

EPIISODE #16: TRUE HERITAGE/EMILY PELTON, WINEMAKER & GEORGE HODSON, PRESIDENT & CEO.

SPEAKERS

Emily Pelton, Fred Reno, George Hodson

Fred Reno

Emily, and George, thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.

George Hodson

Our pleasure, excited.

Fred Reno

Oh, thank you. And I am a big fan of these wines. In fact, I tasted through all of them last week, at least all that was on the shelf at Wegmans. So let me start why True Heritage. What was the inspiration for this? Whose idea? How did this come together?

George Hodson

You know, I think it was one of those that was a function of Emily and I looking at each other and seeing what we felt needed to change about the Virginia wine industry in order to advance the Virginia wine industry. So, like this really, truly began in 2012, 2013. It was us looking at each other, recognizing the fact that we were selling out all of our product in stores, I mean, in our tasting room, that we didn't have enough grapes, enough acreage, in order to produce enough wine. And also recognizing kind of the nature of the Veritas model would always be self-limiting in in those aspects of distribution and having the wine leave the tasting room, it really was a problem solving. discussion is how are we going to do this? How are we going to get more acreage? How are we going to get to a price point that is consistent with the rest of the industry? And ultimately, how are we going to get Virginia outside of Virginia?

Emily Pelton

Yeah, because agritourism is wonderful, we've benefited from it over the years and really grown a following of people that are in and out of the winery and really enjoy visiting and buying their bottles while they're here. But it's kind of doesn't go that next step. We always wanted to be in distribution, but we really do sell our Veritas product here, right? And we don't want to sell out so that we can be in distribution. So, we really did have to look at next steps and how to create a new project a new brand that was ultimately, for the marketplace for consumers so that people could have access to Virginia wine. It's hard to get.

Fred Reno

So once the idea of the springs forward and you start to put structure around it. I'd be curious, did you sit down, say okay, here's our mission statement. Here's our goal.

Emily Pelton

We did, Yeah and one of the fundamental things. And it was also part of that first conversation with George and I wasn't necessarily getting more wine in the marketplace, but it was also regionalizing, Virginia wine and southern food. Everywhere we've been in the world, in the wine industry, there's a huge food culture surrounding the wine. And our area didn't grow up with wine. This is a new phenomenon, you know, and a wonderful growth pattern for our region. But we really wanted to start linking in that food and wine culture, partly because we enjoy it so much. And partly because it really is sort of the period at the end of the wine sentence. You know what I mean? It's the whole story. Yeah. It's how you bring people together and how you share food and share wine. And that's, that's the beauty of this industry. So, it seemed like a good, we didn't want to go into distribution in the whole entire United States, it seemed overwhelming. So, we really just kind of picked our food region.

Fred Reno

Okay, so you started out with the idea that it would be originality, and it would also help promote the wine region of Virginia, essentially, which is all real sound idea I mean it's great, Its great idea, then the next step is okay, where do we get grapes how did that, George? I mean, how did that manifest itself from, you know,

Emily Pelton

that was the three or four years in between the idea and the actuation.

George Hodson

I mean, it's a tough thing to do, because you know, it, you have to be patient in the wine industry. And ultimately, from inception to a bottle of wine, you know, you have three to five years. But we also, you know, had to find the right partners who were sharing the vision of the brand. And so, finding people who were able and willing to plant vineyards on their properties, and then participate in this brand in a way that went beyond kind of a grower relationship and really kind of went into a partner relationship, which is what's unique about this, this project is that the vineyards that are involved in this project are participating in their, in the brand with us.

Fred Reno

So, Castalia farms and Ben Coolyn farm. So, they are basically partners in this endeavor. And they planted their property specifically for this project. Exactly. Well, that's great.

