

EPISODE # 22 GLEN MANOR/JEFF WHITE OWNER & WINEMAKER

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Jeff White

Fred Reno

Jeff, welcome to my Podcast. And thank you for your time to meet with me today.

Jeff White

Thank you, Fred, Glad, to be here. I appreciate this opportunity.

Fred Reno

Well, let's start at the beginning, what got you into wine growing and I know there's a lot of history in this property. So, let's talk a little bit about your background.

Jeff White

As you were saying, my family has owned this property since 1901, when my great grandparents purchased the property. When I was a child, it was owned by my grandparents on my mother's side. And ever since I was first brought here, as a young child, I had a strong connection with the outdoors and the farm life, the people that were here. So, this was just always a draw for me to come up here. Sometimes my parents on a Friday afternoon after school, they would take me to a Continental Trailways bus line in Fairfax and put on a bus to spend the weekend up here at the farm.

Fred Reno

How old were you then

Jeff White

I was in grade school and junior high school. And then my parents would come up on Sunday and pick me up. I always had to bring a Sunday suit. That was my grandmother's rules for Sunday. So, I just always had a connection with the farm. I was raised in Fairfax County but, this was the place that we would come to visit my mother's family. Then I eventually went to college, got a business degree and was working in the defense industry around the beltway on the Virginia side. I did that for eight years. And during that time, my father who worked for the Department of Education had retired and he had a green thumb his entire life. He had started a Christmas tree business up here on another piece of property down the road. My brothers and I and my uncle were involved in that. So, I was connected during the time that I was out of college working. Coming up here to the farm and working with the Christmas trees and also helping with the cattle that my grandfather had when he was operating on the farm. And then, after about eight years of working in the defense industry, I really was getting tired of it and wanted to figure out a life up here on the farm. My grandmother passed away leaving my grandfather alone in the farmhouse. I saw that there was a need for his care. I wanted to get out of city, and we had the Christmas tree business. My father and I kind of took over my grandfather's cattle herd. But I knew I needed something different than another agricultural crop to really sustain a family financially.

Fred Reno

So, how did your paths end up crossing then with Tony Wolf and getting a summer job at the research station?

Jeff White

Exactly. When I first started thinking about grapes, I contacted the local county extension office to see if they had written material on grape growing and they said they did. I went down there and got all this these pamphlets and articles on vineyard establishment, financial work analysis, and a most of it was written by Tony Wolf. And then I learned through the grapevine, if you will, I was talking with some of the local growers Dirgham Salahi over at Oasis, Jim Law and everybody mentioned Tony Wolf as someone I needed to talk to. So, I called up to his research station which is just about a half hour drive.

Fred Reno

It's just up here at Winchester.

Jeff White

Yes. So, I called him, and he invited me to come to his office to talk with him. I went there and he offered me a job for the summer. A part time job working in his experimental vineyard. So that was my first kind of work or working with grapevines.

Fred Reno

Yeah, well that's great. First-time, hands-on experiences is the best.

Jeff White

It was, I enjoyed it a lot. As soon as I got into vineyard, working with Tony and his other staff members, I really fell in love with all the work involved in the vineyard with the canopy management and all the farming activities. That was a part time summer job in 1993.

Fred Reno

So, then he hooked you up with the Jim Law at Linden for the harvest of 93?

Jeff White

No, he didn't. I had been in contact, and I met Jim at his winery. I'd been talking to Jim over the year '93 and was kind of suggesting that he hire me. And he wouldn't. Then I met him again, finally, in August of '93, at the Virginia Wine Festival in Plains, Virginia. It was the big grape Meadows festival and Linden vineyard was there. I walked up to him, and by that time, I think he had heard that I was working for Tony. He knew that I was for real and interested in this industry. Plus, August harvest was about to start, and he had a need. He then hired me for the harvest of 1993. Immediately, you know, with the long days and nights, the rigors of bringing in grapes and seeing for the first time and participating in the making of the wine, the processing of the grapes, I just fell in love with that aspect of it too. Then actually, for the first two years, I would work for Jim, I worked the harvest of '93 and then left because I had my Christmas trees to harvest in November, December and sell them. So, I left Linden, sold my

Christmas trees, and then came back in January and worked for the next two years. I worked for Linden from January to just after harvest. Then left for two months to sell Christmas trees and work on the farm here. That was '93, & '94 then in '95 I planted my first vines.

