

EPISODE # 19 KING FAMILY VINEYARDS: MATTHIEU FINOT.

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Matthieu Finot

Fred Reno

Matthieu, welcome to my Podcast and thank you for taking the time today.

Matthieu Finot

Thank you for having me.

Fred Reno

I like to start at the beginning How does a winemaker from Crozes Hermitage who apparently has made wine in all parts of the world end up in Virginia give me a little bit about your background and how you got into winemaking in France and what started it.

Matthieu Finot

There is the short and long story so, I'm going to get you something in between not too long not too short. I'm coming from a Crozes-Hermitage where my family was growing apricots and vines and making their own wine, but also bringing a lot of grapes to the company cellars and such on my mother's side. Also, my father was a big wine lover. So, when you grow up in a family like that you really get involved with wine and drinking wine. When I turned older and when it was time for me to decide what career I wanted to do in life, I felt that I really wanted to go to my in some way to my farming roots. I wanted to get back to farming. But I did find that wine making was fine but getting back into the farming that I was really looking for. So that's the reason. Even if directly My parents are not farmers, and I've got no reason to be involved into winemaking, I decided to get back in winemaking. And that happened in '94. So, it's been a while now. the rest of it is me working in different places, learning as I studied both in Burgundy and Northern Rhone. So, my two favorite red varietals I will say are Syrah and Pinot Noir. Two varietals that I do not do here but that's the price you pay when you go to some other places. And I decided to travel because I like to travel. I wanted to, you know, enjoy my youth, and go in different places to learn different techniques, to see different terroir and just explore having fun. I arrived her in 2003. And before then I've been in different places. All the main places in France except Champagne. But I worked in Burgundy I work in Bordeaux area. I worked in the Provence area, in the Jura and I even worked in Italy and South Africa. My goal

was to keep traveling and I wanted to go to New Zealand and although I still don't speak Spanish, I really wanted to go to Argentina or Chile. But I arrived here in Virginia in 2003 just because I was looking to a place to work between South Africa and New Zealand. I was supposed to stay six months. And I'm still here.

Fred Reno

So, you came to King Family Vineyards in 2003. I came to Virginia in 2003. I came to Afton Mountain, I arrived at Afton Mountain in 2003. Again, it was supposed to be just a one harvest contract and then I was supposed to keep going with my life. To be honest, being French: First, I didn't know much about United States. I mean I know where the United States was, but I didn't know even know where Virginia on the map was. And I didn't know anything about Virginia wine also. So, I had no expectation about what to find here.

Fred Reno So, then how did this transition happened in 2007 when Michael Shaps moved on and established Virginia Wineworks at that time and then you succeeded him at King Family.

Matthieu Finot, You know I had been working for three years by then at Afton Mountain. Again, they were the one who convinced me to stay another year after 2003 which was my worst vintage not as a winemaker, but it was like a very bad vintage in Virginia. A lot of rain, a lot of Hurricane. I arrived here, and I get told like you know, I've got a hurricane during the season. It's raining almost every day and you try to harvest based on when it's not going to be raining. So that was my initial challenge and like, welcome to Virginia.

Fred Reno So, then you stayed.

Matthieu Finot Yea kind of like a masochist or something like that. But I think what I really liked with Virginia is initially it was a challenge. It's really a place that challenges me like no other place. I've been working a lot of places in the world, places well known and well-defined wine culture. So, it's fairly easy because you don't think too much, you're going to keep doing what's been done when you go to a vineyard in Europe. You know how it's been planted, what varieties have been grown, you know how it's been managed, there's nothing to really change. It's been done like that for decades, or sometimes centuries, and you just going to keep doing it. You know how to make the fermentation. You don't have to rethink who you are in most places that I've worked before. And here I am in a place where with a very specific type of soil that is very specific. Seeing an industry that is, I will say, at that time more a teenager, and then, not a baby, but that's still not fully grown-up person. That for me was the most interesting part about Virginia it is the challenge. The challenge, and how can I in some way participate to make Virginia and it's not only me, but also as a group, how can we make Virginia better? That's for me was initially the reason I stayed another year just to prove that I can make better

wine than what I've done, but ultimately was also to be able to, to be a part of this growing industry.

