

EPIISODE # 38 DAMIEN BLANCHON/ WINEMAKER & VINEYARD MANAGER:
AFTON MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS.

SPEAKERS

Damien Blanchon, Fred Reno

Fred Reno

Well, Damien, welcome to my Podcast. And thank you for coming to my studio.

Damien Blanchon

Thank you for having me, Fred. It's a pleasure to be here.

Fred Reno

Well, as I always tell everybody, I start at the beginning. What's your story? You grew up in Beaujolais? That's, really intriguing to me. Talk to me about that.

Damien Blanchon

So yeah, actually, I was born in Paris, with my mom and dad and family. My mother's families are all from Burgundy area from the Beaujolais Villages area close to Beaune. So, I was going over there always like vacation weekends, and after my parents divorced my father went back to South of France. And when I was 12 years old, I knew already that the Paris area situation was not going to be for me. So, I moved with my dad to the South of France and grew up in an area in Perpignan but going to see my grandparents my cousin and my family in Beaujolais all time, basically. So, I was into that wine thing in Beaujolais, and in South of France.

Fred Reno

So, you were destined from the beginning to be a winemaker and get into the wine business then.

Damien Blanchon

well, with my grandfather, that was his job, and my uncle, too. So that's the other winery so I was really early on into that thing. And I was really the only one that was always interested by that, when I was eight years old. They always remember that my family told me, like I knew already that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to drive a tractor in the vines. And that was my motivation at eight years old and I never really changed. That's the only thing I've ever done like even a

little job when I was young, working in vineyards and wineries that's the only thing I had done.

Fred Reno

Did you go to school, eventually, get a degree and everything?

Damien Blanchon

I went to school early on because I knew I wanted to do I choose to go to agricultural school when I was 14 years old and started to study agricultural in general with vegetable production. Very based on like, everything to grow outside. So, it was very general and after was the time I specialized in viticulture and enology and did my viticulture and enology at Carcassonne. But from 14 to 21, even if it was regular school, it was always an emphasis on agriculture and vegetable production. My high school was in the middle of vines, cherry trees and fruit trees. And I was in boarding school when I was 14, up to the end of my studies,

Fred Reno

what prompted you to come to the US

Damien Blanchon

When I finished my Bachelor's in viticulture and enology, my teacher always taught it will be good if you go to do this job for you to go see somewhere else to have more experience, in vineyards, but not only where you grew up, what you're familiar with. And one of my English teacher always told me, if you guys want to sell wine, you're going to have to use English no matter what that's going to be the first language you want to use. So, I was like, Well, why not try to do an internship somewhere where I can have a better English at the end of it, and something new. There is an organization in France that are sending students in the world for agricultural internship. It was Matthieu Finot actually, at the time, he was working as a consultant with Old House vineyard in Culpeper and he was talking to owner and be like, You should bring a French guy here to do the internship. So, he posted an announcement in France at this Agricultural Organization, and I saw that, and I was like, Well, I would be interested in going there. And that's how I came here.

Fred Reno

How serendipitous that you had a fellow country man in Matthieu Finot to come over here and interview with

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, well, that's the thing. He was here and I was in France, and we didn't know each other, and he was really pushing me to come here and said, it's basically a very new industry. There's lots of things to do, you will be in charge already of the vineyard and making the wine at 21 years old. Some experience that in France is really hard to get if you don't work with your family right away.

Fred Reno

Well, interestingly enough, wasn't he at Afton Mountain or had he just left Afton Mountain?

Damien Blanchon

So, he just left Afton Mountain when I arrived? He was there from 2003 to 2005. I think.

Fred Reno

So, then that is when he went to King Family.

Damien Blanchon

Well, he went I think to King Family in 2008. He was at Potomac Point. He was doing a lot of things around there and we actually live together for a while in Culpeper because he was working in Northern Virginia and down there, so he was traveling a lot at the time.

Fred Reno

So, you were at Old House for about five years.

