaker at another local winery reinvigorated the brand and we knew them, and I spoke with him. And I'm like, That is so awesome. Because he and I are both Charlottesville natives. I was like, That's so great. I'm so pleased that you guys did this. A couple of years later, he's left the industry. And through our connections, and their remembering that we thought that was such a great idea. We all came to the table and said this is too great a story.

Tony Smith

We've got to keep it in commerce. They were selling wine, but he was leaving the industry. And it's like, we want to keep this brand in commerce to honor that history.

Fred Reno

Well man great on you all to that.do right.

Elizabeth Smith

And we didn't know honestly what we were going to do with it. We were just like, yes, yes, we'll take it. And we'll figure this out. And what we have chosen to do to this point is it's a sister label to Afton. And it's what we sell distributed to local restaurants, local wine shops. They are the same wines as Afton. It's just a way to keep that label in use and trade. But going forward, that's the opportunity for Damien and the younger generation, if they want to do something different from dry vinifera wines or just go in a different direction. That is the label that they can take and do more things so we will see. It is a story waiting to be still written.

Fred Reno

As a Branding guy. I see an opportunity here that I'm like, Wow, what an opportunity for you all for that brand and for Virginia. Right? It's just a great combination. So, it's really great that you decide to save it.

Tony Smith

And it was also really fun working with our daughter and son in law on the label development and some of the branding

Elizabeth Smith

Our son in law is in graphic design.

Tony Smith

It was Just a good family fun time, right?

Elizabeth Smith

At our launch party. The brand is theirs and they license it to Afton. But it's their way to feel connected to the family business. They both have other day jobs, but their way to feel connected and they run the social media for the Monticello Wine Company and are very involved at that level. And it gives them good interactions with Damien and our team

Fred Reno

What varietals you put it under that label right now.

Elizabeth Smith

Currently, it's Rose, Chardonnay, our red blend, and at the current red blend is our Sangiovese based blend the BACO equivalent. And we have also done the Bordeaux style red blend, we don't currently have that under label but those are the four to Red Blends, Rose, and Chardonnay.

Fred Reno

I will ask this question of you first Elizabeth, ladies first and then Tony, it may end up the question being answered the same way. But everybody's had it. What was that one wine that you had in your life where you went, Oh, wine can be this interesting, this ethereal.

Elizabeth Smith

I probably answered that with two different if I could. One was an experience versus a wine when I was a young professional in Virginia

Beach and we were out at a company dinner, and I was probably 26,27. And my boss ordered the wine and she had the server, bring it to me to taste. I don't know if he was trying to give me a leg up and put me on the spot. But either way, he brought it to me, and I said its corked and I send it back. And that was kind of really like, okay, it really showed me at one of the things I love most about wine is that it's a living thing. And it's constantly evolving. So that was an experience. That really made me feel like okay, I could know a little bit about this. But then as far as the wine goes, we were at, again, a corporate type of event, sponsored dinner, and we had a bottle of Quintessa one of their earliest vintages because that was a while ago, a while ago. Oh, yeah, 20 plus years ago, easily. But at this great dinner where we're all having a big time and lots of good conversation. I actually noticed I'm like, this wine is really good. And so that was, you know, again, 20 plus years ago, one of the first wines that really made me stand up and pay attention.

Fred Reno

Yeah, Quintessa was beautiful wine.

Tony Smith

that was a special night and a great bottle of wine. And my disappointment that night is that was a non-wine appreciating person in the group, who left some in her glass at the end of the night. And, you know, as much as I wanted to, I was not going to go down her glass. But it's like, oh, that beautiful wine is sitting there going to waste.

Fred Reno

Well, I also see in your tasting room that you do so little bit of Damien's family Beaujolais Villages.

Elizabeth Smith

We do. It's a great family project. We really do. focus not only on the land, but on family. And we consider this our wine family. And this is Damien's uncle's vineyard in Beaujolais that he has helped them reinvigorate again as their succession plans, apparently, were fading a little bit Damien has stepped in with his cousin and uncle and brought this vineyard back to life. And so, we said, you know, absolutely, if we can help them get reestablished, and it's a beautiful Beaujolais.

Tony Smith

We're on our third vintage now. There have been a vintage difference but it's gotten better each vintage, it's been, it's really,

Fred Reno

that's got to be fun for you.

Elizabeth Smith

It is fun. And it's a nice project to say, you know, this is our winemaker's family in France, if you want something different from what we have, or you know, in a different style of whatever, but nevertheless, with a story, and with a family connection, here's a Beaujolais.

Fred Reno

I will tell you. Switching subjects slightly, the experience my wife and I had, it would have been in the summer of last year, late summer, at the tasting room was really nice. The people were very professional, but very warm. There's a definite sense of family and camaraderie within the team there. We really felt it.

