

EPISODE #44/MONTAGE TO DENNIS HORTON/ EPILOGUE

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Sharon Horton, Shannon Horton, Caitlin Horton

Fred Reno

Alright, folks I am at Horton Vineyard. I'm here with Sharon Horton, her daughter Shannon and her daughter, Caitlin, the winemaker today at Horton. I can't thank you, ladies enough, for coming in here and giving me some material that I can splice on to the last episode. So welcome. Let me start with you Sharon. This is a very simple question, but I'm intrigued. What was that day like when you and Dennis decided, Okay, we're gonna buy this piece of property, we're actually going to plant a larger vineyard, and get into wine growing and making wine. What was that day like?

Sharon Horton

It wasn't a joint effort. I think that was Dennis's idea. Totally.

Fred Reno

Okay. But then you decide, okay, I'll be the vineyard manager.

Sharon Horton

No, I think he decided that whatever the first vineyard manager did wasn't the right kind of job. And he sent me over there to find out what was going on. And we found out that the posts weren't in the right place. The Irrigation was all wrong and plants were arriving in two weeks. We had already set up 25 acres.

Fred Reno

Forced servitude.

Sharon Horton

Yep, So I found a job.

Fred Reno

You're still doing it today.

Sharon Horton

Yes, I am. I enjoy it very much. So, there was only one criteria I told him. We're not moving to California and planting a vineyard out there. And the second thing was we're not having a winery in front of our house.

Fred Reno

Two good decisions.

Sharon Horton

Yes, I thought so. I even made him sign a piece of paper.

Fred Reno

That's perfect. So, Shannon, were you born when this was happening? What was going on in your life? Do you even remember or recall?

Shannon Horton

Yes, I was already, well I was born in 1972. So, I was like, over 10 years old. So, I was like, what? 17,18?

Caitlin Horton

You were a junior in high school? Because you graduated in 1990?

Shannon Horton

See, my kid knows, I don't. She does math a lot better. I need a little bit of paper. Sorry, I remember it growing from the basement. I remember doing it a lot when I was a kid and even younger. And then I was like, Oh, so now we have our own grapes. We didn't have to go somewhere else and pick them.

Fred Reno

Oh, you basically made that decision that you were going to get into the business and not do something else.

Shannon Horton

No, Dad always made it very clear that this was his hobby. And he was playing with it. And I should always go make my own way. And so, I became a nurse and did that for quite a while. And then I just kind of slowly came back into the business but was always interested in it and always appreciated it.

Fred Reno

And then the same question to you, Caitlin. How did you get involved in the enterprise?

Caitlin Horton

Sure. So, I was born into this, okay. I grew up, my mom was in school, she did nursing and then went to law school. I spent the summers with my grandmother, and during school holiday. So, I spent my summers out in the field. That's where I spent my school holidays. And when we lived in Virginia, I was like, she picked me up after school and I went to the vineyard and did my homework, and then went out with the guys. Because I thought that was cool. Little did I know it was work. But I did that. And then in high school, I went to boarding school and was like, No, I don't want any part of this vineyard. I don't want to own my business. I don't want to go home and think about work. So, I have a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. When I graduated in May of 2020. I started working full time here in 2016. And going to school at the same time. And then I was like, Well, I'm not going to leave them in the middle of the pandemic. I'm going to help and then as soon as they can replace me, I'll leave and go use my criminal justice degree. And now I'm the winemaker. So, there's that.

Fred Reno

Well, let me jump backwards a little bit. So, Sharon, when your 1993 Vintage Viognier hit the marketplace and had this incredible response, it put Virginia on the map Really! What was that like?

Sharon Horton

It was very, very rewarding, especially for Dennis because he had picked that variety for Virginia, and no one had heard of it. No one thought he could market it. And when it went over, like gangbusters, even in California, he was really happy.

Fred Reno

Yeah, in fact, Bruce Zoecklein said to me in my interview with him that he thought it was the first and only Virginia wine ever on the wine list at the French Laundry restaurant in Napa. It's just kind of remarkable when you think about it. Yes. Was that his favorite grape or did he have a favorite grape?

Sharon Horton

Viognier and Norton, those were his favorite? Okay, he always said that.

Fred Reno

Well, you just jumped to my new Passion, which is Norton? So let me go right there immediately. What was it like and what prompted him to bring Norton back here?

Sharon Horton

Well, he grew up in Hermann Missouri. Stone Hill winery was in his backyard. We got our cuttings from there. We met with Jim Held and I'll never forget that meeting. Dennis was in the front seat with Jim, he was showing us the vineyards and talking, and I was sitting in the backseat, and he turned around to me, and he said, If you want to make a small fortune, you start with the big one in the wine business. That's true. Everyone in the wine business kind of tries to discourage other people. And they don't listen to the truth, either. We got into it anyway. Yeah. Well, there you have it.