Emily Pelton

And then we also have this other layer, which kind of happened on accident. But, you know, as we were looking at it, we always had an eye to the history of the region and how much historical breadth we have. And we realized we were starting to put these old beautiful estates, farmland estates back into agriculture, I realized how, what a wonderful story that is too, and we've always had our family

story to tell here at Veritas. And it was really nice to start having that sort of family story of these estates and how we can reintroduce agriculture back into these estates and also tell the story of, of the land and our region,

Fred Reno

how did you zone in on the Keswick area, because that's where these two properties are located? There must have been something in the soil in the terroir there, if you will, that you saw, that said this would be a great part to start.

Emily Pelton

I've always wanted to grow grapes out in Keswick.

And also, and then also the nature of those farms as well. There's a continuity there that a lot of other you know; Monticello has a very large AVA. So, what we want to do, really trying to do is hyper focus on a region that had a lot of consistency. And so, while we want to have you know, these farms contribute each of their identity to the to the line, we have a little bit of complexity with different sites and but in the same respect, we can also farm them in a very similar way, as we continue to build that out. And, and we've got two farms involved. Now we've got another one that is in the process of preparing to plant right now. And we have a third farm. So right now, we have four participating farms contributing grapes to the label. And we hope to see it continue to grow with fantastic Yeah. And again, the area will allow us to do that. Because there is, you know, so many large farms still intact,

Emily Pelton

and the Keswick corridor follows the Southwest mountains. So, it's a very similar, well, very different in terroir, but very similar aspect in that you know, you're going up in elevation into the Southwest mountains, very similar to a lot of what you see in this area in Monticello right against the Blue Ridge.

Fred Reno

Well, one of the first things I noticed when I had the True Heritage Chardonnay for the first time was what I say call a salinity that I had not tasted in most Virginia Chardonnay. And it reminded me of a project. I had done myself back in California. And then when I was up at Keswick Vineyards interviewing Stephen, and he had pulled out his latest vintage of Chardonnay. And I picked up that salinity in that Chardonnay, I thought, oh, there really is some terroir there is some component here. That's cuz, you know, this farm is right down the road from Keswick And so there's some really uniqueness there. This is not just a commercial endeavor, there's definitely uniqueness to this these sites and what you're doing.

Emily Pelton

Absolutely. And that's my highest elevation planting of grapes in Keswick, that Chardonnay, right up at the very top of

Fred Reno

what is the elevation there?

Emily Pelton

I'm not gonna say relatively speaking Well, what is it? 600? Yeah. oh no 900.

Fred Reno

Okay, well, I mean, you're getting up at Chardonnay, that kind of elevation.

Emily Pelton

But's that's nice, too. I mean, the differences. I mean, our relative elevation is beautiful. Everything is below us on the vineyards. And that's all that really matters. You know how high you are, as long as the air has somewhere else to go is, is the most important part. So, we have that there. But it did give me chest pains planting over there at lower elevations because I'm used to 900 being my lowest, it's worked out really well.

George Hodson

Actually, our next planting is going to be at 13 to 1400. so, we're creeping up the mountain as we go.

Fred Reno

Yeah, that's great. What drove the decision from the standpoint of Okay, these are the varietals, we're going to focus on?

is history. Just what I have. What you know, as a family, we have experience with what's done well, what's doing well in the marketplace. What has promise for long term viability within our growing region. I didn't want to reinvent the wheel by any means. And, you know, we've got such good energy behind the new Petit Verdot and Cab Franc in Virginia. Just wanted to continue that story. I have a lot of ideas as we as we move forward as far as planting the seeds and really introducing people to Virginia wine. I wanted it to be consistent with what I have around me.

Fred Reno

So, my business math tells me that you're compacity is close to 15,000 cases right now, is that about accurate? Given the grape availability?

George Hodson

of, in that neighborhood. Yeah. And with that case production, what we're trying to do, as Emily just mentioned, is limiting the number of SKU's. And I think that you know, one of the one of the assets there, UPC, UPC is yes. So, excuse, yes, yes. One of the one of Virginia's greatest assets is how young we are and how much experimentation is going on. Right. And that's, that's a great thing. And we really love the fact that we're having debates about Tannat and, and people bringing in different varietals. But you know, one of the things in order to be commercially viable, we have to tighten that up and say, Okay, this is what we can be known for. And, and the nice thing about these varietals that we're using, is that we're not competing with a market space that is completely mature and completely saturated. We're not going up against cab sauv from Napa Valley. We're bringing forward what we have

done over the last 40 years, 20 years here at Veritas, and being able to produce something that is unique and marketable. Without, it grows really well here.

