

EPIISODE #15 BLENHEIM VINEYARDS/KIRSTY HARMON WINEMAKER

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Kirsty Harmon

Fred Reno

Kirsty welcome to my Podcast and I appreciate you giving me your time this morning.

Kirsty Harmon

Good morning for thanks so much for having me.

Fred Reno

Well, we'll start at the beginning. As I understand it, you were born and raised in Holland, in the Netherlands.

Kirsty Harmon

Yeah, I actually was born there but only stayed about nine months and then my family moved to South Carolina.

Fred Reno

Oh, okay so you came to the US early then.

Kirsty Harmon

I did, My dad is American, my mother's British. And they were both in the Air Force. The British Air Force and American Air Force. They met in Holland and fell in love and as the saying goes happily, ever after. When I was nine months old, we moved to South Carolina. My dad got stationed at Myrtle Beach.

Fred Reno

Oh, so that probably explains how you ended up in Charlottesville later on?

Kirsty Harmon

Exactly. Yeah. I spent the vast majority of my childhood flip flopping between England and America every two to four years based on where my dad was stationed. My mom retired out of the British Air Force, but my dad stayed in the US Air Force for 20 years.

Fred Reno

Well, that's interesting. I'm looking at your biography here and I'm intrigued. It says that you got hooked up with Gabriele Rausse. Early on, How did that happen?

Kirsty Harmon

By happy accident. My original career was microbiology. I was a microbiologist for a number of years, always wanted to be a scientist from the time I was, I don't know, in seventh grade. And then I became a microbiologist and thought, gosh, this is really not what I thought it was going to be. Every day was the same. I was working in yeast coincidentally, doing cancer research, but every day was a little bit of the same. I had a little side project doing calligraphy and wedding planning. And so, I decided to leave the lab to become a calligrapher and wedding planner full-time. This is what you do when you're 24 and you think, you know, everything. I left to become a wedding planner and planned a wedding for a lady by the name of Patricia Kluge.

Fred Reno

Oh, my god. Amazing.

Kirsty Harmon

Sure, planning her wedding. That is where I ran into Gabriele.

Fred Reno

that is a really interesting coincidence. Isn't it?

Kirsty Harmon

You have to be in the right place at the right time and I was very lucky. Once I started working for Kluge Estate, which was what it was called back then, I met Gabriele because one of my first jobs was starting as a retail director, Mrs. Kluge wanted to have a farm shop and a farm winery, open to the public. And that was taking a little bit of time because at that point, Albemarle County was not so keen with what she wanted to do. She was trying to do a bigger retail establishment in the middle of the county. At that point, the county was not on board, as they are now with wineries. That was taking a little longer than we had planned. So, she looked at me one day, she said dear, I have all these vines will you build me a winery? I thought, sure, why not? And she said you'll meet my consultant Gabriele Rausse, So, the next day Gabriele pulled up in his beat up old blue truck, and we drove to Culpeper to look at winemaking equipment and talked about winemaking. Then he found out I had a science background. And by the end of the trip, he said well, you know science you can be the winemaker.

Fred Reno

That's fantastic.

Kirsty Harmon

Yeah. So, when a handsome, charming Italian man says you can do something? Why wouldn't you believe him? What year was this? This was in the year 2000.

Fred Reno

Oh my god. How great is that?

Kirsty Harmon

Yeah, very lucky. And as you know and as everyone well knows Gabriele is a powerhouse and such a wealth of information, but also just a really nice guy. I learned winemaking from him at the very beginning, just being told what to do and what not to do. Squish this, don't squish this, clean this. And I fell in love with it. I fell in love with the fact that no two days are the same. I like the fact that there's always something new to learn. I like that it's cyclical in nature, that you have a time where you're flat out working all the time, you have a time that it's a little quieter, and then you have a time that is kind of ramping up. I like that cycle. I like being involved in every aspect of winemaking from the grape growing, to the winemaking, and then to the sales.

Fred Reno

Then what prompted you eventually to go to California and get a degree in enology there at Davis?