Fred Reno

So, King Family, the property here is grown to a little bit over 30 acres, is that correct? Yes. Do you source grapes from other growers as well to augment your production?

Matthieu Finot

Yes, and no, when I arrived at King Family in 2007, and it's because David and Ellen King used what they started the winery with here, but made their wine on the first year, maybe the first two years at Afton Mountain. So, they were working with Afton Mountain, and they knew Afton Mountain wine, and they were fully aware about what they were doing over there. I think they really liked the job that I've done while I was working there. They appreciated the direction that I was going when Michael was on his way out because he was starting Wineworks. And they asked me if I would be interested in helping them in the winery. For me, I was in this transition phase anyway at that time and it was a perfect time for me to start at King Family. And you know, I was very happy to start here because when we started again, things were done right from the beginning, there's a very specific focus about what to grow. And how to grow it thanks to Chris Hill, and thanks to Michael. There were very well-defined objectives into the wine that was quality. So, for me, it was very easy to succeed because I didn't have anything to change. I was like very happy with the way the wines were tasting and with how the winery was functioning and the process from the beginning and still to these days. We don't make any compromises when it comes to quality. It has been very clear what we want to do. It's a premium winery and we do what we think is good, we don't do wine just because maybe it's going sell. That made things very comfortable for me and arrived in 2007, to do my first vintage. When you transition into a winery, you always have to keep the idea of who was there before you. Because you want to evolve into what you want to do. But at the same time, you have to keep the identity of the place. Succeeding Michael was very easy because his wines are always good, always very solid. So that was very good for me to transition into that. I won the Governor's Cup with my Meritage in 2007. Not that it means anything, although it makes David and Ellen very comfortable about my skills. And that helped me a lot for the rest of my career. Up to this point now they trust what I do. And I've got almost complete freedom about what I'm doing at the winery site.

Fred Reno

Were you part and did you oversee the building of the new winery in 2013?

Matthieu Finot Yes, so that again when I started here, we were making less than 4000 cases. And we were only at the time 15 acres planted. We even had at the time the luxury to sell grapes to another winery. But I guess King Family, in some ways that was a good reflection

about the state of the Virginia wine industry since I started and maybe since they started in 2002 having their own winery, we keep increasing the production, we keep chasing our tail. I guess it's a good problem to have. But we keep going and saying like oh we're never going to get bigger from that. And the job that we've got here is when they built the winery in 2002 David and Ellen were like, Oh, we're never going to fill up this winery completely. And like, and we're never going to do more than 5000 cases, Five, Six years later, we're already over 5000 cases. And 10 years later we need to build a new building because we are out capacity. Again, it's a good problem to have. We have had tremendous growth. And I think a big part of our success, not just King and the building of their success but it shows how good we are in agrotourism. Most of the wine that we sell here, it's direct to customers. It's direct. People come to the winery, taste the wine here and buy it here and consume immediately. It's great. I don't know too many wine regions that sell more than 90% of their production directly to the customers.

Fred Reno Well, that is true. That is interesting. I want to touch on David King and Ellen here, the Founders. So, David was involved in some very forward-thinking innovative stuff in Virginia. As I understand it, he pretty much was the one who pushed the Virginia wholesaler idea where wineries here in Virginia are able to sell through this organization, to trade accounts, you don't have to go through the traditional three-tiered distribution system that existed with all the franchise problems and everything else. So, David was behind that, wasn't he?

Matthieu Finot

Yeah. But it's also the fact that compared to the rest of the wine industry, we are very small business. And at the time when we did that was, I think 2006, or maybe 2005, I can't remember when the Virginia Wineries Distribution Company started, most people wanted to be able to sell their case of wine to the wine shop down the road. Because we're such a small business, most of the distributors, didn't want to carry your Virginia wine. But at the same time, we wanted our wine to be in the restaurant, we wanted our wines to be into the wine shop. So, to be able to do that we needed to be able to do this direct distribution. We do not use it much now for King Family because of our size. But it's still being used by a lot of small wineries. And it's still very useful.