Elizabeth Smith

And I'm glad you sense that we feel so fortunate to have such a great staff and even in recent times and maybe when folks have had trouble hiring our staff bring their friends in. And we have just continued to grow with really wonderful people that we

Tony Smith

they all have a connection with each other not they all do now because of where they work, but the new person comes in that connection. It's just an extension of the existing family and it's really great.

Elizabeth Smith

Yeah, going to work is fun most days.

Fred Reno

You're also in the hospitality business which looks quite honestly thankless to me. What got you involved in the hospitality business? I mean, you have cottages, right? You have places for people to stay right?

Elizabeth Smith

Again, I think it's partially an appreciation of this property that we want to share and keeping our methods of welcoming guests in a way that makes it feel like a special place, and that we're greeting them with people who care and maintaining that sense of a special place. And yes, we have the lodging, we have the cottages in the guest house. And, and we have the goats. And seasonally we've had chickens, and it's so fun to drive into work in the morning, and either see a couple up on the deck of the cottage with a cup of coffee, or a little kid down at

the fence looking and feeding grass to the goats. It's just the sense of continuity of this is a working farm that we want to share. This is not just a production vineyard, and we're selling wine.

Tony Smith

And for those people, you know, staff was showing up about 10 o'clock in the morning is there till maybe six, but from 6pm till 10am. You know, it's the farm to themselves kind of thing. It's a really great experience. And we had a fun time in the design and decorating process.

Elizabeth Smith

and we like to projects were always projects driven.

Tony Smith

and that was part of what drew us to this business is every vintage is different. And so, it's a continuing project. And if you're not doing something new, you're falling behind also, which creates continuing projects for us.

Fred Reno

Right? Well, I can see that, you know, so you have no French American hybrids planted in your vineyard at all?

Elizabeth Smith

No, I think with the aspect of our vineyard, it would not be the best use of our property. I certainly think hybrids have a role. And I don't think you have to be either or, but what we have and as we mentioned, planting more of what we're already selling out of, we have a number of SKU's or varietals, however you want to look at it, which sell out in

six months. For us to be planting or focusing on anything more while trying to build what we have is not what we need, we need to have more constant availability

Fred Reno

So, you must be about 5000 cases, maybe a little less annually.

Elizabeth Smith

Less. That's the capacity of the winery and we've bumped against that a couple of years.

Tony Smith

In two vintages we've done 4600 or so cases, but in terms of retail sales, and sort of the average we're between three and four.

Fred Reno

Well, there's also for me, coming to Virginia, what I sense is a real collegiality or collegiality amongst the vintners themselves, everybody still seems to be willing to share and help.

Tony Smith

Absolutely, when I was working with Michael, that first year, the first time I filtered wine, the existing filter wasn't up to Michael standards. So, I ended up heading over and borrowing a plate and frame filter from Jake who was at Pollock at that time, and I learned how to filter on somebody else's filter. And then if we're ever short on anything, Veritas is right around the corner, and Emily and Damien can do that.

Elizabeth Smith

These relationships are a huge part of what we enjoy so much about this business. As a matter of fact, when we were contemplating what we were going to do with the Monticello Wine Company, it's like, well, we called Jake up and said, Come have a drink with us. And let's just banter about what we could do with this. And that level of collegiality. As a matter of fact, I'm on my way after this interview to drop by King Family, and I have a bottle of wine. For Matthieu that was produced by him when he first came in his first year in 2003 was at Afton.

Tony Smith

And it's the last, well actually we held back two bottles from each vintage of the sparkling. And one of those two is now going to Matthieu, so there's only one left.

Elizabeth Smith

Because he produced that wine. (*fr* Oh, he's going to cherish that). All, I hope and enjoy it as well. But it is a great community, and I don't know that exists elsewhere. Obviously, we're not part of it. But

Tony Smith

I remember in 2009 We did a single barrel varietal Merlot. It was actually the hard press of the Merlot. That's 25 cases, and we hand numbered and signed every one of those bottles as part of that. But bottle number one went to Matthieu as a thank you for his help in getting things going.

Fred Reno

Well, I can tell you from my 43 years-experience in the wine industry, I don't see that anywhere but here. There's a little bit of in Europe, still, but Virginia appears to be unique in that regard.

Elizabeth Smith

And I think everybody just wants to improve the quality of the wine. This is not us versus them. This is us together, we'll all do better for our AVA and for the state and for our industry, if we're working together. I know you're familiar with the Winemakers Research, Exchange. Lots of folks have talked about that. But just that whole sense of if we're all improving, it works for all of us.

Fred Reno

I couldn't agree more. Well, Elizabeth and Tony, this is delightful. Thank you for coming to my studio and shared a glass of White Burgundy, we had some Meursault. Yes, 2019 Meursault from Thierry Matrot, rocking good. And thank you

Elizabeth Smith

Thank you, Fred.

Tony Smith

Thanks, Fred