Fred Reno

So that's when you established Glen Manor Vineyard?

Jeff White

yep.

Fred Reno

As I recall, the first was about an acre plus of Sauvignon Blanc that you put in.

Jeff White

It was two acres actually an acre of Sauvignon Blanc and an acre of Chardonnay.

Fred Reno

I'm curious, where would you have gotten plant material in those days,

Jeff White

All of my original six-acre vineyard plant material came from a nursery, and which is now nursery winery, Hamburg's in New York State. They're still in operation.

Fred Reno

And so, then you were farming your vineyard and still working at Linden, and then selling your grapes to Jim.

Jeff White

Correct. I planted in '95. I sold my first grapes to Jim in 1996. Both '95 and '96 were very wet years. Not good years for making wine but great years for establishing vineyards. Jim was making Sauvignon Blanc also from another vineyard that he was managing over at Flint Hill. And he saw that I had

Sauvignon Blanc too, and there was going to be a crop in 96. 'So that was the first time and '97 was our first good vintage.

Fred Reno

Then as you expand your vineyard holdings, you started planting. You had Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Manseng, Petit Verdot. What got you to expand? Was it experience? What made you think okay, these are the varieties I can plant and do well here.

Jeff White

Well, initially, the original vineyard was Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay in the first year and then I planted Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc the second year in 1996. And then in 1997, we planted more Chardonnay and Petit Verdot. I originally didn't know I was going to be selling my grapes to Jim so, I was interested in Sauvignon Blanc because I liked Sauvignon Blanc and then just talking to other growers, winemakers in the state on what they were using, I wanted to grow things that I could sell. Back in those days, there was not a ton of information for me anyway to know what grapes were going to do best here. We were pioneering, we were trialing an erroring. And now both Jim and Tony at one time walked in my vineyard site and said you have a good site. You can grow grapes up here, but we really didn't know at the time. You know what, and we still don't know. This whole state is in its infancy and figuring out what's the best grapes to grow and where there's been a lot of movement over the years. And the Chardonnay didn't work. It made a really nice wine here. But grape vine yellows, which is a worldwide disease forced me to remove the Chardonnay and then we replanted with more Sauvignon Blanc and some Merlot for the first time and some more Cabernet Sauvignon.

Fred Reno

I'm curious, did you ever consider planting any hybrids at all up here.

Jeff White

I considered it but again from talking to winemakers and the value that you would get from vinifera versus the hybrids at that time and it seemed like I had a site that was safe for planting vinifera cold tender, because we're on a mountainside

and we have good water drainage. We have good air drainage. Normally, back then the hybrids were used a lot in lesser vineyard sites,

Fred Reno

Well yeah, you're at about 1000 to 1400 feet in elevation here.

Jeff White

Almost 1400. The vineyards go from about 900 to 1400.

Fred Reno

So, it's a really good site to mitigate any potential frost.

Jeff White

Sure. Frost has not been an issue on that site.

Fred Reno

Well, that's nice to know, right?

Jeff White

I mean, we've been nipped every now and then we'll get nipped a little bit, but I've never had a commercial loss of crop.

Fred Reno

What did you learn that helped you establish your own winery from Linden, your days at Linden? What did you learn there that stuck with you?

Jeff White

The most important thing I learned was the dedication you need in the vineyard. The emphasis needs to be in the vineyard, the winemaking if you can grow the grapes correctly, meaning where you establish the vineyard, where you establish the vines, how you work the vines all during the summer. Then the winemaking is really very easy. If you have good clean ripe fruit, then the winemaking, it comes pretty naturally.

Fred Reno

At the end of the day, as I always like to tell people it's farming.

Jeff White

It really is if that's where it starts. And I'm not a chemist, In fact I failed chemistry.