Fred Reno

It's a great idea and having been as a distributor for 15 years, and at one time, believe it or not the largest independent distributor in America, operating in eight states. I understand the dilemma. Because in California, of course, if you're a producer such as yourself, you don't have to use a distributor, you can go direct to the accounts. This was brilliant of David to come up with a solution for the small family winery so that they can get their wine into the better shops, into the better restaurants, and not have to go through all the other machinations.

Matthieu Finot

Yes, you know, I mean, again, marketing the wine outside the winery is very difficult and very challenging, as we know, and having a distributor is very, very valuable for us. But for a lot of people, the distributors will not want to work with them because they are too small.

Fred Reno

When I was interviewing Chris Hill for this Podcast, and this sticks in my mind because I was doing my final editing yesterday, he made a comment and I'd love you to expand upon it. He mentioned you, and we were talking about what grows best here in Virginia, and how to deal with weather conditions and things of that nature. He said well, thanks to Matthieu Finot we developed a really strong business for rose and I see, of course you were in Provence, so I get the connection. King family has this rose wine Crosé. So, talk about how that all developed because it's been a huge success, has it not?

Matthieu Finot

Yeah, the Crosé is the wine that we sell the most and the wine we produce the most, so I guess that's a good success. How did we get there? That's very interesting when I start working here, the way the Crosé was made previously was we were using the bleed to do a rose. It is a classic way to use what we don't want for the red that as a single product. But because I worked in Bandol, I worked at Domaine Tempier.

Fred Reno

you worked at Tempier?

Matthieu Finot

Yeah, Lulu passed away not so long ago but because of my background I'm like, we should try to make it a regular rose not by bleeding but an intentional Rose. Then when I decided to start harvesting grapes, red grapes, in this case Merlot, I treat it like a white wine based on the acidity with low brix to make something that's 11% alcohol/ 11 and half percent alcohol with high acid where we do a direct press on it, and it is fully intentional Rose. And again, we started producing it and year after year, people were showing more interest. Not only because of me but, it's also the International market that was craving for Provence style Rose. Just a small comment when I started working here, I'm like, oh, let's make it dry a Rose, one of the comments that I had from somebody is like oh, here we are in the South and the Rose here is like all tea, sweet. So that was in 2003 things have changed since and obviously people understand that a dry rose is very good and very refreshing. It's also very trendy so you know, I'm not going to complain about that. But that's the way we realized if you don't have ripened grapes make a rose with it. It's better to make a good rose and not a bad red. So again, I didn't invent the rose in Virginia.

Fred Reno

You know, what he was saying was because you understood what to do with Merlot when it wasn't getting ripe and yet making high quality wine from it. That was what his point was.

Matthieu Finot

But again, so that's the story behind the rose and we've been increasing the production. Luckily also, I mean the fact that were in a place called Crozet and so, we do the play on the word with calling Crozé and with this kind of very simple packaging, easily recognizable which helped the marketing of this wine.

Fred Reno

It's great branding.

Matthieu Finot

But weirdly enough, we've done nothing really to push it. It just grows organically. I guess the Polo matches might help to sell also a lot of it.

Fred Reno

Well, that's what happens with all good brands. They just happen. And it's because the quality is there. The idea is there and timing, right? Yes, it's timing. So, what's your overall philosophy on winemaking in general? How do you like to approach it? Obviously, it's in the vineyard, its wine growing, but every winemaker has their own philosophy about what their land is going to do here.