Damien Blanchon

For five years. Yeah.

Fred Reno

How much property and acreage did they have?

Damien Blanchon

25 acres of vines over there. And we were producing everything on site basically. It was a good challenge, I have to say because especially Culpeper, compared to Charlottesville, it's a little bit more flatland. So, no altitude, not the topography. So, we don't have a good effect of the terroir, let's say, right? So yeah, a bit harder to do. But it was a good challenge. And I learned a lot. And the owners are so nice to really, let me do the thing over there. It was a really good experience for five years.

Fred Reno

How did the folks at Afton Mountain contact you? How did that come along?

Damien Blanchon

So, when Tony and Elizabeth bought After Mountain vineyard in 2009, they were looking to maybe build a Pavilion. And at the time at Old House in Culpeper we had built one of those outside, so they wanted to check this out. And I was already a friend with Robbie Corpora that was working at Afton, his parents used to own Afton Mountain vineyard. So, when Tony and Elizabeth bought the winery, I was very familiar with Afton and with the people working there. That's why they said, go check where Damien works as they have a Pavilion, and they wanted to check around. They came and we talked, we check the vines, we had some tasting of the wines and things like that, and they left. After a couple of months later, when their winemaker left, they contacted me and asked me if I wanted to come work for them. That's how it happened.

Fred Reno

I was fascinated by reading about your practice of agriculture in the vineyard and how you treat the vines with herbal remedies and natural types of approaches to agriculture. Did you bring that with you from Old House to Afton? Or is that something you've developed at Afton Mountain?

Damien Blanchon

So, actually, when I was at Old House vineyard, I was not doing so much of those techniques, because when you come in Virginia, Virginia weather is very challenging, like, you know, so for me, it was a whole new thing. To work with the spray, I was more safe, trying to make sure I was not going to develop disease. And I was developing my knowledge about the weather and the area. So, I didn't really push that. It's really when I came to Afton, when I realized the terroir and the possibilities that we could do here that I developed more of those techniques, tried to really reduce the spray and chemical into the vines. And it took a long time. But we've been doing that for eight years now.

Fred Reno

So, Elizabeth and Tony the owners, they were all over that from the beginning. And they just let you go with it.

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, I mean, that's the thing with Tony & Elizabeth since the beginning that we were really listening to what we were trying to do and let us do this kind of stuff really easy.

Fred Reno

Where did you come up with the idea about using natural teas and herbal concoctions?

Damien Blanchon

In France it is very used in Loire Valley, for example, lots of organic areas that are very specified and very developed now for many years. The techniques about those are really well established in France and much more well known in France and practiced. So, for me, it was same thing my uncle in Beaujolais used lots of those techniques, also very limited chemical spray, and more developing the vines in like the strength and immune system instead of targeting disease and things like that. For me, that's how it came up. I did some more research some stuff that I did during my study, I was always drawn to developing spray in a healthier way, something that brings the vines, the good elements and something that is not residual in the wines also, because when you do a lot of chemical spray on the vines you have residue in the wines no matter what it is not truly quantified to a level where it can be dangerous. But when you do residue chemical analysis on most of the wines, you have residual stuff in there that most of the people they don't realize it's in there, but it's in there. For me, it was a little bit of bothering I didn't want to go towards that thing. And especially in Virginia, where I saw lots of people using lots of chemicals, because once again, the weather is very challenging. I was like well, let's try to make it work a little bit different.

Fred Reno

Do you have any hybrids planted in your vineyard at all?

Damien Blanchon

No. So we have no Hybrids only *Vitis vinifera* with some Chardonnay and Pinot Noir that are pretty sensitive. But other than that, yeah, no, all *Vitis vinifera*, but it's been working well. Like I said, I think this technique, you can use it, but it doesn't happen from a day to another. You really have to start a process and force the vines to adapt to that it takes few years and it's not like I'm going to

spray teas only and that's the way it is. It's also managing the vines, you know, like there's a trellis system and the airflow and the grass and herbicide that just has an impact on the vine, so we really try to be careful.

