

EPISODE #44 DENNIS HORTON/MONTAGE; BRUCE ZOECKLEIN SEGMENT

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Bruce Zoecklein

Fred Reno

Well, Bruce, welcome and thank you for taking a few minutes to talk to me about Dennis Horton. First question is really obvious. How did you meet Dennis?

Bruce Zoecklein

Well, as the head of the enology, grape chemistry group at Virginia Tech I knew Dennis for over 25 years. He was a friend and a client. I got to know him very well, because we had a number of meetings at his winery. He was generous enough to always offer his facility for us to have short courses, seminars, symposiums whatever we wish to do. Dennis was an outspoken wine industry leader that really left a legacy of unwavering support for my program efforts. And all of us here at Virginia Tech.

Fred Reno

I'm curious, when you first met him, what were your impressions?

Bruce Zoecklein

That he was highly interested in getting into the industry didn't have a whole lot of background, asked a lot of questions. But as I got to know him, it was quite obvious that he was a person with a great deal of passion. Not only passion, but the thing that differentiated Dennis from many was his willingness to share. We had an experimental vineyard where we were looking at various cultivars, cultivated varieties that we thought would do well in Virginia. And I would share those at roundtables frequently, but not exclusively, those roundtables occurred at his facility, he was always willing to plant commercial size blocks of cultivars that we thought showed promise and share those results with the industry, which helped move the industry forward by a quantum leap. And as an example of his generosity, one day, I got a call from a grape grower who was asking me about what at the time was a new variety for Virginia, a really obscure variety, Tannat. And I provided some information about that. But this grower said, Well, I've

never tasted a Tannat wine. I hate to plant something I never even tasted where can I go? And I said well, you could just give Dennis Horton a call and I'm sure he'll, or just go to the Horton winery they have Tannat. Well, about a week later. This grower called me back. And he was overjoyed because his, as I say his consciousness was raised several feet. He had showed up at Dennis's place unannounced, introduced himself. And Dennis spent the entire afternoon with this fellow tasting Tannat in his cellar. Not only that, but shared financial records with regard to what it costs him to grow the grapes and make the wine from this variety. I have to say, generally for a business owner to share their financial records, would likely cause a certain limited degree of conflict, pretty much in the same vein that the Atlantic Ocean has a certain limited degree of water. But from Dennis's perspective, this was just what you do. This perspective grower was so thoroughly convinced that I had somehow conveyed to Dennis, that this fellow, the grower, was some very important person deserving special attention or recognition. But I of course, had not.

Fred Reno

Oh, my God. Amazing. I'm curious about you know, Dennis was responsible for bringing Norton back to Virginia. Did he ever talk to you about why he did that and what the story was behind that?

Bruce Zoecklein

Well, of course, he's from Missouri. I think he felt a passion. He realized, as did many of us that in order for Virginia to be put on the map, we needed to establish some sort of regional distinction. And that was always a goal. I think that was an overarching reason why he was so willing to plant commercial size blocks of varieties where there was no guarantee of success. I mean, we might have had them in our test vineyard. In some cases, we didn't even have them in the test vineyard. He would grow enough of these varieties for him to have enough volume to truly evaluate them. So, I think it was his sense of the viability of the grape, Norton roots is from Virginia and his understanding of the fact that there is no more competitive business in the wine industry. And if you want to stand out as an industry, you need to do something a little bit different.

Fred Reno

Oh, so that was behind it. That's right he grew up in Hermann Missouri, didn't he?

Bruce Zoecklein

Yes. And Hermann, Missouri is a unique place. And the wineries there were renowned for their Norton.

Fred Reno

Exactly. Well, you said it earlier, Bruce. But how was he viewed universally within the industry itself in those days here in Virginia,

Bruce Zoecklein

Dennis kindhearted generosity and willingness to share were matched only by his blunt frankness. Freedom of speech includes the freedom to be misunderstood, okay I would say that's a kind of a malady that I might have shared with Dennis. I think indeed, at times, Dennis sort of sarcastic wit telegraphed all the warm finessing and suppleness of a rape whistle. But I think he kind of enjoyed that. I really do. One time I came into his winery. I guess it was on a weekend and it was packed in there. So, I go up to Dennis and I was just so amazed that there are so many people there. I thought there was some kind of event going on, but there wasn't. And I asked him how many employees he had working in there that day. And his response was about half. I do remember one instance, to your question about how he was looked upon by other industry members. Once Dennis got a hold of a local press person, or that a local press person got a hold of Dennis, anyway. And Dennis declared that even God could not make a good merlot in Virginia. A statement, and I'm fully confident endured him to the Merlot producers throughout the state. As you can well imagine what I mean, and it's kind of an irony because we now do a pretty good job with Merlot. But I gather at the time that he didn't think that we could or did, but I have to say, despite some of his rhetoric, nobody ever accused Dennis Horton of being dull. But despite that, his wines really moved this industry forward. His Horton Cellars Viognier was to my knowledge the only wine ever served at the very, very famous French Laundry restaurant in in Napa. That was from Virginia.