Kirsty Harmon

After a few years of working for Mrs. Kluge with Gabriele and then later leaving Kluge Estate to work primarily for Gabriele. He looked at me one day and said, Okay, you have to make a decision? He said, you're a woman and this is Virginia. Nobody will take you seriously unless you have a degree, and I felt like he was right. There were very few women winemakers then. There are a few more now luckily, so I decided to get a degree. I knew I had a microbiology background so, I thought, well, it wouldn't be too hard, hopefully to meet the prerequisites of getting in school. I looked at Virginia Tech and I looked at UC Davis at the time. Those were the two primary schools that I knew about. Virginia Tech, obviously, because it's right here in Virginia. And then UC Davis, I was lucky enough to be accepted at UC Davis and started my master's degree program there in 2005.

Fred Reno

Well, then that led you to Burgundy. We were talking about Faiveley earlier. Let's talk about Faiveley. I mean, how did that happen? What was the mechanism that you got that scholarship?

Kirsty Harmon

Yeah, so every year, I believe still through today, two students from UC Davis in the Viticulture and Enology program are sponsored by the Chevaliers du Tastevin. I believe it was a group that mostly started in California as a way to bridge California and Burgundy, connoisseurs in some ways and they offered a scholarship to students from UC Davis. Jen Walsh a classmate and I were chosen. She ended up at Marquis d'Angerville and I ended up at Domaine Faiveley.

Fred Reno

And you mentioned earlier Warner Henry had a hand in that.

Kirsty Harmon

He did. Warner Henry the owner of Henry Wine Group was one of the judges for the scholarship. I met with him, and he grilled me on a few questions, a few things. And I was fortunate enough to receive that scholarship and go to burgundy.

Fred Reno

Was that during the harvest in the summer?

Kirsty Harmon

Yep, I finished Davis in 2007, in June, and I flew to France in July of that year. So, I was there from July until December of 2007. Then I went to New Zealand on another scholarship. Luckily, through UC Davis. I think obviously, the benefit of going to school is the foundation and the knowledge that you gain but also the people you meet and the opportunities you have as a student. And UC Davis is well placed and well-loved to receive really amazing opportunities for students. And one of those was the Doug Wisor Memorial Scholarship to go to Craggy Range winery in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand

Fred Reno

Wow, fantastic.

Kirsty Harmon

Lucky me. I was really lucky to go to two very ideal places in the world to learn how to make wine. I was in the lab mostly at Craggy Range working on all of the analysis, at Domaine Faiveley I did everything from count clusters to watch people do punch downs. At the very beginning the French guys didn't want me to do anything in the cellar. They said no, no, you'll feel better in the office, but they finally broke down at the end and let me do a little bit more.

Fred Reno

Oh my god.

Kirsty Harmon

Yeah. So, I had two very, very different experiences. But I can't imagine a better foundation for starting at Blenheim. Because I had worked at Kluge Estate which is directly across the road from Blenheim vineyards. I became friendly, you know, on a waving basis with the Matthews family. So, Dave Matthews owns the winery. His mother lived in the main house at Blenheim at the time. She and I would wave at each other every day as I came in for work or she was out in her garden. But I didn't know that they had been tracking where I had been after I left Kluge Estate,

Fred Reno

They were following you and paying attention then.

Kirsty Harmon

Lucky for me. So, when I was in France, I got a call from Peter Matthews, Dave Matthew's brother, asking me if I would be interested in interviewing for the job. They were looking for a winemaker. Of course, I was overjoyed to have the opportunity to interview. So, I came back from France interviewed, was lucky enough to get the job. And I said, Okay, thank you so much I'll be back in three months, I do have this little thing, a gig in New Zealand. And they were kind enough to let me go. I came back in June of 2008 and started as winemaker, and they haven't kicked me out yet.

Fred Reno

And you would have succeeded Brad McCarthy?

Kirsty Harmon

That's right. Yep. And Brad was at Blenheim from the beginning until 2007, late 2007.

Fred Reno

I can't seem to get a lot of history here. And I don't want to dwell on too much. I'm just curious were him and David partners in that venture.

Kirsty Harmon

As far as I know, yes, they had been friends and they've become partners in that wine making venture.

Fred Reno

What I find fascinating about Dave Matthews, there's this proliferation, you know, in recent years of celebrity people, athletes, musicians, actors, whatever having wine brands, and they take front and center. He doesn't appear to have taken front and center. He seems to be completely in the background.