Fred Reno

So, the acreage at Afton mountain has doubled since you've been there. You have like 24/25 bearing acres. Yeah, yeah. But the farm is much larger than that.

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, the farm is about 140 acres. So, we take care of everything else. Also, in the fields around we have goats and things like that to make sure we can use. We don't have to mow everything. That's the thing. We do a lot of hay; we do a lot of different things to kind of preserve the land and put a good mark on it.

Fred Reno

You have a chicken farm up there, is that accurate?

Damien Blanchon

For the past few years, we did some chicken, like free range chicken, and we were butchering them and sending them to the tasting room.

Fred Reno

This is a real live farm.

Damien Blanchon

I think we are going to take it easy on that now and just be more focused on the vines. We try a lot of different things, but it's a lot of work, so we just will focus on wine.

Fred Reno

I'm curious about what you've seen in your period here in Virginia over the last 15 plus years, in the way of climate change. And let me add this as well. When I talk about climate change, I'm not necessarily speaking about whether it's getting warmer or anything of that nature. I just see dramatic shifts in climate. What have you seen?

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, I mean, you're right. I think what we've seen in change without talking about getting warmer or colder is just the intensity of the weather events that's really impacting us for the past few years where the frosts are getting frostier and for longer periods of time, where during summer it is getting hotter and drier, but

it can be also wetter and rainy. You see what I mean, all the weather effect. I think for me, that's what I've seen, are really just multiplied like very drastically change

Fred Reno

But it seems to me everything is a wind event. The wind just seems to be a constant element, no matter what. And that is to me the turbulence. Let's turn to your winemaking and what you do in the vineyard and then also how you handle the fruit in the cellar itself. What are you doing that you like that you think produces the kind of results you're looking for?

Damien Blanchon

For me really making wine comes from the grapes. I mean, that's like, the most important thing, it's very hard to make a good wine when you don't take care of the grapes. And that's the primary thing. Most of the work we do is in the vineyard to be honest. In the winery, we produce the fruit with very minimal impact and minimal addition and things like that. So first is to try to have a terroir wine. It's really trying to have the vines adapted to the area where we are in Afton, and we have a good airflow. We have a good topography and a bit of slope. So, we have advantage in that way. Well, that's a good point for us. So yes, the fruit basically, we try to not over produce too much we are not trying to get lots of tonnage per acre here, we try to really get good production for quality wine, so we are two, three tons per acre, very low. But I think for me, that's when you can really get a lot of complexity, aromatic development and many nuances from the grapes that you grow basically. So, during the season we spend a lot of time on the canopy basically trying to have good airflow. Because of the spray that we do are very, we don't do a lot of spray here with a lot of chemicals we need to make sure the trellis system is really impeccable. That means edging the rows, not having to struggle and do a nice job in leaf pulling. With that we kind of diminish the chance to have disease development in the vineyard.

Fred Reno

Are there any of the original vines that were planted in 1978 still producing?

Damien Blanchon

so yeah, we still have some Cabernet Sauvignon that had been planted in 1970 that is still producing. In some years it does really great like this year 2021, we're

going to have a nice single varietal Cabernet Sauvignon with some of those vines in there. And some of the time we use it for Rose.

Fred Reno

It's hard to tear out Old Vines isn't it.

Damien Blanchon

We had to remove 2.5 acres of most of Cabernet Sauvignon to replant some Cabernet Franc. And same thing when we replant, we changed a lot of way of planting. We do high density planting compared to the way that the vines were planted so there are more plants per acre. The plants are much smaller. This is to emphasize competition, the vines we like to develop competition, the vines like to struggle a little bit. It develops more aromatic complexity, it's more fruit, more concentration. In a way that's why we do when we plant vineyards with much more higher density planting and smaller vines.

Fred Reno

is there a particular varietal that you grow, that you produce wine from that you would call Okay, that's our Signature Wine.