Fred Reno

That was like his first vintage of Viognier. And yet it took the country by storm, didn't it?

Bruce Zoecklein

It did. It helped to put for Virginia on the map. It got the attention of a lot of people. And if that was his only contribution that would have been

substantive, and that was recognized. It wasn't just recognized here because in 2020, excuse me, 2002 I took a group of Virginia winemakers on a Technical Study Tour to France. And during that technical study tour, we visited Condrieu the region in France that produces Viognier, we went to George Vernay's cellar. George Vernay was the premium producer of Viognier.

Fred Reno

Yeah, he's the one who saved it.

Bruce Zoecklein

Yes, he was considered to be the dean of Viognier. And in the cellar, on the wall was a full-length blown-up copy of a picture of Horton cellars Viognier label.

Fred Reno

Oh my god.

Bruce Zoecklein

Really a true testimony to Dennis Horton and his influence, and of course we had a chance to chat with George and even though his English was not superb, he expressed a great deal of positive feelings about the Horton Cellars contribution to the world of Viognier.

Fred Reno

That is really amazing. Where did he get his cuttings for the Viognier. Do you know?

Bruce Zoecklein

I actually don't know where he got those cuttings but, on a trip, it might even have been the same trip. We went also to Madiran the home of Tannat., there was like 18 to 20 of us on this technical study tour. They were all commercial producers because it was a technical visit. We get off the bus and Dennis without any dialogue with anybody including myself the host walks into the vineyard there in Madiran and takes out some pruning shears and starts taking cuttings of the vines. The French, our hosts, were so astounded. I don't think they knew what to say. So, they said nothing.

Fred Reno

Oh my god, they must have just went, what is going on here, right?

Bruce Zoecklein

But that was Dennis, who could be like I say, could come on, like the proverbial four miles of bad road to some but he definitely had a kind heart. He was definitely interested in the well-being of the Virginia wine industry. And for my 30 plus years as the head of the Enology grape chemistry group have never met a producer more generous with regard to sharing what they have done and what they have learned with other members of the industry than Dennis Horton.

Fred Reno

Was Alan Kinne, his first winemaker.

Bruce Zoecklein

I believe Alan was in the first mix. I can't remember who's the first winemaker.

Fred Reno

I'm curious, the intersection of Alan Kinne and Dennis Horton was pretty profound. Was Alan here in Virginia at the time.

Bruce Zoecklein

Yeah, Alan worked at a number of places in Virginia.

Fred Reno

Okay. So that's how they met. And Sennis wife was always the vineyard manager.

Bruce Zoecklein

Oh, yes. And a very good vineyard manager, very devoted vineyard manager. They had an interesting compartmentalization. He would never question what she did in the vineyard, and she was astute enough to be getting good vineyard advice. And he handled the Cellar she handled the vineyard.

Fred Reno

That's the way it was from day one. Right?

Bruce Zoecklein

Yeah. It was a nice synergism that worked very, very well.

Fred Reno

They really didn't have any practical experience prior to that, about growing grapes or making wine, did they?

Bruce Zoecklein

Not to my knowledge? No, they did not. I'd say both of them were quick learners.

Fred Reno

One last question. I'm curious, do you think Dennis had any idea later on prior to him passing away about the impact he had, both in the industry in general and for bringing Norton here to Virginia, specifically?

Bruce Zoecklein

No, I don't think so. Dennis, was, despite the fact that he was somewhat gruff with people and had this sarcastic wit. I think in the main, he was rather humble, and he would not have suspected that he would get any kind of real accolades. I mean, he was always the first person to suggest that their success was a function of Sharon, his wife, and growing good grapes.

Fred Reno

Well, again, I lament the fact that I never had an opportunity to meet him. He passed away before I moved to Virginia. I thought it was really important to capture a few stories of his as part of these recordings, which are going to go into the archives.

Bruce Zoecklein

Yeah, no, I think it's, it's, it's a good move.

Fred Reno

This was your idea? So, thank you for the suggestion.

MIKE HENY INTERVIEW SEGMENT/DENNIS HORTON MONTAGE.

SPEAKERS

Mike Heny, Fred Reno

Fred Reno

Mike, welcome to the Podcast again.

Mike Heny

Hey, good afternoon, everyone. Good to be here, Fred.

Fred Reno

Let me start by asking you when and how did you meet Dennis Horton?

