

EPISODE # 1 INTRODUCTION TO FWC

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Michael Shaps, Peter Neptune, Gabriele Rausse, Luca Paschina

Fred Reno

Hi, and welcome to Episode One of the Fine Wine Confidential Podcast. This is Fred Reno, your host. Fine Wine Confidential Podcast will focus 100% on the modern-day Virginia wine industry, and its dynamic growth producing quality wine during the past 40 years here in the Old Dominion. In this episode, I take the opportunity to introduce myself, why I believe you should tune in, what you will learn, and why I was motivated to create this podcast in the first place. I'm sure you're saying to yourself, okay, here comes the sales pitch better make it good. Well, rather than doing the lead introduction myself, I will defer to an accomplished wine industry veteran who knows me well. You can then be the judge of whether you want to take your time to listen, learn what I have to say, and add me to your list of important sources for information about wine.

Peter Neptune

Hi, this is Peter Neptune. I'm a Master Sommelier and I'm the president & CEO of Neptune School of Wine here in Southern California. And you're probably asking yourself at this point, who the heck is Fred Reno? And why should I listen to his podcast or view his new website? Fine Wine Confidential.com. The reason I'm endorsing Fred is that I know Fred very well, I worked with him and, alongside him at the Henry Wine Group for 10 years as his vice president of wine education. Fred is a successful 40-year wine business executive with experience in all facets of the wine industry, which include retail, winery producer, brand building and distribution. He has literally seen it all. When he began his career over 40 years ago as a young wine buyer in Washington, DC he was intrigued and curious at that time, by what was happening in California. So, he decided to see for himself and hopped on a plane headed for Northern California Wine Country. He discovered many upcoming new wine producers who would later

become recognized leaders in the growth of California wines available nationally. Several of which he was instrumental in building. And as a result of his early trips to California, he started to buy directly from the producer, introducing their wines on the east coast to his clientele. Eventually, he would move to California and his career grew even more successful.

Fred Reno

Well, thank you Peter, for that wonderful introduction. You've now put the pressure on me to make this podcast stand out. Folks with past as prologue, in 2017, the same intrigue an intellectual curiosity that has governed my career hit me once again during an annual trip my wife and I made to Virginia. During that trip, I quickly realized there had been an evolution taking place in wine quality in the Old Dominion. So, when we returned to California, once again, I hopped on a plane, only this time it was to the East Coast to verify for myself, what I intuitively believed was happening. And sure enough, after tasting many quality Virginia wines, and I mean many, it became apparent what had occurred in California 40 years ago. And what I had experienced, also 30 years ago in Oregon, that Virginia was now the new frontier for wine growing in the US. Backed by that belief I went all in, and my wife and I moved permanently in late 2018 to Virginia. I've created this podcast to highlight this dynamic story of the Virginia modern day wine industry's growth. Virginia is, in my opinion, the most exciting wine growing region in the country today. There are about 300 wineries in Virginia now, and from what I have tasted at least 10 to 15% of them, perhaps even more are now producing as good a quality wine as any wine region in the world. And I will put my reputation behind that statement. However, I continue to be surprised by how this development remains largely undiscovered and unknown to many wine drinkers in the wine trade at large in the US. My goal is simple. I want to change that. There's a little-known fact that during the early settlement at Jamestown the newly formed House of Burgesses here in Virginia, enacted Acte 12 in 1619, which required each male settler to plant at least 10 grapevines for future production of wine. Thus, Virginia has a 400-year history of wine growing and is achieving the aspirations of Thomas Jefferson to produce wine equal to Europe's best. This podcast will showcase the history of the past 45 years of wine growing in Virginia through interviews I conduct with many of the Commonwealth prominent winemakers, winery owners, and viticulturalist who