Damien Blanchon

Not really, because we have lots of styles of wine that we tried to develop, to be honest, like our blends will be maybe the most representative of what we do like the Tradition blend, for example, because it's a bit of three different varietals that we put in there. But for me, it's not maybe the most representative. One wine that I really like right now that we changed the style in the past few years is Cabernet Franc. Cabernet Franc we used to do barrel aging like regular typical Cabernet Franc. But now we really switch to a more fruitful wine. So, we don't do barrel aging anymore. We do concrete tank fermentation and concrete aging. We press that very short so when fermentation is finished, we don't try to extract a lot of tannin, we try to go with more like fruitful wine, easy wine to drink. For the past few years, we've been trying to develop this kind of wine. And 2021 is a good example of that. More like Loire Valley.

Fred Reno

Or like Beaujolais. I had one Vintner here, Mike Heny who told me that he looked at his Cabernet Franc as his Pinot Noir, his Gamay. Have you ever thought about planting any Gamay?

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, I thought about it. I hear a lot of people say it's really hard. But it's the same thing. You have to have a good terroir because Gamay can be very sensitive to Downy Mildew doesn't like too much the humidity. And so, like Pinot Noir, it's a grape that you can grow but you have to be really good at the way you grow it. To really diminish the disease or things like that. That can ruin Gamay because Gamay has a skin that's pretty thin. When you have a lot of rain, it can split easily. Virginia weather can be challenging for Gamay, but I'm sure it's possible.

Fred Reno

How do you like this 2017 Meursault?

Damien Blanchon

This Meursault we are drinking is pretty good. It's opened up now. Nicely. Yep, that's, that's rock solid. Yeah. Acidity, its baseline is really good. Typical from that region. And it has lots of complexity of different things.

Fred Reno

I will tell you though, I think your Chardonnay is one of the better examples of Virginia Chardonnay, okay. My wife and I have enjoyed it immensely over the years. And when we visited not too long ago. Last summer, actually, it was like, oh, we got to get some more Chardonnay. That wine is really quite good.

Damien Blanchon

That's another example of wine that we changed with the years. Before we used to do everything in barrel. And for me even when you use neutral barrel, we don't have the same terroir you know, as Chablis or like, where we can retain so much acidity at harvest, for us to have the ripe chardonnay you don't have the same acidity or ph. So, when you bring it to a barrel, you remove some of that vibrancy and you make more like round toasty Chardonnay, but I've done it's a question of style. But for me, it was not so much this time, we didn't want to go to California Chardonnay thing. So, the barrel is good, but you have to know how to use it. So now with a 50% barrel and 50% stainless steel blend, we can retain some of the freshness, acidity that we ferment in stainless steel. I love the mouthfeel and the

different aromatic perception that stainless steel has in barrel. And I think when you blend both you have more complexity of the two kinds of fermentation. Chardonnay,

Fred Reno

I'm curious about what interaction you have on any kind of regular basis with your customers that come to the tasting room, come to the winery. What kind of interaction Do you have

Damien Blanchon

I'm really involved with the wine club members when we do events and things like that, I'm here all the time doing tasting from barrels. I mean for the past two years we didn't do much, but we've been having those tasting starting back this year actually with wine members on Sundays. This past Sunday we did some vertical tasting with Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot and some of the Bacco so with like eight different vintage and that was based on Sunday's, but I do a lot of that with the wine club members

Fred Reno

What's the blend of Bacco?

Damien Blanchon

So Bacco is Sangiovese, Tannat, and Petit Verdot.

Fred Reno

Oh interesting. I got to try that bottle I have. Sangiovese, you actually have some Sangiovese

Damien Blanchon

We have a little bit of Sangiovese.

Fred Reno

How long has that been in the ground up there?

Damien Blanchon

Well, actually when I arrived, they already had some Sangiovese. I wonder if it had Gabriele's hand on it.*fr* Yeah, definitely. That's who planted that. But after they've been replanting, just the year I arrived they replant three of the rows of Sangiovese so the original Sangiovese we took it out of the ground because that Sangiovese was on a rootstock that was very giving lots of vigor to the vines.