Matthieu Finot

It's for, for me has been it's a very difficult question. I mean, like, because I've been asked this question quite often, and I still have trouble to really define it. Let me try to develop a little bit more about that. When I worked in Tempier, when I worked in, you know, all the vineyards that I've worked before, most of the ones that I really learned a lot about were organic vineyards or mostly organic vineyards that work very close to the terroir, to the soil to make wine with grapes. I mean, you know, could be weird, but like, getting back to, to expressing the terroir as best as possible. And when I arrived here, I arrived here with all my youth, I would say uncertainty about how wine is supposed to be made here. And again, that's why I'm telling you. It was challenging, because now I have to rethink the way I was doing things, especially in the winemaking I have to slightly change my initial style. Because initially what I wanted to produce is wine that were I hope above drinkable, but maybe saying world class wine would have been a little bit pretentious, but I wanted to make good wine. So, to make good wine I had to back up the limit on my intention of being natural. I produce a bit more by the analytical tools. But since I've been here at King Family, and since I've started having a very good understanding of all

vineyards what comes is how to make it work. I've been moving increasingly to express the terroir and to make wines that are terroir driven, instead of like winemaker driven. Of course, Rose is a technological wine. So, I'm not going to talk about the Roses because the rose I want it to be like fresh. But the other wines and my Meritage all the wines as I want them to be a good reflection of what we can do here.

Fred Reno

Of your portfolio, which I'm going to have the wonderful opportunity to taste shortly after this interview. If there's one wine and you have a wine critic, a trade person, or somebody you want to impress what's the one wine out of your portfolio. Say, here you got to try this.

Matthieu Finot

Yeah, that's always a question about like, which one is your favorite kid.

Fred Reno

Well, it's a difficult question. But what is the one wine if, Okay, this is going to be the one that impresses?

Matthieu Finot

If you talk to people about what's King Family, maybe a lot of people are going to tell you the Crosé. And it's not a wrong answer. But like when we're presenting King Family if I have to highlight King Family, it's always going to be the Meritage, okay? It is always going to be the Meritage because it's always a wine where we've been the most consistent in recognition. It's also because it's a wine where, even if it's a Bordeaux blend, we can debate about what Bordeaux blend means. But, you know, it's a wine where I can still highlight the terroir. Because it's a blend, I can also not erase the vintage effect. But I can adjust the vintage effect just with the with slightly changing my blend.

Fred Reno

So, said in a different way, what you're telling me, what I'm hearing is, this is the wine that reflects year in and year out what King Family stands for from a qualitative standpoint and the terroir and expression of the fruit of your vineyard.

Matthieu Finot

And, and also, maybe more the winemaker side, it's also a wine where there is a intentional blending. In some way, highlight a bit of my style too, into this blend. And that for me, it's we've got the Mountain Plain, that's like, you're going to base your blend on the Meritage. But it's more of a smaller batch. I think that the Meritage for me, it's the red wine that we use the most. And yet, for me, it's also what represents the most King Family vineyards. And in some way, you know what we can do in Central Virginia.

Fred Reno

Are the King Family, Ellen, and David's children? Are they involved at all in winery?

Matthieu Finot

Yes, they are involved a lot. They all work here on the farm. The winemaking part, that's me, that's my area. We'll make the decision together about what we're going to produce, where we're going to produce it and all these kinds of things. But that is more my area. Carrington is working in the vineyard side. So, they are taking care of the vineyards. James is all into the marketing and office side. And Ellen is still very involved a lot with all the tasting room area and hospitality.

Fred Reno

And the Polo field, David was a big polo player, apparently.

Matthieu Finot

So, the Polo, initially, I mean, the reason King Family is here is because of the Polo. They were looking for a place where you had flat land and was on low land to be able to get a polo field on it. So, it was the reason they bought a farm initially. And then after a while they started thinking we need to do something else with this farm. I'm just like, growing alfalfa and, and adding a polo field. So that's when they started to plant grapes.

Fred Reno

But we're still at an elevation here of close to 800 feet. So, you have a plateau that's flat. You're not on low lying ground.