Mike Heny

I'd say before meeting Dennis Horton in person I was first introduced to Dennis wines at a wine shop in DC, Calvert Woodley. And maybe just to set the stage here this would have been in the mid-90s, 95 or so. So, kind of back up to 1995 in Virginia we had been making wine again, there was another phase that had started in the late 60s In the early 70s. But, you know, in mid 90s, in Virginia folks were certainly making wine but there was no Veritas, there was no King Family Vineyards, no Early Mountain Vineyards, this was the pre-Octagon Barboursville days. Calvert Woodley was the well renowned white wine shop in DC. We had Naked Mountain Chardonnay on the shelf because people like to order cases of it on the holiday. And that was it for Virginia wine.

Fred Reno

So then, Horton

Mike Heny

Their wine manager, Tom McKnew had a strong interest in Virginia wine and one day he brought in a couple bottles. It was Horton Viognier, Horton Cabernet Franc &, Horton Norton, he's like, these are good. You should try them. And when they were talking about something being good, having the greatest wines from all over the world, if they said they were good, I should try them that got my attention.

Fred Reno

So then what year did you actually meet Dennis?

Mike Heny

So, from there, tasted the wines and they were pretty impressive. I would say in retrospect. '93 Horton Viognier really put Virginia wine on the map internationally for the first time. His '93 Cabernet Franc was the first varietal bottling of Cabernet Franc at the time. So yeah, I got really interested, I had wanted to get back into the production end of things. Chris Pearmund worked for Naked Mountain at the time, and I got chatting with him. He put me in touch with Alan Kinne, who was Dennis's consultant at the time, I took Alan out to lunch in the Plains to talk to him, to see if there was an opportunity to work for Horton. I was kind of getting closer and closer and sent my resume in. But before actually meeting, Dennis, I saw him from afar. Every year there was a big wine festival at the Plains where everyone would go to. And I saw this like red faced, you know, Irish ball of energy that I knew like, oh, that's Dennis Horton. And to me, it looked like okay, this has got to be the Bobby Knight of Virginia wine, just you know, sort of great, great intensity. Soon after that. I interviewed with Dennis and got the job as the assistant winemaker at Horton vineyard, starting in 1997.

Fred Reno

How many years did you work? At Horton?

Mike Heny

I worked at Horton from '97 through 2017. So, 20 years,

Fred Reno

20 years. Then you saw a lot of Dennis so describe his approach to wine growing as best you can.

Mike Heny

You know, Dennis was really on a search in the early '90s to find grapes appropriate for kind of the wet, humid Mediterranean climate that we have here. So, you know, kind of going into it there was a standard vineyard for us was hybrids. But yeah, Dennis really took a great risk of planting grapes that had not been planted or not been planted commercially in Virginia before. Grape varieties like Viognier, Cabernet Franc, Tannat, Petit Verdot, Petit Manseng, Albarino, you know, that we think of as part of the Virginia land landscape these days were first introduced commercially by Dennis.

And there was maybe even a longer list of things that he tried that didn't work out. But what an important time in Virginia wine.

Fred Reno

What was the story behind? Did you ever get it out of him directly, let's say about why and how he brought Norton back to the state of Virginia.

Mike Heny

Yeah, the Norton story and Dennis are so tightly woven. Dennis grew up in Hermann, Missouri, which Norton, of course, originated in Virginia, but the Civil War and prohibition worked as the one two punch that kind of made it extinct in Virginia, but a quarter acre plot survived in Missouri. Dennis, as well as his wife, Sharon, both grew up in Hermann Missouri. Dennis used to play as a kid in the caves of the defunct Stone Hill Winery. So, when he came back to Virginia, and established his vineyard in addition to some of the varietals we've been talking about, Dennis thought Norton was a no brainer.

Fred Reno

Okay. Interesting. So, what was the biggest influence you would say he had on you?

Mike Heny

So, the biggest influence he had on me was to work hard. And, you know, there's so many various obstacles that could get in the way of making a good bottle of wine in Virginia, and just staying focused on getting a good bottle, a good product into the bottle, you know, despite the many obstacles of whether finances, staff, on and on, so, yeah, getting a good bottle glass of wine into the bottle and letting it reflect where it was grown.

Fred Reno

So, from your vantage point, you saw him for quite some time. How was he viewed within the Virginia wine industry?

Mike Heny

He was viewed as a pioneer and Maverick and an iconoclast. So, a Maverick. A Maverick for sure. He would strongly speak his mind and advocate for what he wanted; he was described as a hard negotiator. But

also fair, so, you know, he would argue and argue and argue his point, but he would stick to his word. I think people valued that in and for sure.