Kirsty Harmon

He is a very humble guy. The family is a very humble family, even though obviously he's a rock star and very famous. His day-to-day life is very different. And they are incredibly gracious. And he said to me, Hey, make good wine. You let me know what you need, otherwise, go to it. I know it's an opportunity that doesn't come around very often.

Fred Reno

How large was the holdings at the time when you came in 2008 as far as how much acreage was under vine?

Kirsty Harmon

10 acres were under vine? They were making between 2500, 3500 cases a year. And was all mostly estate. There was also a little vineyard called Redlands, which was just up the road, which now Gabriele Rausse and his sons replanted, so they were getting a little bit of fruit from Redlands primarily the rest was from Blenheim.

Fred Reno

Yeah well, Redlands didn't Gabriele originally plant that?

Kirsty Harmon

He did for the Carter Family. So, it comes all full circle.

Fred Reno

And so, you've gone from 10 acres to what 30 acres producing, and primarily Cabernet Franc, and Viognier?

Kirsty Harmon

Nothing primarily, we have I think 12 or 13 different varieties everything from Chardonnay and Viognier, to Albarino, Sauvignon Blanc, we have some Gruner Veltliner also Roussanne, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Mencia, Petit Verdot. Oh, it's all over the place, which is really fun.

Fred Reno

I saw they originally planted Pinot Noir is that no longer in the ground.

Kirsty Harmon

it is in the ground. So, I planted one row of Pinot Noir in 2009, after coming back from Burgundy and falling in love with it. And then the piece of property behind Blenheim which was originally Kluge estate was up for sale. Blenheim was able to buy that piece and that came with three acres of Pinot Noir, because the Kluge family winemakers had used that Pinot for

sparkling. When we got hold of it in 2011, we had to change the trellis system. Gabriele had planted that vineyard in 1999. And it was on a Casarsa training system. So, the very tall on very high trellis, and we decided, well, let's cut these vines. We'll train them to VSP, a little bit lower down, and we'll see how they do. And they've done very well. As you might know, with the Virginia weather Pinot Noir is not my first choice for a grape that does well, but because the three acres were there and doing pretty well. We thought if we're expanding, it seems silly to take out a producing vineyard. What do you do with it? Make rose Okay, and then some of the fruit goes to Gabriele Rausse because they make a Vin Gris de Pinot Noir. That's fantastic.

Fred Reno

I just had the 2020 vintage. Two days ago, he gave me a bottle that was phenomenal after I interviewed him,

Kirsty Harmon

It's so nice. I have tried to make Vin Gris like they do, and I just can't nail it like they do. So, I decided to make rose out of it. And it makes a really lovely base for Rose. But every now and then when the conditions are right, I do try to make a little bit of red, but not very much. And it doesn't usually leave the winery. We've done wine on tap, and we've done kegs because I have such a love for Pinot Noir. I don't want to make a crummy Pinot Noir. Right. I want to make a really great Pinot Noir. And I think the conditions most of the time, are not set up for success with Pinot Noir.

Fred Reno

Speaking of wine, of your wines that you produce, let's just say you're going to impress somebody. If you could only choose one. It's difficult. What wine, would you say okay, this is representative of Kirsty, and Blenheim. This is what I want you to taste, what would that be?

Kirsty Harmon

Can I have one red and one white? Yeah, please for red, I would say Cabernet Franc. I think it is phenomenal grape for this area. I think it grows really well and it expresses its place perhaps more than some other varieties. I like Cabernet Franc, so I buy it from other grape growers around the state. Usually, the Cabernet Franc that we have at Blenheim is a blend of what's grown on the property, as well as some from the Shenandoah Valley, some from up north and some from down south towards Lynchburg, because I like each one of those pieces of Cabernet Franc as a layer. And then for the white. I'm torn because I'm really starting to like the Gruner Veltliner and the Albarino that we have, but I think for consistency, it would be Chardonnay.

Fred Reno

Gabriele makes a Gruner is that your grapes?

Kirsty Harmon

Nope. He has grapes at Redlands. And we both planted the Gruner around the same time. I think it's a really interesting variety. It is certainly not as Zippy and zingy as the Austrian versions that you see just because it's so much warmer here. But it expresses as a really savory layered white wine. We do ours all in stainless steel. Gabriele does all his in stainless steel as well.