Those vines were a very wide planting very large so they get tired very quickly and Sangiovese can have big clusters with big berries. And we had trouble to reach full maturity with these grapes. It was inconsistent again, on a good year was doing good, but on a rainy year it was just very average. So that's why we took it out. And the other clone and rootstock of Sangiovese that we have is higher density plantation is performing much better. So, we kept that one.

Fred Reno

What would you say if you're looking forward is your biggest challenges here with what you're doing at Afton Mountain right now?

Damien Blanchon

One of the things is trying to push the envelope in organic methods a little bit and trying to find ways, I mean, this is why I think I have pretty good ideas for downy mildew and botrytis, and all of those things to get a good control with plants. The problem is, Japanese beetle, for me is a big thing that I'm trying to now study for the past few years of how we can really get this population down. There is not much we can do without spraying Carbaryl based insecticide that is just not choosing to kill only Japanese beetle, but everything else. And that's for me a problem. So, we only spot spray here and there. But it can be a big problem. So that's my thing right now trying to find ways to control that. That's a big challenge but also, I am just trying to keep what we are doing year after year, and not knowing what we're going to have.

Fred Reno

What kind of support during this whole period with what you've been doing for natural, organic and herbal remedies, what kind of support, if any, have you gotten from Virginia Tech and these types of places, nothing here?

Damien Blanchon

Nothing here, nobody's really looking into this.

Fred Reno

That's amazing to me,

Damien Blanchon

it's surprising to me, too, because the only data and things I can find is in France. I'm lucky that I can speak French and, I look at all those research that they do, especially as an agricultural chamber of Loire Valley. They are really, really good and dedicated to that for lots of years. So, there's a lot of data and things that have inspired me in there. But here when I talk about the stuff that we do, I feel

like people are not really interested. It's too much work or they don't get it. But for me when we started early on to do like 15, 16 sprays a year and now we are only at six seven sprays, and we don't have disease. I'm like there is a way it's working here.

Fred Reno

Well, you have the evidence. Yeah, you have evidence-based research that appears to be being ignored. Are you involved at all in the Virginia Winemakers Research Exchange?

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, so I was involved when it started and I still follow and go to tastings and things like that but some of the things are research that they do or did was more about an enology project or like we use the study you know, we use that so not so much vineyard trials. It looks like they are starting to do that a little bit more I got contacted not too long ago to be part of a trial for spaying some different insecticides on the vines. There is some type of organic powder that come out of clay that can disturb disease and things like that. So yeah, I hope there'll be developing more of those vineyard trials like this.

Fred Reno

That would make a lot of sense to start doing research on wines being made that have organic natural practices in the vineyard and those that have the traditional herbicides that would be useful over some time.

Damien Blanchon

and the thing is like what we use you don't have to be drastic and be like oh we are 100% organic and we do only herbal teas and things now we use a systemic and flowering. I still have some products that I use so but the thing is a reduction of spray where for me, and I've seen that in Virginia a lot when you know people take their spray schedule from last year and do exactly the same thing. Oh, it's because I have to do my spray on time for botrytis. I have to do my systemic, anti-downy mildew, and when you spend enough time in one vineyard and One area, that's the thing you can really have an effect on because you know your vineyard, you know the effect of the weather that's going to be on that. So, for us, we start with being there, I think we diminish chemicals spray by doing that thing, but just by also knowing, and just looking at the weather and the vines, if it's flowering, and the weather is nice, and there is not a lot of pressure of disease,

we are not going to do the same spray as we did if it was a rainy year or something. So, I think this really plays into what we are doing.

Fred Reno

You're basically paying attention as opposed to just spraying on schedule.

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, completely, completely. Yeah

Fred Reno

I'm curious about something because I'm also a big fan of well-made Chambourcin. And that's about as close to Beaujolais as I get here. Have you ever experimented with any Chambourcin?