Fred Reno

Did he also open his cellars, if you will, to other winemakers who weren't necessarily making wines from the varietals he was growing and saying, Hey, look at this, or look at that.

Mike Heny

Absolutely. There are so many examples like that. Dennis was an open book for what worked and what didn't work with us. And he thought, secrets were stupid, secrets held us back. So, he was very sharing. And he was also really interested in not just trying new grapes or growing techniques in the vineyard, but he was equally supportive of experimentation in the cellar. We had the first micro-oxygenation system in the state like in 2000. Yeah, we got the first crossflow system, he was very interested and supportive of a staff to explore whatever techniques would make the wine better. And if we convinced him that something's worth taking a look at, he invested the money. So yeah, he would spend the money and bring it in and see if it worked.

Fred Reno

I've heard this before from other folks. Was there a real division within the organization, which is to say that his wife, Sharon, was the vineyard and Dennis was the winemaking side? I mean, did they keep that firewall in there most of the time?

Mike Heny

Sharon, for sure was the vineyard. Dennis business partner Joan was great at running the business side of things. Dennis was a great bridge, kind of bringing everyone together. And yeah, he was super interested the vineyard. The vineyard was the most important thing to him if we weren't getting good grapes, then it was all downhill from there. And yet again, he was really interested in kind of tasting and different techniques. So, he was kind of the umbrella that brought these different pieces together in a fluid way.

Fred Reno

I'm curious, you talked about him openly speaking his mind and he was a Maverick. But, was he a good public speaker?

Mike Heny

You know, he would get this kind of twinkle in his eye, and love to tell a good story. And he could get that 1000 people in a room quiet and listening to him. And in a few minutes, for sure.

Fred Reno

Oh, man. That must have been fascinating to watch and experience.

Mike Heny

Yeah, for sure.

Fred Reno

Do you think he had any idea later, if not earlier in his career, on the impact he had made on the industry by bringing the Norton grape back to Virginia. Or was it just sort of this thing that he did, and he got weird looks about it or something?

Mike Heny

Well, no topic is more divisive in Virginia wine than Norton. Kind of like Pinotage in South Africa. It really divides the industry between those who love it and those who think it's an aberration of nature. I'm on the love end of the spectrum. You know, I don't think it's the only thing we should be growing in Virginia for sure. And you know, I think with Dennis it was his Maverick part. So, you know, what he cared about is that there were 4000 customers each year who's buying a case of Norton and were really enjoying it. For him, that's where the ultimate satisfaction was.

Fred Reno

Interesting. I mean, his legacy lives on as a result of that. And I don't think as many people understand what you said earlier in this interview, the impact his Viognier had.

Mike Heny

One story that Dennis really enjoyed with Norton was, as some other people were trying grapes that had been successful for Dennis. Jim and Debra Vascik down around Roanoke had a really cool winery Valhalla and

they planted Norton. Dennis always loved the story when their customer came in and said, do you mind if I try your Horton?

Fred Reno

Oh, my God. So yeah, the Horton/Norton moniker, right? Yeah. Who can beat that? Well, obviously he brought Viognier here. He pioneered a lot of different varietals. What do you think he would think of this bottle of Chablis we're enjoying right now?

Mike Heny

Well, Dennis had some strong opinions on things. And I think, since Chablis, last I heard, is me from Chardonnay. Dennis was maybe kind of looking to go beyond Chardonnay in Virginia. Why I love what we're doing with Chardonnay. But Dennis wasn't super interested in Chardonnay.

Fred Reno

So, he was really much at the core beyond his passion for wine growing. He was a businessman.

Mike Heny

For sure it was important for him. For Virginia wine to be like, of course, he worked hard to succeed. But just as important to him was for Virginia to succeed as an industry and stand on its own two feet. And ,that it had to make money at the end of the day. His goal was to get a really high quality of wine on the shelf at a price that people could afford. And that through the process of making it that the winery made money.

Fred Reno

Well, you told me a couple of great little stories there. One last one. If you have one last story you would tell about Dennis Horton, what was it?

Mike Heny

One thing I learned at Horton was Dennis was very driven. And when things went wrong, you would see an angry side of Dennis. I learned early on that when we are getting chewed out never to stand in the middle. Because if you stood in the middle, you got all the eye contact, even if you haven't done anything, I think my favorite story is one time, he was just telling me about chewing out someone. And he went into character. And then I felt like I was getting chewed out and it was just a story.

Fred Reno

Oh, man, I can almost see that. Pretty cool. Thank you, Mike. This is fun. Again, I'm jealous that I never got a chance to meet him. I would have loved to interact. I like tough characters in the wine business. They're my bread and butter if you will. And it would have been fun to know him and exchange and share wine and stories.

Mike Heny

Thank you.