Fred Reno

I expected you to say Sauvignon Blanc with your time in New Zealand.

Kirsty Harmon

I know. But it's hard to pick one favorite. We do have Sauvignon Blanc on the property. And I really enjoy that as well.

Fred Reno

So today production is five, 6,000 cases?

Kirsty Harmon

We're about 8000 cases.

Fred Reno

So, starting to get to a size where you have some breadth of people that can dabble in it.

Kirsty Harmon

Yeah, I think we for the longest time, were able to sell everything directly through the tasting room, which is wonderful, but doesn't give you a great sense of how you might stack up with other wineries in the world. I think you have to be on the retail shelf and in restaurants to really show your merit because the world of wine is so big, and people have so many choices. But for a winery to be represented on a restaurant list is really important because that shows that they believe in you, but also the customer is then believing in you. And that, to me is the greatest reward.

Fred Reno

Following up on that wine question, my favorite question I always ask, what was that one wine that you had in your life that you went? Wow, that is amazing. And it's that one wine you always remember.

Kirsty Harmon

Yeah. So, I was working for Neil Kassel, who is a neurosurgeon in town. In the time that I was working for Gabriele as well, but I was saving money to go to school. So, I worked for Neal Kassel, sort of his assistant, He had an amazing wine cellar which he put me in charge of it. And he said, learn about these wines. I have a lot of dinner parties. I'm lucky that I enjoy wine. So, he would buy a lot of wine, I would catalog it all. And he said, okay, pick one wine. I found the most gorgeous label I could, it was a heavy bottle, which back then I thought, of course, a heavy bottle means great wine. So, it was Sassicaia. And he said, Okay, we'll open it up. We'll have it for dinner. But you know, make sure you get a sip. And I thought what in the world is that wine? What vintage, do you recall? I don't recall. I wish I had but I was not paying as much attention to those sorts of things, as I should have, but it was that wine that I really thought, Okay, this wine is not just wine.

Fred Reno

Talk to me about the branding here and the label for Blenheim. What does this represent? As far as this is your main line here, I am assuming as opposed your other packages. What is this representing on the label?

Kirsty Harmon

So, that is half of a fractal of a Pythagoras tree. If you put the red wine and the white wine together, the labels together make the whole Pythagoras tree which is on the top of the screw cap. When I started at Blenheim, Peter Matthews, Dave Matthew's brother was interested in changing the label from what it had been to denote something, some change, right, change in winemaker, and perhaps a change in the program a little bit, let's say. And so, we searched for a very long time to try and find a label we thought Do we want this? Chateau? Do we want the main house? Do we want a piece of the main house? Do we want some connection to the Matthews family? It took forever. And Peter Matthews came to me one day and he said, Well, what about a fractal? And I said, That's fantastic. And then I had to Google what the heck a fractal was. I had no idea. So, it's a mathematical function that makes a form in nature. It turns out there are a lot of fractals in nature. And I found a Pythagoras tree and then we had an artist friend of the Matthews family decided to split the tree so that the red wines show half the tree that goes one way the white in the other direction. We wanted something bold, something instantly recognizable and something unlike any other at that point, you see for Virginia wine labels,

Fred Reno

Folks, I'm looking at these two together. Kirsty brought me a bottle of Chardonnay and a bottle of Cabernet Franc and now I get it.

Kirsty Harmon

And most people think well, is that the Dreaming Tree from the Dave Matthews songs and it can be anything and all of those things. Math teachers are the only ones that come in and are really excited because math teachers know exactly what fractals are.

Fred Reno

How does this differ from the other two labels? I mean, the Claim House is there. It's a historic property.

Kirsty Harmon

I live in the Claim House.

Fred Reno

So, you have Claim House and then you have Painted. I'm assuming that they are different varietals, and they represent some blending. So, what's the difference here

Kirsty Harmon

The difference is the Claim House red and white which used to just be called Red table wine and white table wine until a gentleman by the name of Jose Andres came to the winery and said you can't call it table wine anymore. So, then we change the name to Claim House Red and White. The goal is to have the most flexibility for me as a winemaker to make variety specific wines like Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc, Viognier, but also two blends. So, a blend at sort of the entry level that has little to no oak at all meant for slightly less serious occasions. And then at the other end, another set of blends Painted red and Painted white, that are a little bit heavier, a little bit more structured. And those have labels designed by Dave Matthews. He draws the labels every year and every year those labels change.