Matthieu Finot

So, that gives us good drainage naturally. I was perfect for Polo field, the Polo field is fairly big, I think it's almost 15 acres or something like that. So anyway, like the Polo was something for David and not something that never thought to be other than something that he wanted to do. **B**ut it ultimately become a big part of the winery. And because we do the events on weekend which drive a lot of people out here. We see still have Ali, Stuart's wife, who still plays Polo so, we still have some of the family that play Polo, and the Roseland club is fairly active.

Fred Reno

Well, the King family must obviously have an awful lot of trust in you because they also let you do side projects. So, tell me a little bit about some of the consulting and some of the other wines you produce and the things you're involved in, both here in Virginia, and as I understand back in France as well?

Matthieu Finot

So, coming from a from a farming winery my mother had a bit of land, you know in Crozes-Hermitage. It was being managed by cousin with my brother. We decided we wanted to start a winery and we found some place in the Alps. So, on the eastern side not so vulnerable and we found some vineyard over there that we're starting to make wine with available varietals and other forgotten varietals. We started out in 2008. It's mainly my brother's doing all the work you know I'm more on a support side. We started with Domain Pinot In 2014, the crew team that was managing the vineyard that we had in Crozes-Hermitage decided to give it back to us, he had to leave, he decided to give it back to us. So now since 2014, we've got our vineyard in Crozes-Hermitage back. So now in France, we've got two sides of production. Even if you're a very small winery, we've got two sides of production, one in Alps, and the other one in the Crozes-Hermitage in Northern Rhone. And since I arrived here, I met one of my good friends, Gilbert Tallard who is a French guy, he has a small vineyard near Afton Mountain.

Fred Reno

is that Turk Mountain?

Matthieu Finot

Yes, let's talk about it. So, a couple of years ago, he was like, you know, I'm starting to want to not retire, but step back a little bit. And so, he asked me to help him manage his vineyard. And, I have been managing his vineyard for a while now. He's still making some wine for himself on the side. But because now I had access to some grapes that initially we were using at King Family, I started to make my small batch wines on the side. And that's also a part of things that I've been exploring whether it was with King Family vineyards or with my own label,

Fred Reno

What varietals are planted at Turk Mountain?

Matthieu Finot

He's got Petit Verdot, Tannat, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, and Malbec. It's a five-acre vineyard, kind of small, with all these varietals on it. And it's a very nice hillside vineyard and very steep. It's the kind of site difficult to walk and to play with. So, you know, if I'm not enough busy I will go spend my weekend over there, like taking care of the vineyard. But it helped me also on my personal quest of finding who I am, at 40 years old, you can still feel like a teenager sometimes. But it helps me to explore more my concept of more natural winemaking. And so, all the wines, also limited but, the way we are with wine in France, we are organic vineyard in France, we do wine in very natural way. It's all-natural yeast or, very low level of sulfur. All the kinds of things that I wanted to try to do that here was always the challenge to do. But you know, after a while I was able to, after a couple of failures, I was able to finally get where I wanted to be with this wine and this wine that I'm going to do whole cluster fermentation. No

sulfur, a natural yeast fermentation. That's been a fun project. And since 2019, I feel like there's a couple of wines that I feel are of a quality now that I can bottle.

Fred Reno

Since you've been here in Virginia, have you seen, or have you pursued any place you'd say now that's a great site to plant some Pinot Noir. I know it's difficult here, I understand the reasons.

Matthieu Finot

Ankida when they started their vineyard asked me to come help them start their program with a Pinot Noir. So, I work with them. I mean, I still work with them, especially even more at the beginning, where I help them with Pinot Noir. Because they did understand that I had some background in in Burgundy, and they wanted to understand better how to make Pinot Noir.

Fred Reno

Well, I'm very impressed with them. In fact, Ankita Ridge was one of the wines when I would have skeptics back in California, about Virginia wine, I pulled all a bottle of their wine and pour it for them, and they would go that's from Virginia. And I go Yeah, that's from Virginia.