have contributed to this wine quality progress. You will learn in their own words, the challenges they faced and the vision behind their successes. I believe you will find the first three episodes to be very insightful. They will tell a story about several of the personalities in the Virginia wine industry whose careers intersected, and in each case, they went on to make significant contributions of their own to the Virginia industry. In Episode One, Gabriele Rausse, who New York Times called the father of modern-day wine growing and for good reason is my guest, Gabriele was hired by Gianni Zonin from the very prominent Italian wine family of the same name, shortly after they founded Barboursville vineyards, and helped them get their start in 1976. Listen to this excerpt from my interview with Gabriele, when I asked him his opinion on why he thought Thomas Jefferson was not successful in producing wine from his vineyard site, at Monticello, by the way, the same vineyard site, Gabriele was asked to replant to the original varietals that Jefferson planted back in the 1700s. He did start replanting it in 1984. (fred asking question) Why do you think? I mean, I understand phylloxera okay. But why did he fail? To be able to successfully grow grapes and make wine? I mean,

Gabriele

Okay my feeling is, I want your opinion. My feeling is wildlife. And I tell you why. While he was in France, 1789 I think is the year, he writes a letter to Antonia Giannini who was the person in charge of the orchard and the vineyard and he said, do you think we will be able to make some wine this year? And Antonia Giannini said I would be happy to make some wine, to try to make some wine. But the grapes disappear year after year before they are ripe. So, you see he sort of suggests that maybe the slaves were stealing the grapes, right? Okay, but why should they steal the grapes before they are ripe? The bird steal the grapes before they are ripe. Right? And naturally, I can tell you this is a bit of a joke. But I remember an interview in which they were asking me how do I check the chemistry of the grades, you know, when to decide to harvest. I said, I look at which animal is coming to steal the grapes, if they are birds 17 brix, if I see a raccoon, they are probably 18 or 19 brix, if I see a fox, they are over 22 brix. So, if you see the fox, you know that is time to

Fred Reno

time to go and harvest.

Gabriele

And this true, you know, I mean, I don't know if you have seen at Monticello the wooden trellis system we have. Yeah, I have. One day I remember there was a mama raccoon with five raccoons behind all eating grapes, right? Because the post was allowing them to walk on the thing. Okay, they were all eating grapes. And so, they told me that they are eating all the grapes, beautiful Now, it's really interesting to me how some people don't have much respect for animals, right? But for me, some animals know much more than people.

Fred Reno

Well, they've had to survive a lot today. So, they had to learn and pass that wisdom on down.

Fred Reno

That excerpt from Gabriele is just a little slice of what you're going to hear in the entire episode. Now on to Episode Two, where Luca Paschina is my guest. Luca eventually succeeded Gabriele at Barboursville in 1990. You will learn how Luca led the effort to replant their vineyards with a focus on future wine quality. Luca has provided a steady hand at Barboursville for the past 30 years, and he is recognized as one of the leaders in the Virginia wine industry today. Take a listen to this brief excerpt where Luca recounts how he and the Zonin family came together. Luca eventually moved to Virginia.

Luca

But then when I came into my late 20s, I really felt my heart was in the vineyard as a farmer. I told the company I was working for you know, I want to be in charge of your fine wine division and your vineyard division. I can take care of the vineyard. I can take care of the winemaking. The answer was No for reasons I don't need to discuss, and then I said, Well, then I guess I'll have to leave. And then I was on my own. I started working as a consultant. And the second client was Gianni Zonin the founder of Barboursville Vineyard. I had a phone conversation with him, and I was asked to attend a meeting just outside of Verona, Italy. And in the meeting, I was told, well, we have an estate in Virginia,

we started it in 1976. We need to implement some changes, although we need somebody to help us with it. So, we agreed that I would spend three months here, July, August, September, helping for the harvest. I went back in early October. I was asked well what are the changes that were needed. And then I told them the main change, that has to happen if you want to see your quality increasing, you have to pull all your vineyards out and replant everything. And the reason wasn't that the vineyards were not planted properly. The main reason was that the source of the plant material that was put in the ground in the '70s and '80s was of a lesser quality. And I learned off that when I was working in the mid-80s in Napa Valley that a lot of new clones were now coming from Bordeaux, when it comes to Bordeaux varieties, and also Italian varietals from parts of Italy we're finally coming in through UC Davis in Fresno and being certified through the FDA quarantine process. I learned of that, and I put it to good use in my conversation. I say, you know, here we are, and I was here in 1990. At that time, I look at the vineyard of Merlot that has big cluster, big round berries and made a red wine with very little color, very little structure. When we then subsequently planted clone 181 for example, small berries, thick skin, it produced wine with such depth of color and intensity and strength. So, I think that was the main reason that Virginia took a bit longer to be established.