Fred Reno

I understand now. And I'm still trying to search my memory bank. I was at Food Of All Nations about a year ago, and Tom handed me a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, a blend I believe it wasn't Painted, but it had some label that looked like that.

Kirsty Harmon

Oh, it was On the Line. So, on the line was our response to the Coronavirus to do something with wine, right I feel pretty helpless. Most of my families is in healthcare. My husband's an anesthesiologist on the frontlines. I am nowhere near the frontlines of one of the battles against this virus. An old friend of mine, Mrs. Kluges son John Kluge Jr. reached out to me and said I feel helpless. I want to do something would you want to team up? He said, could we do a wine specifically for frontline foods World Central Kitchen fundraising. So, he said, maybe we can get somebody to draw the label. I said, I know a guy. So, I talked to Dave Matthews through Ashley Yancey. And he drew this label of the woman in a mask, obviously, in the

medical field, and we called it On the Line. And all of the proceeds from those wines went to World Central Kitchen.

Fred Reno

Well, the wine was fantastic.

Kirsty Harmon

Thanks, It's just a fun blend, we wanted to do something that was at a price point that a lot of people could potentially afford, and also feel like they're doing something by drinking a glass of wine, with proceeds going to something pretty spectacular.

Fred Reno

So, let's see this will be your 13th,14th harvest in Virginia? That's right. What have you seen, if anything in regard to Climate Change, any subtle affects you might have seen happening in the vineyard?

Kirsty Harmon

It's not subtle, it's pretty extreme. I think the extremes are becoming even more extreme. We've seen an increase in in heat, certainly, the winters are not nearly as cold as they used to be, which is great in some ways, and terrible in some ways. We're not getting the reduction of pests and bugs that we would normally get, you know, wiped out with a really cold winter. It helps that we don't have cold winters, obviously for, you know, graft protection, we don't have to heal them up as much as we used to. There's definitely a trend towards warmer, but I think it's just also a trend to more extremes. extreme heat, extreme rain, you name it, it's extreme. We are looking and thinking about varieties to respond to that. That's why we planted Albarino a few years ago. That's why we have just planted Mencia last year to try and see five years from now 10 years from now what works now might not work. Mencia, it's the red variety from Spain? Because Albarino is doing so well. We thought why not plant their red counterpart in some ways. So, we don't know. We planted it last year. We'll see. So far so good.

Fred Reno

I had a vintner say to me early on when I came here to Virginia a couple of years ago. I would love your opinion on this. He said, Fred, it's entirely possible that some of the absolute best vineyards in Virginia, haven't even been planted yet.

Kirsty Harmon

Yeah, I think that's very true. And I think it's changing. The Virginia wine scene has changed a lot in the 20 years that I've been involved in it. 20 years ago, I felt like people retired to Virginia, with a fair amount of money, found a place or a house and then looked out the window and said, can we plant grapes. And now it's changing because people are finding a spot to grow

grapes and then planting their house there. And it's a very different change in attitude. I think because of that you're finding better sites.

Fred Reno

Okay, well, then, yeah, that would make sense. It would just seem to me that diversity is what has attracted me to Virginia. Why I think, in my opinion, it's the most exciting wine growing region in the country today, without a doubt.

Kirsty Harmon

You also have a diversity in winemakers and winemaking style, which I think is really fun. You see a lot of French influence you see, you know, people that have been lucky enough to travel a little bit, get some experience elsewhere and bring that experience back.

Fred Reno

Well, you were in Burgundy, and you were in New Zealand. How did that influence your winemaking and your winemaking style?