Damien Blanchon

At Old House vineyard when I arrived, they had Chambourcin. I worked five years with Chambourcin. And it was one of the hybrids I loved working with, I'd have to say because of the aromatic development that you can get very fruity, very light, if you want to work it that way. And I really love Chambourcin. I have to say it was great to work with,

Fred Reno

Plant some. Or buy some and make some. Well, when I was talking to Tony Wolf and interviewing him, and I asked him this question about hybrids. He said to me, Listen, I believe that what we'll be growing in 20, 30 years from now may be varieties we don't even know of today, because of all the different hybridization that seems to be going on in different parts of the world, trying to keep the vinifera and yet cut the disease prone nature of some of the grapes. Have you experimented with anything like that?

Damien Blanchon

I mean, I've read and heard lots about those merlot resistant clones, are those even *Vitis vinifera* now that they breed to be resistant to have resistant genome on sort of certain type of disease. So, I think the materials, their vegetal material that has been developed right now, in *Vitis vinifera* or in hybrid is definitely prone for less disease naturally. But I think because what we are doing now, I think is a way you can work and it doesn't have to be drastic of like, oh, *Vitis vinifera*, it's overrated, we're going to go with varieties that are more resistant. Because if, once again, if you pay attention to what you're doing, and to the good care in there, I mean, we don't have disease crazy, even in 2018, when it was really rainy. We had maybe a few more spray, but it was not an explosion of disease

that it was not uncontrollable. In '18, we did produce some really decent reds, it was a different style of red maybe because '18 was a bad year, rainy and harvest was terrible. A lot of people didn't make any reds. But same thing after it's an adaptation. So, I think it's for people that want to go into business that want to be like, less stress free, they've got to plant hybrid and things that are easy to take care of. The only problem for me is like after the quality of the wine, we are not sure of really how it's going to go. Like we don't have enough background yet.

Fred Reno

You also have elevation. So that certainly helps mitigate some of these issues doesn't it, that you get up there. The one question, I like to ask every Vintner. And this will be intriguing to me because you grew up with wine as a kid and in a wine culture. At one point, what was that one wine you had? Whatever stage in your life when you said, Wow, that really is ethereal. That's the kind of wine I want to aspire to make. Was there one wine at one point,

Damien Blanchon

Yes, I mean, for me, the Beaujolais Villages of my family. You know, that's the first wine I started drinking when I was like six years old, basically a glass of wine with cheese at the end of dinner. And as the years go, you have a little bit more and you try to understand it more. And for me, I think there's one event that I can recall, it was a family dinner, and we had a Beaujolais, and I was probably eight or nine years old. I knew I kind of really wanted to do that. And because my family knew that they were really like my grandfather, every time there was a problem in the wine or a corked wine or something. He was giving that to me for me to be like oh, is he going to see if it's corked? Or is he going to so that I think this event on the Beaujolais villages where he opened it, he didn't say nothing, and he gave me the bottle and the cork. And right away I said like this thing smells like cork a little bit. And after my grandfather was like, Yeah, that's right. That was a thing you needed to smell, and that's why I gave it to you. And from that stage, I was really drawn by that. So that was the thing that marked me was my exchange with my grandfather of this and after like, every year after that I was just asking more questions and doing more things to be I was really just interested by.

Fred Reno

I know you didn't grow up or spend time obviously in the northern part of Beaujolais, but I'd be curious. What is your favorite Cru of the 10 Cru? Do you have one?

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, I like Brouilly, Moulin a Vent. I mean, but Brouilly and Moulin a Vent would be my two favorites because they are the one closest, I think that's the one I know. Mont Brouilly just by topography of Brouilly is just a little mountain in the middle of nowhere. So, you have some blocks over there, I try some wine from specific block that was just amazing, because you know exactly where I've come from. And compared to one mile away from the same vineyard and same variety that's going to be really different. Mont Brouilly for me. It's one of the one that can have a drastic change. It's not maybe the most famous one, but it's one of the one that I like,

Fred Reno

is it correct for me to say that, as you come from the northern part of Beaujolais down further to the south, the granite becomes less and less red and pink and more and more grayish. And then it sort of turns into more typical soil and less granite.