Fred Reno

Yeah, well, no, you

Emily Pelton

actually, have to fit so it wasn't like what else can we plant rather than cab sauv? So, we did try cab sauv,

Fred Reno

no wine growing. You have to obviously be specific to your site. Yeah, right and choose. But the idea what you just said is really important, George focus, especially when you want to turn this into a larger brand offering, if you will, on a more regional and national basis, the consumer has to be able to say, True Heritage, what do they make, and they have to gravitate immediately to in their mind, that's what they make. Okay, that's what it is.

George Hodson

you think of every wine region in the world, if you're going to go to a grape, you know, whether it's Marlborough whether it's Napa, whether it's Sancerre, pops in your head, that grape. And Virginia doesn't have that yet. And, you know, we're putting forth our opinion on what it should be. That's not to marginalize, you know, all those other efforts, because you know, we're doing the same thing. But to use the word you just use focus is we're really trying to create that identity, so that people can know who we are what we're doing, be able to see a wine on the shelf and be able to have that pop the way we do with every other wine region.

Fred Reno

I'm assume the wine is produced here, at Veritas, which is great, if you have capacity, and

Emily Pelton

Sorry, I'm shaking head and were on a Podcast.

Fred Reno

It is what it is, how large Do you see this? I mean, what do you think commercially, and that's not a dirty word, I think it's a great word if he can make high quality wine. And in 10s of 1000s of cases, which a lot of producers do, that's what you need to do to get that, that nationality, if you

George Hodson

well, and every step we take towards that improves our ability to do it better, more cost effective. And so, it's really, we're graduating into what the majority of the wine world is doing. You know, I mean, if you only bought, if you only drank what you bought out of winery, you know, you'd be very limited. And so, you know, I think we do have a pretty long runway on where we want to take this brand in terms of production levels, we have a lot of land that's available in the Keswick corridor, which is one of the reasons we chose that area for development. And we already have production space available to us.

So, all the pieces are coming together in a way, you know, when we've taken the time that we have, you know, nearly seven years as we build out this this project, we've kind of planned on these things. And so, our hope is to take it to a significant size and one that is relevant on the regional, national, and international stage.

Emily Pelton

And we've just been planting every year, anywhere from 20 to 30 acres a year. Okay, I think we're at 60 acres in production almost 100 in the ground for future.

Fred Reno

So, tell me about your naming and your branding. That must have been an interesting Roundtable. How did this all come together?

George Hodson

Well, you know, it's been it's been a dynamic conversation. You know, obviously, we start with true, and, and so that is linking to Veritas, Veritas obviously, Latin for truth. And so, we wanted to make sure that we were linking back to the legacy brand of Veritas. And so, what we wanted to do then is bring in that larger conversation of what this area is what we really working towards is partnering with that food culture and the really broad spectrum of influences that this area has that food culture has, that all of the stories of this region are contributed to by so many cultures, so many people, so many places that it's come together. And so, we want to, we want to honor the work that's been done with the wine over the last 40 years. So that's the piece of that heritage. And we want to honor the people who have contributed to Southern food culture. And that's from all around the world that's from you.

Emily Pelton

came here from somewhere else. It came here from somewhere else.

Fred Reno

Right, as we all did,

George Hodson

exactly. Right. And so, speaking that culture and that history in that heritage, and bringing it together in an inclusive and in a way that honors the values of all those contributors is what we're trying to do.

Emily Pelton

what we're excited about. It's been a really fun evolution.

Fred Reno

What was the first vintage? 2017. It was a range of wines, or did you have less varietals at that time,

Emily Pelton

it was three wines, Chardonnay, Viognier, Petit Verdot, from our first planting, which was eight and a half acres.