Kirsty Harmon

In Burgundy, I learned the importance of place. One of my very first jobs when I was in Burgundy as this intern that they didn't know what to do was to visit all 200 parcels that Faiveley held. I had started the week after a new technical director Jerome Flous started. And he said I don't know where all these parcels are. He said there's not one person in the in the company that knows all of the parcels. There's this guy that knows this section, this guy that knows this section, and this guy that knows this section, he said; Your job is to go with them, find all the parcels. And because I do calligraphy, I made these little tickets with the name of the vineyard or the name of the parcel and the surface area on the back and I marked all four corners of each of the 200 parcels and then had to have direction so I could drive him back to each of those parcels. So, we went up and down through every vineyard and I got just an outstanding learning experience from Grand Cru to all, and I was floored that these vines on this side of this little road are Premier Cru, and these vines on this side are Village. And I thought this is just make believe. But then following those wines and those grapes through the wineries and I could see Oh, it makes a huge difference. So, from Burgundy I learned the importance of place and from New Zealand I learned the importance of having a good time, having it be fun. I was one of seven interns. So, a very different experience than in France because I got to meet these cool people that had traveled all over the world and done harvests, here and there and everywhere. And so, from them, I learned the importance of really just, this is wine, but it's also a really good time.

Fred Reno

I'm glad you said it, because I think of the folks from down under, if you will, Australia, New Zealand, that area, their attitude about wine is so refreshing. It's not this Protestant type attitude that this is bad for you but it's more like, no, this is just part of our life. This is part of what we do. Yeah, this is who we are. And it's fine.

Kirsty Harmon

Yeah, I was expecting to see a lot of innovation there and a lot of tradition in Burgundy. But I felt like I saw the opposite. I felt like the biggest folks in New Zealand, we're trying to go back to more basic and traditional methods and that the French were pushing the envelope on innovation and technique.

Fred Reno

That's fascinating because the last time I was in Burgundy, which was in 2014, I was stunned by what I'm going to call the Wizard of Oz. Mirage behind that Old World is this incredible technology. I saw things in some places that people in California had no idea even existed.

Kirsty Harmon

They were both fantastic places. And I think I would have, looking back, I think I would have liked another two to three years to travel around and do more harvests in different places. I don't regret starting at Blenheim, I'm so happy I'm there. And so now I live vicariously through interns that come to Blenheim that have gone other places and are teaching me things. So that's how I continue my wine knowledge, exploration, and learning. It's really easy to get stagnant and complacent I think so, I work hard to not do that.

Fred Reno

Well, now every winemaker I've ever talked to have some private little sparkling wine project down in the cellar. Do you?

Kirsty Harmon

NO! Because I don't everybody asked me. Would you have a side project? Are you doing a side project? No, I am very lucky that I get to make exactly the wines that I want to make at Blenheim. And that I have no need to do any side projects because I am fortunate, I get to do exactly what I want. I wouldn't change a thing.

Fred Reno

How much time do you spend yourself in the vineyard these days?

Kirsty Harmon

So, I take my dogs out for a walk for an hour, hour, and a half every day in the vineyards. And then I usually go and check in with John our vineyard manager at least once or twice throughout the day. So, I'm in the vineyard quite a bit.

Fred Reno

Yeah, because it is winegrowing.

Kirsty Harmon

It is, and it is extremely monotonous. It defeats me every time I work in the vineyard, I feel better suited for the winery. But I have the utmost respect for the work that happens in the vineyard.

Fred Reno

Of course, you know at the end of the day, it's just farming.

Kirsty Harmon

It is and that's why it's so humbling. Because you realize Mother Nature's the one in control. Doesn't matter what you do, doesn't matter how many hours you put in, she's in charge.

Fred Reno

I can't believe how Virginia has continued to blossom. And yet the best days are still ahead probably

Kirsty Harmon

Absolutely. As we gain more knowledge, as we try different varieties, as we're understanding what works or what doesn't work, and also understanding a little bit better a style. It's hard. There are more than 300 wineries in the state. Everybody like me knows exactly what we should be doing. But there's so many different opinions. I think what's important and exciting about Virginia and especially about the Central Virginia region is that we're always pushing to get better, and we see each other as wineries as collaborators rather than as competitors. And I think that's important.

Fred Reno

Well, that was the next question. I was going to ask you and you just answered it. There does seem to be a level of collegiality and collaboration here in Virginia. That is refreshing.

Kirsty Harmon

It has to happen. I mean, that's how you succeed, I think that's how New Zealand is so successful is because they knew that they had to band together to push something forward out into the world.

Fred Reno

What type of support Do you get, or do you can rely on from someplace like PVCC or Virginia Tech or one of the schools?