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, On the plain on like, how do you say that? Not on the hilly part, it's a little bit more like that. And that's why Beaujolais ends at Beaujolais Villages. Beaujolais Villages is just the one, it's not the Cru but still lots of granitic soil and it's not flat. There is no one part of Beaujolais Villages from my uncle at least that is flat.

Fred Reno

So, this gift you brought me today which I'm going to treasure he brought me a couple bottles and his family's Beaujolais. Do you sell this at the winery?

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, we sell it at the winery now, so the winery was Des Lyres en Beaujolais, that's the name we gave to the wine once we took over with my cousin when my uncle retired, it was *le Domaine du four a bois*. And we just changed the name and did something different with my cousin and now we bring that here and sell it through the Tasting Room.

Fred Reno

I can't thank you enough. I just love Beaujolais, have all my career. To me it's the most food friendly red wine you can possibly serve a crowd.

Damien Blanchon

Yeah. And it goes with everything. That's the thing. Beaujolais for me I will drink that with grilled fish with meat, but everything. I'm very biased on that because that's the kind of wine I grew up on. And I have very definitely a passion for that. But it's a wine you can drink with everything. And it's just a stylistic wine that for me I really like. Good aromatic red fruit not too heavy into the tannin and barrel you don't have so much of that, it's really natural wine. And especially as this way, we're like old school foundation and old school like aging, no bearer, very, very easy.

Fred Reno

One. I also think from my experience, as limited as it is Beaujolais ages a whole lot better than most people even think,

Damien Blanchon

yep, completely. That is something that people say you cannot keep a bottle of Beaujolais, but we've tried with my family. We've tried some stuff, like very dusty bottle from '74 '76. I recall that the last time I was in France for Christmas. That's what we drink, and it was it was good. It was really good.

Fred Reno

That's the key isn't it that the wine gets better and more interesting. Well, Virginia is lucky that you came here. To me Virginia, again, represents the most exciting wine growing region in America today. There's no question in my mind about it. The diversity here has been fascinating. And I always tell people who don't know anything about Virginia winegrowing people in the trade I say you have to think about Virginia, like you would about France or even Italy, for instance, they don't grow Pinot Noir in Bordeaux. And they don't grow Cabernet Sauvignon in Burgundy. And we have that same kind of diversity here in Virginia. Just certain grape varieties do much better in certain parts of the state. It's really fascinating to see that.

Damien Blanchon

Yeah, and it's true. I mean, for me, that's the thing I've seen when I arrived here 15 years ago, it's really the diversity of the wine making, the varieties, the possibilities in Virginia. That's what drove me to stay here too like, when I was in

France in an area, you can only make one type of wine or it's very regulated. But the thing in Virginia and I think that's why we came a long way for the past 15 years is lots of people try lots of things, lots of different variety, lots of different winemaking style. And we are all trying to help each other to go in the right direction. So, I mean, I was glad to be here in Virginia. When I arrived here, I didn't even know that we're making wine here and now I can't see myself making wine somewhere else where I think I really am true Virginia winemaker, even if I'm French, the knowledge and responsibility that when I came here, I didn't have that in France, and like to really start from A to Z without anybody telling you what to do, or something like that. So yeah, I can say I'm a true Virginia winemaker, because that's what I experienced most of my years of making wine here.

Fred Reno

That's fascinating because I had one owner talk to me about his winemaker. And he said the same thing. About his winemaker, he said, he's a Virginia winemaker and I went what do you mean by that? And he goes, Well, the diversity here and the change every year in the harvest, you really have to be on your toes, you got to be nimble. And you have to adapt and really find a way to make really high-quality wine no matter what the circumstances. And that's what a Virginia winemaker has to do.