George Hodson

Great year to start though, right? It was a great year. And you know, our portfolio hasn't changed much even though a lot more varietals have come on. We still kept it that that focused with Petit Verdot, Chardonnay and Viognier and then a blend.

Fred Reno

Well, the blend I have my refrigerator. I've been enjoying it over the last four nights having a glass of it. I mean, the Viognier/ Petit Manseng blend is terrific. Yes, that is really wonderful, delicious wine.

Emily Pelton

Thank you so much. I think they complement each other's no question like what the Viognier is missing, the Petit Manseng has and what the Petit Manseng has too much of the Viognier helps to kind of balance it.

Fred Reno

Well. What I like to do with in that situation is get a glass, cap it, and just put in the refrigerator taste over three or four Nights Watch how it evolves. And that wine has done nothing but blossom and get richer without losing its structural components. Wonderful. It's no and it's '18 Yeah, it was. I was just thinking to myself that which, you know, everybody said was a difficult year? Well, you have difficult years. It's called farming. Right? Right. I mean, it is what you're going to deal with. And the fact that you could make the high-quality wine that you did, speaks to the vineyard speaks to your talents, and also speaks to the region, quite honestly, that even in a difficult year, it can produce high quality wine. And that's the thing. And what you're doing here excites me, because when I talk to people and have talked to people before I came here to Virginia, about Virginia, wine around the country, and people know, air quotes everything about wine. And I talked about Virginia, and they looked at me like I was crazy. And then I would taste lots of Virginia wine. And the overwhelmingly the response was always the same. I had no idea.

Emily Pelton

I had one experience. And I'll try and go ahead, it's a story. I was doing an event and they didn't really introduce me or us or the group that was pouring. And it was all Virginia wines. You know, it was sort of a larger brand that had people from all over the United States to this dinner. And I was kind of annoyed that nobody knew it was Virginia wine, but we went through it. And at the end, I went around to every guest and said, you know, Hi, we're from Virginia, and are like Virginia. And they it's almost nicer that they just took it blind and was like, This is fantastic. Instead of having Virginia first and then being like, well, this is good for it was kind of the other way around. And they were so pleased. And so, they enjoyed the wine so much. And we're really excited when they found out that it was local for them.

Fred Reno

To me there's a soul in these wines from Virginia that is missing these days out of most California Wine primarily because they de-alc most of that. And anytime you go through that process, you're stripping the soul right out of the wine.

George Hodson

But I also think it's a learning process to, right because at the end of the day, the winemakers especially, you know, the modern era of Virginia wineries started in the late 70s. Right. And, you know, I think that a lot of people's first impression of Virginia wine was when they were trying to be California, right? Like we're the same continent, we should try and do the same thing and, and I think that that's what has really been learned that Virginia winemakers who are doing the best things are recognizing the soul of Virginia and recognize that we do have bad vintages. We do have great challenges, challenging vintages. And so, they do what you know, I mean, not every not every one region in France is absolutely perfect. And they respond to it. And they and they the vinicultural responds the winemaking responds and then you have something that's an authentic expression of the place. And that's what we're trying to do with Virginia wine and not not just as not just True Heritage, or, you know, King Family everybody is is saying okay, we are who we are. We're comfortable with that now and putting forward a product that reflects that. And then that's why people are now interested in it. Because we're not trying to be something else being true to our roots, yes. And we're being we're being a wine that that speaks to the region. And that's what wine consumers want. They want something that is unique, and they want something that has a soul to it, as you just said. And I think that that's what we're trying to do and take out of Virginia and share with the rest of the world.

Fred Reno

How have your efforts gone so far? To get distribution outside of Virginia.

Emily Pelton

We just started.

Fred Reno

Yeah, I recognize that. But yeah,

George Hodson

so no, we've been really we're starting to launch our distribution initiative in March of 2020. And so not very good timing, not a great time. And obviously, you know, distributed books are closed right now, the on-premises market is effectively been closed for the last year. We've done as well as you could possibly do in a global pandemic. But I think that now we're really starting to hit our stride. We're picking up additional states. And there's a great level of interest there. But you know, we're pacing ourselves understanding that the books aren't open, people are not taking on new products. And so, we're lining it all up right now. We're in Virginia, Maryland, DC, Florida, and picking up Tennessee, South Carolina and Georgia, well that's terrific, in the next handful of months. Yeah,

Fred Reno

that's terrific. Yeah, no COVID timing right. By, you know, I'd hate to be in the restaurant business. You are here at Veritas. I can't even imagine how difficult that must be.