Fred Reno

Well, your wines don't show that I can tell you that.

Jeff White

That's not the business I wanted to be in. I didn't want to be wearing a lab coat and adding different things. For me, that's what attracts me. It's the farming aspect of it and then seeing what those grapes and the ultimate juice become with very minimal intervention here.

Fred Reno

Well, it was preordained. You'd be in the Shenandoah AVA if you will because your family has owned this property for some time. It's been five generations now. What do you see from your experience and growing grapes in Northern part of Shenandoah Valley, let's say for instance, versus Southern Shenandoah Valley. Is there a big difference? I am curious.

Jeff White

Well, there is, you know, I'm in this AVA called the Shenandoah Valley. But you can see my vineyards, I'm not in any Valley. So, the AVA is kind of meaningless. This AVA goes all the way down past Blacksburg so it's huge. And it's really fairly meaningless with the size of it. This is definitely, a mountain side site. And so, you can't really compare me to most of the AVA. You can compare me with some of the other wineries in this northern area. Because we're North we start later in the spring, and we finish probably last in harvest time. So, there's that and then it's hard to compare a mountain site versus a valley site. So, they're just both how the vines grow and how the wines taste. It's apples and oranges.

Fred Reno

In general terms it's a bit cooler up here in the northern section of Virginia area. Let's say than it is in central Virginia.

Jeff White

Sure. But then there's also microclimates here. And I'm on the west side, I'm in the north, but I'm also on the west side of the mountain and you have vineyards on the east side of the mountain. Chester Gap for instance, which is about two miles from me as the crow flies, but he's about the same elevation if not slightly higher, but he faces east and the wines there are very, very different than mine. They're both good wines, they're just stylistically different.

Fred Reno

So let me put you on the spot. What's your favorite varietal to grow and produce wine from if there's such a thing?

Jeff White

That's hard to say that. I enjoy growing everything I'm growing. I do have this new pet project going on with the Nebbiolo. That's our latest planting in 2017. That's something I'm really excited about. And we've had two small harvests of it. Based on what I've been tasting I'm really even more excited about the potential. We have a single clone planted now and we're propagating a separate clone to plant from, actually we have some of it growing in the vineyard and we're taking cuttings so that to establish another acre of it

Fred Reno

is Nebbiolo a relatively thin-skinned grape?

Jeff White

No, it's got a fairly big tight cluster, but the skins are fairly tough. It's not impervious by any means to our weather which is the biggest challenge that you read about with Nebbiolo it's very soil expressive expresses itself very differently on different soil types and so where it's grown. I've traveled in Italy and tasted the Nebbiolo's there from Barolo and they're very different from the mountain side sites up in the north down into the Barolo area. So, I'm not sure what we're going

to have here yet. It's still early, but I've been very pleased with what I've tasted so far from two vintages.

Fred Reno

That sounds really exciting. So let me reverse the question a little bit differently. You have a really top buyer, somebody from the press somebody you want to impress with your wine. What's the one wine you pull out and say, Hey, this is representative of Glen Manor, this is who I am. Try this wine?

Jeff White

Well for red, it would be our Hodder Hill. That's our flagship red wine, a Cabernet Sauvignon based Bordeaux blend. It's usually in the 60 odd percent Cabernet Sauvignon, followed by Merlot and Petit Verdot.

Fred Reno

Okay, what about white then?

Jeff White

Well, I have two we're known for our Sauvignon Blanc, my oldest vines are now 26 years old. And then I'm a big fan of Petit Manseng. So, I'm planting more of that. And we make an off dry style

Fred Reno

Well, let me stop you there. Because I'm a big fan of Petit Manseng and yours is really good. I just had it two weeks ago. It's definitely really good. Which vintage did you have? I believe that would have been what was currently on the market, perhaps 18?

Fred Reno

I think it was 18. What I've found interesting, what I try to do when I'm tasting through wines I haven't had before from Virginia is open the bottle and have a glass, put it back refrigerator. Go back to it over three or four days. And your wine just kept getting more interesting, more complex. It held its structure the

whole time. But it just evolved. It was really cool. And it was a different interpretation of Petit Manseng than what I had in general terms in the past.