Damien Blanchon

And it's, I think, if you're really good, or if you understand how to make wine, Virginia and how to grow grapes, it leaves your door open to do that in a lot of areas in the world. Because I feel for me like Virginia is one of the most challenging areas to make wine in the world. When you go in South America, the weather is pretty dry and hot is good. You go in California, it's okay. I mean, even in France can be challenging the weather in their region is pretty standard. Here, we see a lot of variation that I don't think we have, like, you know, with the soil and the weather, and it makes it very challenging. Like when you have very hard soil with lots of vigor, you know, clay soil that we have here with humidity all the time, even if it's 100 degrees, you have 50% Humidity in the morning, always like dew points. And even if it's a drought, everything is green. Do you see what I mean? It's a thing that we don't see everywhere else and for the vines you have to be on top of it to make sure from year to year you can do the right things,

Fred Reno

I feel your passion. And I share it, about Virginia wine, I share it. To me, it's just got all the elements, modest alcohol with good acidity, but a lot more well, as I tell people, Virginia wine has what I call soul. It still has soul. There's a sense of place in most of the wines you have from Virginia, which seems to have been lost in a lot of the new world winemaking areas where there's a recipe. And a lot of it includes very high alcohol, and a lot of extract.

Damien Blanchon

Here you just define everything that I'm trying not to do. You know, like for me, wine, in general is such an old trade that people have been doing for centuries. And it's not like I'm trying to do the same things they were doing 100 years ago. But truly, the wine for me is really, well we are farmers first so you grow the grapes the best way you can and try to translate that into a bottle with keeping the same characteristic of where the grapes are from. So, it's terroir wine we talk about terroir This is really 100% what we are trying to do so even within the winemaking we have very low extraction, very low power no tiny addition, no acidification, we really try to stay true to the old school way. And sometimes not easy because we restrain ourselves or be like ah, it's a bad year but I don't want to use tannin, I don't want to use an enology product to make it better. Because after all that's where you get wine familiar to another that's kind of more standard recipe I'm all against recipe. When I start a new season for me, what I did last year is kind of I forget about it. I was like let's see how it's going to be this year and not like Oh, I did that it's going to work again.

Fred Reno

Well, Damien, this has been fascinating. Give me your final comments on this glass of Meursault we have here

Damien Blanchon
I finished my glass, it is good, it's delicious. If there's one more thing, I would say for me. Because I mean you're really involved with lots of people that even start vineyard. So, you know, it's a development I think for me for the next couple of years or even the next 10 years in Virginia. I love that there's more winery developing. But when I'm afraid of is the kind of like, the big winery, and people don't pay attention to much to the grape growing, you know, we'll talk about the specificities of, it's really tough to make a good job here. So, if you start a big thing, without obvious knowledge of the people that can really steer you in a

good direction, it's going to be trouble. And that's where, either there's lots of people that do much more good things now with the knowledge that we have around. But I don't want to see that they're developing into only economic business where people develop big wineries, just to showcase or to other events or things like that. There is I think two different schools that I see happening, where you're going to have small craft wine developing and like what we are doing now and the other one that's more events, because wine has a lot of attraction to tourists now in Virginia, something that we didn't have 10 years ago.

Fred Reno

Well, I would love to see somebody come in here and have some significant development of new vineyards. But to your point, focus on quality winegrowing because that's what Virginia needs. It needs more quality grapes for it to grow. We don't need any more hospitality.

Damien Blanchon

Yeah. That's my point I wanted to say is like, grape growing is so important. And that's what I mean basically, the success of the wine industry, you know, because if you keep on just growing grapes, but you just have to make; and don't age or to sell your wines to somebody. So, you don't really pay attention to the quality that can be damaging in a big way at some point if you start to produce lots of things.

Fred Reno

Well, it's fascinating. Again, Damien, thank you very much. This has been a delight. And thanks for the gift of Beaujolais, my wife and I are going to really enjoy it.