Kirsty Harmon

They definitely have that PVCC has some enology courses and sort of prep courses for folks that want to get into the industry. Virginia Tech also has certainly on a higher level. They've got a master's program in food science, I believe. I don't think there's anything specific and unique in enology. But the biggest resource that we have, I believe as Virginia winemakers is the Winemakers Research Exchange. This was an idea that came up a number of years ago with Matthieu Finot from King Family and Emily Pelton from Veritas. The three of us wanted more hands-on experimentation and a way in a forum and a format to talk to each other about winemaking. Before that Bruce Zoecklein, who is at Virginia Tech is a great supporter, he sort of went into semi-retirement, he's still very much involved. But it pushed us as winemakers to challenge ourselves. We started with very little funding from the Monticello Wine Trail, but it enabled us to start doing experiments, right. I know what I'm doing with everything in the cellar. So, I want to challenge myself, if I do punch downs versus pump overs on a red wine, what does that do to it? Do I like the effect? And you can do that on your own without anybody kind of helping you with the experimental design. But it's always better if you can do it with some determined control and experiment. And then you taste it blind. And you taste it blind as a group. And you decide, is there a difference in whatever I've just done? punch down versus pump over? Is there a difference in these two wines? And is that difference, positive or negative? And obviously, depending on your style goals, as a winemaker, you might think whatever is very positive, and I might think it's very negative. So, it allows us a conversation, a starting conversation, for really drilling down and understanding what my actions are doing or what I'm adding to the wine or what I'm not adding to the wine, how that impacts the final product. But it's a constant forum for challenging ourselves as winemakers.

Fred Reno

That sounds interesting. I hadn't heard anybody talk about that yet. And is it just a small little group?

Kirsty Harmon

Its actually state funded now. It is available and open. And we now obviously, all the tastings are virtual. But we do tastings and Joy Ting is our enologist, and she runs the show. She's been running it for three years now. We get together virtually every two to four weeks,

depending on the topic to taste wines blind and understand. So, I have one coming up on use of SO₂.

Fred Reno

You'd mentioned this earlier. So, you do source some grapes from Shenandoah Valley. What do you see the difference is between Shenandoah Valley and the Central Virginia's growing conditions and AVA's.

Kirsty Harmon

Shenandoah Valley has the luxury of having slightly cooler evenings slightly overall cooler temperatures, so I think fruit from the Shenandoah Valley has higher acids, it brings a bit more freshness than Central Virginia. The Central Virginia fruit we are in a lucky position where we can ripen things. It depends on the year of course, but we can ripen things but sometimes I like a little bit more acid. So, I think it's nice to be able to play around with those two AVA's. I also get a little bit of fruit down south towards Lynchburg that has a slightly different profile like Cabernet Sauvignon, tiny bit of Cabernet Franc and a tiny bit of Viognier down there. What vineyard is that? I work with Piggott vineyards and then also Charlie Reed these two, two retirees.

Fred Reno

Small growers

Kirsty Harmon

Small growers. The Piggott's have two acres. Tony and Jim have two acres. Charlie and Ann Reed have I think just under two acres.

Fred Reno

Well, that's fun.

Kirsty Harmon

Yeah, I collect, collect all of these awesome little growers that are so proud to bring their grapes at the end of the year. The Piggott vineyard is shared with the Rausse's, so they have two acres of Cabernet Sauvignon and the Rausse's get some, and we get some at Blenheim.

Fred Reno

It is so amazing to me that you were able to serendipitously meet Gabriele.

Kirsty Harmon

I know it really changed my life. Mrs. Kluge changed my life. The opportunity to work for her and be given a complete chance on something I had no idea what I was doing.

Fred Reno

Is she still alive?

Kirsty Harmon

She is as far as I know, has moved back to the Charlottesville area. Okay, she was in New York for a while,

Fred Reno

I interviewed Claude Thibaut as part of all this and so you

Kirsty Harmon

I was I was at Kluge before Claude,

Fred Reno

You were there before Claude, Exactly. Okay. Now I understand. Well, this has been really enlightening, Kirsty, really enlightening. Thank You.

Kirsty Harmon

Thanks for the great questions.

Fred Reno

I really have enjoyed this immensely. And I want to say thank you again.

Kirsty Harmon

Thank you so much.