Jeff White

Yeah, ours is not the normal Petit Manseng that we produce year in and year out. It is an off dry wine and ends up with about 3% residual. We pick it in mid to late September, and it's fermented almost dry. And then we reserve about 10, 15 rows, about a half-acre of Petit Manseng for another late harvest Petit Manseng. But we use some of that late harvests juice when it comes in and November to balance and back and sweeten if you will the early pick Petit Manseng. It's a German technique, using that riper juice to balance it. Petit Manseng has very high acid so normally we need to balance that acidity with a little bit of softening sweetness. We get a little more complexity from that added two months of ripening on the vine of the grapes.

Fred Reno

What do you see in your experience here if anything that you can attest to Climate Change. That has meaning to your farming practices and what you're seeing in the vineyards?

Jeff White

Over the 26, 30 years that I've been up here, Day in and day out, it's definitely happening. You know, we're seeing budbreak dates move. We're seeing harvest dates move. Now this is both global warming and global trade. We're seeing insects here that shouldn't be here. From the climate, which is milder in the wintertime and they're able to survive. And it's not necessarily sometimes the insects but it's viruses and diseases that the insects harbor that can hurt the vines. And then global trade is also bringing insects here, I know this is happening all over the world. We're looking at other varieties that might work better here in a warmer Glen Manor site. We're kind of looking at some hybrids, but we're also just looking at grape varieties that do well, currently in warm sites. So, we're looking south at varieties that how they do well.

Fred Reno

Have you ever planted Carmenere?

Jeff White

I have not. I've had some experience over at Linden when he attempted to plant it, but I think he's pulled it out now, but I'm not certain.

Fred Reno

Interesting. Well, when I interviewed Tony Wolf, back several weeks ago, at the end of the interview, over lunch, he pulled out a bottle of a varietal called Marselan. It was from Uruguay. He poured it for me, and I tasted it and I said, this tastes like a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec. He said well, you're half right. It's a cross of Cabernet Sauvignon and Grenache. It's resistant to powdery mildew. It has a lot of virus resistance, and they planted some up at the research station. And you know, obviously Uruguay is a really warm site for winegrowing. The wine was terrific. When I asked him that question about what he saw in the future here. He said, it's entirely possible by 2050, we'll be growing a completely different set of varietals that we don't even know exist yet.

Jeff White

Yep, exactly.

Fred Reno

It just sounds like there's a lot of experimentation going on in Europe, with hybrids with mostly vinifera strain in them.

Jeff White

Right, that's what I hear. As for what we may be growing I have no clue. Now what I would agree with that, in 50 years or even closer, what's going to be, and it's partly because of climate change, but also, we're still learning what works best in our soils, what grape varieties are really going to be expressed in a fantastic, lovely way with our climate and soils here. We've just scratched the surface with site selections in the state.

Fred Reno

That's true. In fact, that is something that one vintner said to me early on, and it stuck with me. And I would love your opinion on this, essentially, he said, Fred,

it's entirely possible some of the best vineyard sites in Virginia haven't even been planted yet.

Jeff White

Oh, I thoroughly agree with that. I mean, you drive down the road, and you see tops of mountains with nice slopes, especially in this environment of climate change, having a mountain site on an eastern side of a mountain, I just think you're going to make some great, great wines up there. But they're hard sites to develop. That's the key. That's the trigger. You've got to invest a ton of money in clearing, stabilizing, and laying out a very difficult site. But the rewards in my opinion will make it worthwhile.

Fred Reno

So, what was the one wine you had early on that turned your head and you went? Ah, that's it. That wine is unbelievable, you know, what was that one wine? It just got you going.

Jeff White

Yeah, unfortunately, my memory is not the best. There was a man that would visit a friend, a friend of everybody's at Linden, who would visit about once a week and he would bring aged, really nice, aged wines to try and many of his wines turned my head. I had no clue when I started in this industry, the possibilities of wine I was drinking, Gallo and Blue, Blue Nun. It was it was one of the best wines I would drink. But the one varietal that sticks out was a Barolo that this gentleman brought. I just fell in love with that wine at that time. And that's one of the reasons I'm planting it. I'm growing Nebbiolo now.