Matthieu Finot

So, I'm not going to say you cannot grow Pinot Noir in Virginia. But you really need to have a specific site. And I think very often that's a bit of the problem with the challenge that we had with Virginia wine; we have 10 people wanting to plant grapes that are not suitable for the terroir and that are not suitable for all climates. And the problem is when you really understand that everything comes from the grapes, like the site selection and the grapes that you grow are so important to the outcome of the wine. Again, when you've got good grapes with the right chemistry, you've got nothing to do on the wine. The wine is going to do it on its own. It's very easy to make wine. As soon as you start working with varieties that are not suited for the site. You can still make wine, but you're going to struggle every step of the winemaking to make something drinkable.

Fred Reno

Well, I'm curious about that because. What's your thoughts? And have you worked with any hybrids yourself here?

Matthieu Finot

I did. Not for me personally, Not for King Family. But I did work with hybrids.

Fred Reno

What do you think about hybrids? In the right situation here for Virginia?

Matthieu Finot

Yes, but no.

Fred Reno

No for you. But yes, in general.

Matthieu Finot

I mean, yes, you can plant hybrid. Yes, we can make fun wine with hybrids.

Fred Reno

I just want your opinion.

Matthieu Finot No, I'm trying to see the bigger picture also is like, again, we were talking about, in some way, lack of recognition of Virginia. And unfortunately, the market right now, except if you go to New York and sell to a specific wine shop that is into organic wine, they might be interested in your Hybrid. But if you go anywhere in the world and say I've got some very good hybrid, people are going to laugh at you. And right now, we're still in the quest to being recognized for what we do here in Virginia. I think the way to do that is in some ways to produce some premium wine from vinifera grapes. But for us in Central Virginia, there's no point of trying to grow Cabernet Sauvignon because it's not going to do anything good. We know that we've got a clay soil. If you don't have a clay soil you could grow good grapes, like this place in Keswick, that will do very good Cabernet Sauvignon, because of the kind of soils that they've have. But most places are not suitable for Cabernet Sauvignon, so let's not grow it. It doesn't do any good for us, yes you will be able to make wine. Yes, a year out of ten, maybe it's going to be outstanding. But then you've got nine years that you will need to struggle every year to try to make a good wine. So, I think we need to fully understand what we are and stop trying to pretend what we're not. And there's a limit where all my challenge right now is to do what I believe can grow best. I'm not against hybrid because I think there's a good chance for us to find hybrids with the new kind of hybrids that could really help us to get even more natural in the vineyard. Because right now it's one of the biggest challenges, it's almost impossible to have organic vineyard. I'm not sure going with Chambourcin or Vidal is the way we're going to get international recognition, we can make very good wine, very good entry level wine, and there's room for that. But that's maybe not what real wine critics will be looking for.

Fred Reno

Understood. I got to be honest with you, I have taken a liking to really well made Seyval Blanc. It surprised me because in my career I hadn't really drank any hybrids, I wasn't really for me, obviously being in California where I spent 30-years, but I've been enticed by the Seyval Blanc I have had. To me is an interesting everyday drink.

Matthieu Finot

But I will always have a challenge in some way. also, you know, talking with other winemakers we always challenge about how to make good wines and what grapes do we work with. For me, it was my background about hybrid grapes, obviously it is influenced by being French I cannot hide that. When you go to school in France your being taught to not like hybrids, hybrids don't make quality wine. It is slightly changing now because of the global warming by the fact that there's more disease pressure on some varietals and people are trying to make wines that are more natural sense. There's maybe a new view and look now to hybrids. I truly think that the future of hybrids in Virginia, but maybe not for the current grapes, not the current varietals, but I think we will most likely see more hybrids being grown. Once you start going that way, you also have to be very sure of who you are, and how you're going about it.

Fred Reno

Yeah, how are you going to market it? Because you're going to have to explain it first and then sell it second.

Matthieu Finot

So yes, if your ideas are to go full organic, can we play in this market? Well, yes, that will work perfectly fine.

Fred Reno

That makes sense.