Emily Pelton

We're lucky to have space. So that was our blessing. Yeah. Just the physical outside space for guests

Fred Reno

Yeah. So, Emily, your general philosophy about winegrowing wine making you started making wine here in 2004. Was that your first vintage.

Emily Pelton

2001 was my first vintage oh it was okay. But I worked alongside my father. But in 2004 or five, I became sort of the sole, the head winemaker.

Fred Reno

So, you cut your teeth producing wine. Only in Virginia? That's correct. making wine only?

Emily Pelton

You must be I'm really proud of that.

Fred Reno

Yeah, in fact, you must be a rare person in that regard. When I when I look at the landscape, because a lot of the winemakers I see here in Virginia, are anything, but from Virginia, and a lot of cases, even this country.

Emily Pelton

That's correct. That is correct. My colleagues are definitely from all over and have had a lot more geographical experience making wine in other regions. For a little while, I kind of felt like I wanted to go do that and explore other regions. Right now, where I am is I love kind of my hyper focus of really having sort of grown up with these varietals really learned so much about each one of these grapes and how they perform here in the soils that I'm very thankful for that ability to not have any sort of fuzz from Well, you know, I used to do this here, and I used to do that there. I've only learned what I've done and what I do from what I have. And that's been a long road of trial and error.

Fred Reno

What's the collegiality like, during this last 20 years, you've been making wine here as far as sharing ideas and problems and troubles and?

Emily Pelton

absolutely wonderful. Could not have made the progress that I've made as a winemaker here in Virginia without all my other colleagues, we share ideas, we experiment together, we set up a research exchange where we each do projects in house and then bring them back to the table and actually have managed to get state funding for that as we as we grew it. And it's become a huge part of sort of our culture, our industry and bringing the whole Commonwealth together. Because, you know, Monticello is obviously what I know the most about. But there are so many other distinct regions in the Commonwealth of grape growing that are very different to what I experienced. So, it's been nice to be able to talk to winemakers from Northern Virginia and really understand their challenges which are different than mine. But we are all sharing as much information as possible. In order just to learn more about winemaking in Virginia, all of the literature is not about Virginia. So, we have to make our own literature and kind of build our own techniques and really start looking at each other and asking each other Why. Why are we farming like this? Why are we Why are we using this certain technique in the

cellar. Why? And really figuring out what we can do that's more specific for our grapes in our region and our phenolic ripeness.

Fred Reno

Well. One of the things that you are doing ties to something that was said to me early on when I first moved here by one Vintner who said Fred, I think some of the best vineyards in Virginia haven't even been planted yet. And I believe what you're doing currently in Keswick is proving that that Virginia's best vineyards maybe still way ahead of us. And there's so much potential quality evolution, you have to come.

Emily Pelton

Absolutely. And it's so exciting. I mean, even down to our True Heritage project we're planting right now. In our first five years, we were planting what was available. But I was always kind of looking up at the top of that mountain and kind of, you know, saying, but where I really like to plant is up there. In the years as we progress, you know, our partners start to hear what I'm saying. And so now we're into a position where we can clear some land that is, you know, where I'm like. That's where I want to plant. And it's really exciting.

Fred Reno

You sound like your father when he was talking about Top Meadow.

Emily Pelton

Absolutely exactly the same. It took us 10 years to plant, our best site here at Veritas to have that cleared and ready for vineyard production. And we've only had two or three vintages off of it in so far. So yes, you're exactly right, you know, as we learn, and as we experiment, and as we move into some of the premier sites, which are more challenging to farm and get to and but we, I can see it. I can see where they are.