Fred Reno

Well, I can't wait to taste that someday. Well, we're just beginning to become a wine drinking culture in this country. None of us really grew up drinking wine for the most part,

Jeff White

right, right.

Fred Reno

It certainly wasn't a staple on my table as a kid. I know that.

Jeff White

I read somewhere that if it wasn't for prohibition, the majority of the wines that we would be drinking because that's what was being consumed before prohibition were Italian wines. And so, our main wine on the table would probably not be Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay, it might be a Nebbiolo or Chianti, or a Sangiovese if prohibition hadn't gotten in the way of things,

Fred Reno

It certainly got in the way, and you don't want to get me started on that track about distribution and organized crime, because that's a whole another story in and of itself, that's for sure. How do you go to the market? What's your market strategy? I'm curious, you're up here, you really got to know where you're going to come to Glen Manor Vineyards.

Jeff White

You do. And that's one of my faults I'm not a great marketer. I did have a bit of a leg up when I started this, a bit leg up because I was part of the vineyard designation, or vineyard labeled wines at Linden. So, the Glen Manor name was known by the public in the Northern Virginia, DC area in some restaurants and wine shops. But still, when I started on my own, I had to walk in there like everybody else with my wine and continue the quality. And for the most part, it helped. Currently, we do have a distributor, Williams Corner Wines out of Charlottesville, and mostly here in Virginia, and DC. But the majority of our wine is sold right here out of the tasting room, and just word of mouth. People have learned about us, and we're a small production winery. Right now, about 2500 cases a year. So, it's easy to sell a small amount of wine. Easier than say 5,000 or 10,000 cases.

Fred Reno

Well, yeah. I had one vintner say, well, Fred, I don't make that much wine, I say, well, that's not a negative, that could be a positive, right?

Jeff White

You will spend more time crafting the wine and growing the wine than what I don't really want to do is go out on the road. But it's a necessity.

Fred Reno

Some of the some of the best wines in the world are made, as you know, in miniscule quantities, and people everywhere in the world are clamoring to buy them. If there's anything I'm going to hopefully achieve in my time here in Virginia, is to get recognition for Virginia wine on a more National, International stage, because that will ultimately elevate what I see happening here in Virginia in remarkable wine quality. In my opinion of the 300 or so wineries, they say there are in Virginia, and I haven't tasted through them all. Although I've tried. I would say in my opinion 10 to 15%, maybe slightly more produce as high a quality of wine as anybody in the world. Now, I reserve the term great wine for the 1/10 of 1% of all the wine that's produced in the world, right, but then the level of quality in your wine certainly sits right there qualitatively. With some of the best in the world. I must tell you that. Thank you. Yeah, no, I never had what I would call an unsatisfactory bottle of Glen Manor. I am curious because you do and you've had good success, submit wines to the Governor's Cup competition, and a lot of other people don't. So, what's been your philosophy about that? Because you've done really well there?

Jeff White

Yeah, I just initially, when I first started this winery, I wasn't submitting to the Governor's Cup or any place for that. I would submit them to wine writers when they asked for them. I did then start contributing wine or participating in the Governor's Cup when they first changed their parameters back in 2012. And since then, and of course, as you know probably that we won it that year 2012. And I've wanted to participate over the years just to kind of support Virginia, industry. I did not this past year which was the first year I didn't submit anything since the 2012. And just a lot of things were sidetracked this past year, as you well know. So, we did not participate in '20.

Fred Reno

This property, as we talked about earlier has been in the hands of five generations. You've got a historical designation for Virginia. Is there another generational pass coming within you and your family now.

Jeff White

Yes, I don't have any children myself. But my niece, Ashleigh White, has worked for me now since 2014. In sales, she started off in the tasting room, but she's now in production. And both in the vineyard and in the cellar. And she has been I think, bitten by the wine bug. She's made a number of excursions to work harvests in New Zealand, Australia, California, and Canada.