Fred Reno

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

Luca

It took it took 12 years.

Fred Reno

Oh wow.

Luca

It took 12 years

Fred Reno

In Episode 3 my guest is Michael Shaps, owner, and founder of Michael Shaps Wine Works. Michael began his winemaking career in Virginia when he succeeded Gabriele Rausse at Jefferson Vineyards, in 1995. Jefferson Vineyards was known initially as Simeon vineyards when Gabriele started planting for the Woodward family back in 1981. Michael then went on to establish his own brand, Michael Shaps in 2001. And in 2007, Michael Shaps Wineworks was established. However, there is an intriguing backstory to Michael's career. Michael also owns a Domaine in Meursault, France, and produces Burgundian wine under his label Mason Shaps. That is a fascinating story in and of itself, which you will learn more about in the full interview. But first, here's a brief excerpt of Michael recounting how a kid from New York without any connections, decides to go to France. He knocks on the door of the Lycée Viticole de Beaune the enology school in Burgundy and talks his way into admission in their program. Take a listen.

Michael Shaps

on the wine list, and over the course of a couple years just got fascinated with the wine industry and fell in love with Burgundian wines and eventually decided that I was young and had nothing to risk and so I decided I wanted to learn. I did some research and looked into schools and programs and then heard about the Lycée Viticole in Beaune. I left my job in Boston and dedicated about nine months to studying French and learning as much as I could before went to France and showed up in Burgundy and went to knock on the door of the Lycée Viticole de Beaune.

Fred Reno

It doesn't sound like you were afraid of the dark.

Michael Shaps

I figured I had nothing to lose. I could always, you know, come back to US, and try my luck out in the West Coast. But I love burgundy wines and gave it a shot and was able to talk my way into the Lycée. The director, Pierre Charlot kind of laughed at me because my French was so bad and said, there's no way you can, you know, really follow the course in French. And I reassured him that I would do what I could. And he finally relented and said, Okay, I'll make a deal with you.

You can go to the program here. And as long as you can pass the classes, you can stay. He then said, but I really don't think you're going to make it. So, I'm not going to charge you tuition. But instead, in exchange, we'd like you to do conversational English with the students twice a week after school. And for me, that was just an incredible opportunity. This was in August, and he helped me find an internship, in Puligny Montrachet at Chartron & Trebuchet and that turned into almost a two-year stint. First as an intern, then as one of the cellar team members while I was going to school.

Fred Reno

Did they ever charge you tuition?

Michael Shaps

Nope, And I received my, well there it is right there my diploma from the Ministry of Agriculture in France, my diploma in enology and viticulture so I was able to prove him wrong. And trust me, there were a lot of all-nighters studying, I had a Dictaphone. I taped every class and would listen to it at night and make sure I was understanding everything. And then Fortunately, I was working as well. I had several weeks went I went through the Vendange before classes started and got exposed and met people who helped me and it just all came together. It was really magical.

Fred Reno

I hope you enjoyed these three excerpts. The full interviews are chock full of interesting facts and humorous stories. My intention is to put together a series of interviews which will provide a platform for chronicling how far Virginia winegrowing has come in the past 45 years. In upcoming episodes, I will weave a story around all the many other pioneers during the beginning of this modern era in Virginia viticulture up through today, showing why the future's so bright for the Virginia wine industry. Get ready to pique your curiosity. Eventually your palate by tasting some of Virginia's finest at your earliest opportunity. I want to thank you for listening and hit that subscribe button to this podcast. This podcast will be commercial free for your listening enjoyment. And please share any comments you have to Fred at [Fine Wine confidential.com](http://FineWineConfidential.com).