Matthieu Finot

But if you keep having a traditional viticulture and spraying as much as you can, then you defeat the whole purpose of these varietals. So, it's really like what approach you use in your vineyard, and ultimately how you make the wine.

Fred Reno

So, I had a vintner say to me early on, when I first got here, something that stuck with me for some time. He said, Fred, it's entirely possible that some of the best vineyards in Virginia have not even been planted yet.

Matthieu Finot

Yes.

Fred Reno

And what do you think about that?

Matthieu Finot

I think it is most likely true I mean look, there's still a lot of wooded area where a lot of different kinds of soil, lot of things on same type of land is very, very expensive here also.

Fred Reno

Well, not in relationship to the West Coast.

Matthieu Finot In Albemarle, try to find a piece of land in Albemarle, it's very, very expensive.

Fred Reno

Shenandoah Valley though.

Matthieu Finot

Yes, So depending on where you are in Virginia, it is possible to find some land and there is a lot of land that are not being recognized yet or even worked and, a lot of us are always trying to find these places. Because when you see Ankida and what they've done with a small piece of land, that's, again, a good example of you can get out of like the regular path and still find a best specific terroir. But I don't think even if I wish it will be more like that, I still don't think most of the winery owners or people that want to start a winery, they will want to start a winery first, because of the site for retail, not because of the site for grape quality. And again, it's always going to be dependent on that. It's different if you if you talk to me, to Ben Jordan, or Benoit Pineau, as well as there's more than these three that I just named, but like, a lot of people are going to be focused more about the site for great grapes then a site for selling it. But these winemakers, they cannot buy the land that they need to grow their own grapes. They are going to have to rely on what somebody wants to invest in.

Fred Reno

You don't produce yourself here, do you? Petit Manseng,

Matthieu Finot

We do. It is one of these very specific grapes, which is very interesting, but very challenging in the wine making, so it grows very well in the vineyard. It is very easy to grow, very disease resistant, great for us, and not a hybrid. But when you have to make wine with it, and you end up having something with potentially very high level of alcohol, and very low pH, so very acidic, like something that I've never worked with before. And so how do you manage that, if you try to do dry wine, then you're going to have to obviously, pick not overripe, and then your pH will be like three or sometimes below three. So, you get this wine with high alcohol, very high acid, which can be very challenging to be doing here. Or you can do some very good, half dry wines also that are very pleasant. But that's not usually where I'm trying to go. So, the Petit Manseng that I'm working on now it's usually as a blender. So, I'm blending it with other varietals to bring

acidity and freshness, which is what I've been doing lately, I've been working more as an oxidized wine. So, I'm trying to do a dryer style with Petit Manseng.

Fred Reno

Well, I look at Petit Manseng from a marketing and sales perspective. It almost is like it could be to Virginia, what Chenin Blanc is to South Africa.

Matthieu Finot

Yes, but Chenin Blanc still going to taste more like white wine, and again, I'm not saying it's not possible to tell you can't do it. I mean, I love Chenin, whether it's from Loire or South Africa, but I think even if there's a high acidity, it doesn't get such a high brix and that's the challenge we have to have to fight with Petit Manseng. It's a very good example of balance between high alcohol and acid, and then potentially your residual sugar, you know, but there is a tendency to say that Petit Manseng does better in bad sites for us.

Fred Reno

Interesting.

Matthieu Finot

And it's almost better to have Petit Manseng just after rain. When it's fully diluted. It's a grape that you again keep talking about and thinking and re-trying to get out of it what we're seeing is best for us to make wine and try to think it differently. Petit Manseng is one of these grapes.

Fred Reno

That's a really fascinating viewpoint. It hadn't been explained as well as you just explained it. That's really interesting. This is a young industry here in Virginia. What's the collegiality like? What's the cooperation amongst yourselves.