Fred Reno

Oh, she's clearly been bitten by the bug hasn't she.

Jeff White

She likes both the wine and meeting people in foreign countries. Learning about the culture and just learning new techniques or other techniques, that she can come back here and teach me. So yeah, she's on board, and she's fifth generation. So, she'll be hopefully here, you never know though.

Fred Reno

Stepping back in the beginning, you started to plant your vineyard, you must have gotten some support from Tony Wolf, the research station and all that. What type of ongoing support can you get from these organizations like Virginia Tech or anybody like that, if you need it?

Jeff White

You can get tremendous support both short term and long term. You know, in fact the year that I worked for Tony, I would tag along, or I would be with Tony as he made trips to vineyards. People would call and say I see something in my vineyard, can you come down and take a look at it? Tony and I have become really good friends. Also, if I have something going on I pick up the phone and call him. Over the years he has run, not only in my vineyard but in other vineyards around the state, research trials. We talked earlier about grapevine yellows here. He ran a grapevine yellows trial here for many, many years, capturing insects and taking native plant life samples and testing for the virus and

it wasn't good news for me. We have a lot of viruses here. There were some other grad students, Virginia Tech grad students who worked for Tony that ran some experiments here and they're doing it all over the state. So, it's long-term benefit to us what these scientists are learning and our vineyards are like the petri dish. It's the place where they need to conduct the research.

Fred Reno

The branding of your packaging, is that a generational historic crest that's on it?

Jeff White

No, I came up with that.

Fred Reno

Its good looking, It's has a good feel to it.

Jeff White

Thank you. Yeah, it was just designed to kind of be a little not intrusive, if you will. So, you have to kind of squint to see our label, which I thought it'll stand out on the shelf because you can't see it.

Fred Reno

It's tastefully done. It is what I would say tastefully done. Well, Jeff, I really appreciate getting some of your insights. What do you think? What do you see for the future of Virginia wine growing 10, 20 years from now is. Do you feel like people are going to start to recognize how wonderful Virginia wine is outside of the area, you know the Middle Atlantic

Jeff White

I do feel that the future is very bright for the state and being recognized outside of the state is key to our success. Being, as you think of wines from Washington State and Oregon. Those are household wines here now and all over the country as well as all over the world. Virginia needs that, we can't survive by just selling our wines to tourists who are traveling up and down the state to look at battlefields. We need to be sought after by wine connoisseurs, and not just as part of a vacation. So, getting our wines noticed by reputable wine writers and

restauranters, sommeliers, yourself the key to our success. And then of course it all starts as we started off in the beginning, it's all comes down to farming. Site selection, we haven't even begun to touch the great sites that are here in the state. It's an exciting time for someone who is interested in wine to come to Virginia and look for a site because there are plenty here

Fred Reno

Boy, that's for sure. That was the feeling I got when I moved back here. I thought this reminds me of California in the late 70s. It reminds me of Oregon, in the '80s and the land is still relatively inexpensive isn't it.

And although we there are issues here climatically, you know, it's not, it's not burning up?

Jeff White

No, but you know, it's a tough place to grow grapes. But it's not that more tough than some places in Europe. Like in Germany and Austria, there's weather in Bordeaux. We're not sunny California but we're, more like Europe, which has successfully grown, and people have made and had their whole existence sustained by that industry.

Fred Reno

That's for sure. Alright, Jeff, Well, listen, thank you for your time here this afternoon. I really enjoyed finally meeting you. Although we did meet two years ago. You probably wouldn't remember that, but it was at the Governor's Cup tasting. You sat right behind me. You were showing off your wine that was in the case that year. I believe it was a Cabernet Franc.

Jeff White

Was that at King Family?

Fred Reno

Yes, it was 2019 in the Spring. That's when I got introduced to your wine. And I'm like, I got to go out and buy this man's wine. So, I started buying more of your wines. I thought boy these wines are really good. But anyway, thank you I really enjoyed this interview.