Fred Reno

Well, that's fascinating. What do you see the Monticello AVA is a large AVA as a lot of these are Virginia? But how does it differ as far as the character of the grapes, let's say from Northern Virginia up in Middleburg, AVA and things like that, what do you see just what's the difference?

Emily Pelton

physiologically, you know, we have budbreak, two weeks earlier than they do. Okay. So just from if I was a vine, and I was telling you what the differences we're just warmer down here, everything kind of pops out a little bit earlier. And so, our growing season, it's just shifted a little bit from them. So, you see different varieties do better. And in the south versus the North. You know, Viognier I find very easy to farm here okay whereas I think most people you speak to in Northern Virginia find it a little more challenging, white blends in this region. And our red are our red blends in the Monticello AVA I think are just outstanding. And that might be just from that extra two weeks of growing time.

Fred Reno

I hadn't thought about that. But you're right, the Meritage wines that come out of this area are distinctive, and really lead the pack quite a bit.

George Hodson

Yeah. Well, I mean, if you look at you know, the, and obviously competitions aren't everything, but if you look at the makeup of the Governor's case, over the last 10 years, you'll see Central Virginia, contributing a significant percentage of the number of wines in the governor's case and the gold medals. You know, we represent about 10% of the wineries in the state of Virginia, you know, about 30 wineries are right in this Monticello AVA, But the golds that we have and kind of some of those laurel's kind of speak to what we're doing.

Emily Pelton

And they can do a much better Chardonnay than I can up in Northern Virginia, even on the coast.

George Hodson

And again, and I hope I didn't sound like I was I was saying, you know, bragging about it, but I do think that it is, you know, a unique place to grow grapes. And that's why we're leaning into the way we are.

Fred Reno

Well, yeah. And well the proof is in the in the bottle, and it's there. I mean, I'm just so excited about Virginia wine, and the diversity here, but the quality. In fact, that is the number one thing I try to stress when I talk to trade people around the country and send them wine. I say Listen, I want you to tell me what you think of the quality judge this based on quality because some of the variables are different, obviously. Big fan of Petit Manseng. Love Petit Manseng, I think this is exciting, grape to work with. When they break it down to pure quality? Then they start going, Oh, I see what you're talking about. Now, West Coast palettes are different. So, I find that my experience so far is they understand the Cabernet Franc, but they don't get the Petit Verdot that I've discovered, but tell me about the quality, oh the quality is really good. Yeah. It's just maybe a little bit too much for them what they're expected. Well, this is exciting project. Really exciting project. Just so happy for you all is this. It's really cool. And it The sky's the limit here.

George Hodson

That's our that's our hope, and we're excited for it too. I think that, you know, one of the things about the Virginia culture and the Virginia wine industry, and we've touched on a couple different times is that we're trying to support each other with it. We're trying to all you know; we are too small of a region to be in competition or anything like that. So, this effort is as much about promoting Virginia, every single winery in Virginia is helping us make a name for it. And so, you know, and we talked about kind of the collaboration between winemakers our hope is that this this project is a small piece of advancing the entire industry and making more and more people less surprised when they taste Virginia wine, we would like that reputation to not be one that is a gimmick, or Hey, I'm surprised Oh, they make wine in Virginia. Or the or even worse thinking that it's going to be some kind of muscadine sweet wine. Right? As you just spoke to about quality, we want people to know the level of quality wine that comes out of Virginia. And we hope to be you know, part of that with this brand and the other brands that we work on.

Emily Pelton

And what I'm excited about is we're not telling you, our story. We're still writing our story. So, I think on, you know, on your side, I think that's a really fun thing to be a part of

Fred Reno

Exactly.

Emily Pelton

Remember when dot, dot, dot. I love that aspect of where we are in our industry.

Fred Reno

Well, Emily and George, I know you've got another meeting coming up here and I'm glad you can take the time to sit this is going to be great. This is another wonderful piece of the episode of my journey here in Virginia trying to discover and to share that discovery with the people at large and I just want to say thank you.

Emily Pelton

No, we enjoyed it Thank you.

Fred Reno