Matthieu Finot

I mean, a big part of who we are here in at least in Central Virginia. I'm going to talk for what I know sure we get along very well. We all know each other very well. There's one thing that you have to understand is there's no competition between us. So, the winemaking job is as I see it, it's not about the recipe, it's not about the process because I didn't invent anything. Wines have been made for centuries. Like everything has been already done. So, I don't need to reinvent what's already been invented, everything is out there. You just have to decide what works best for you. Our job is an artistic job, always what I say is what I do most is we're doing is to have to be farmers. And because again, like, you never can emphasize that enough, the wine is being made outside, not inside the winery, you have to be a farmer. So, you have to understand weather you have to understand the site to understand what you grow. But then you have also to be a scientist, because you have to understand the numbers, you have to

understand chemistry, you have to understand the biology of things. And ultimately, you also have to be an artist. I mean, that's the thing that I really like, because when you blend these three components together, it's super exciting. But because there's so many variables in the wine, and I think one of the most important variables is a human factor, you cannot change that; my perception, my feeling, I think I'm the only one who have it. And I can tell exactly my recipe, and you can quote the recipe to another winemaker who is going to have different feelings, he has got a different interpretation of what he's tasting, when he's tasting it also he might not be looking at harvesting the grapes exactly at the same time that I will be harvesting, or not use exactly the same process. So, all these small details make everything that we do very unique. You can give the same grapes to different winemakers; they will come with two different products because their sensitivity will make the wine their own. Therefore, there's no secret. And for us because we're young industry, the more we share, the more we communicate, the better we'll be as an industry. It took centuries for Burgundy to be what is Burgundy. And because there are people that were sharing things, recording everything, and taking note on terroir and how to make wine and all these kinds of things. It was a long process for Burgundy to be Burgundy. I'm not going to say we're going to be Burgundy anytime soon. But if we share our knowledge, if we share what works for us and what didn't; if we share our feelings about varietals and saying you should try this via at all, I think will do very well for us. As an industry, we'll get better. And then you also avoid making the same mistakes that other people did before you. I don't know if you heard of the Winemakers' Research Exchange, but that's something that we've created here on the Monticello side with a bunch of other winemakers, Emily, Kirsty, Ben Jordan, and Stephen Barnard they all been a part of creating the Winemaker Research Exchange. The idea was to get together as a group and taste our experimentation, talk about what we do, how we do it, to try to help and have everybody have access to that.

Fred Reno

Oh, that's fantastic.

Matthieu Finot

We've got bigger wineries, like us included that can afford to make small experimentation. But there's a lot of other wineries when they've got only a couple of barrels of wine, they cannot experiment, because it would be too much of a challenge. But if we're already worked together, we're sharing your point of view about what to do, and not, and specially how to do it. But the different way of doing it, then everybody can take what they want out of it. We're not trying to say this is the way to do it, or it's like yesterday found a way of doing things, the one that you like the most. So, it's really sharing, communicating what we do to help the industry grow together by sharing knowledge.

Fred Reno

Well, this is fantastic, because this is what I get excited about. This young, growing quality wine industry reminds me of what Oregon was, 25 years ago. That's what it felt like when I came here. I see the same type of collegiality, the same type of information sharing and the same type of everybody supporting everybody.

Matthieu Finot

We have to work together; we are too small otherwise. And we also don't have the resources. Now the Winemaker Exchange Research started in 2014 or 2015. And I'm losing track of time now. Now it's something that we run statewide. It helped us when we got Joy Ting full-time. I'm sure you've heard about Joy Ting. Joy Ting is an enologist that takes care of the whole thing that helped us, so we know we've got a great support group that helped us to develop this product. And it's super interesting. I mean, for me, it's like sharing knowledge about what I feel like, that's what I like. I like to talk to people, and I like to communicate with the challenges and what worked and what didn't.

Fred Reno

Well, on that note, all this talk about wine has gotten me thirsty, I want to taste some of your wonderful wines. So, I'll end the formal part of this interview by just saying Matthieu this has been fascinating. I really appreciate your time today and thank you.

Matthieu Finot

Thank you very much.