Fred Reno

Shannon, I got a question as I am curious. From your vantage point If you meet somebody today, let's say, who knew your father and they talk about him? What do they tell you? What do they say? What's the recollection that comes out.

Shannon Horton

So usually, most of the stories come in the tasting room for me, not more on the vineyard side, but more on the tasting room side. And they just always remember him being in the tasting room, smoking a Swisher Sweet, in his tasting room during normal hours, this is not after hours. They always remember that he went in and opened something different, that when he was here, like they would mention something and Dad would be like, Oh, hold on. And he'd go back and get something out that wasn't released yet, or he'd been holding on to or he'd go get old vintages out of the library, they always seem to remember that. Then they'd be here for hours just talking to him about the wines and the history of Horton and the history of what he had done. And they got to try all these really great things. And then they always seemed like that the rest of whatever was going on, just fell away to the background. Like they didn't remember other people being there. His charismatic personality when he was talking about the wines and what he had done. Everything else fell away.

Fred Reno

Interesting. Caitlin, do you get any of that yourself when asked about your grandfather?

Caitlin Horton

Yeah. So, I get it. From time to time when I worked at the tasting room, and people would be like, So there used to be this guy here. And he would cuss all the time? And smoke. And I'm like, oh, yeah, uh huh. Yeah, that would be my grandfather. He was a character. And they're like, yeah, and he just told these amazing stories about, you know, the White House and this and that. I'm like, yep, yep. That would be Granddad. That's my grandfather.

Fred Reno

Oh, that's priceless. Was Dennis's love for wine, was it French, what drove him to the Rhone Valley in France?

Sharon Horton

I think he had researched enough that he knew that the Rhone Valley had the same sort of weather that we have here in this region, in Virginia. He had tasted Virginia wines that were on the market at the time, before we started, he took two or three years to research everything for him and put the first plant in the ground. He decided that he didn't like Chardonnay at all. That Cabernet Sauvignon was not going to be great for Virginia. So, he wasn't going to imitate California or try to because we had different weather. He needed a white wine that a red wine drinker would appreciate. And he came up with Viognier, and I think it holds true today.

Fred Reno

Oh, that's, that's brilliant. To really understand that early on. I was trying to categorize this morning, in my own mind what would Dennis Hortons legacy be, or should be, and I kept coming back, believe it or not to Robert Mondavi in California.

Sharon Horton

Yeah, we went there a couple times. We went to Mondavi vineyard before we even planted, just the two of us, and he wanted to see the open lyre trellis system. Mondavi had his Opus One on open lyre. That's where we got that idea. And he said, that's the only thing we're gonna have because we have too much rain in Virginia. We got to open our canopy. See that fruit?

Fred Reno

That's, that's really it.

Sharon Horton

That's why he had so much Opus One in his cellar.

Caitlin Horton

I didn't know that. I'm learning things.

Fred Reno

Oh, that's great. That's fantastic. So, I think, at least from my vantage point, I've only been here in Virginia, four and a half years. I don't think there's been enough

written or said about Dennis Horton and what his contribution was. And I'm just curious, I'll ask you, Shannon. What do you think? I mean, does it go beyond that people just forget, people move on. I just don't hear about Dennis that often. I bring it up more than anybody else brings it up.

Shannon Horton

I think, as the Virginia wine industry grew exponentially after Horton had been established about 15 years, and then at that point, it got exponential. And when you have a growth like that, you don't have the foundation or the research behind it. It's like you're imitating a model, still making great wines, and putting things out. But the business model really was already set. So, you didn't have to, oh, what's that guy doing over there? Where did this come from? Or why do we have it? Well, there's a high demand for it. So, let's plant it. Instead of looking into why was there a high demand for it? This is how this happened. It's still in books. He's still quite prevalent in Janice Robinson's book, the book of grapes where she did that. What is it? The 15,000 grapes, different varietals? He's still under four or five of those varietals. He is still listed by name for what he did in Virginia for the Viognier, for Pinotage, for Rkatsiteli, Cabernet Franc, Tannat, he is still in that book. So that is immortalized. But not a lot of people pick that book up and read it. Yeah, it's a textbook. It's a reference. But it's not something that you own like it's on my coffee table and just enjoyed it that afternoon. Unlike, that's what Dad did.

Sharon Horton

Yeah, he read that book, like the Oxford Companion to wine. And he read it like it was a textbook.

Fred Reno

Well, you know, you're just touched on something that made me think about what I see happening in the wine business that discourages me. There doesn't seem to be enough intellectual curiosity on the part of the wine lover, and the wine industry itself, I can't get enough of it personally. I learn something new every day about wine. And yet I don't see that intellectual curiosity out there at all really

anymore. And I think that's what fuels legacies, and people remembering and understanding contributions that were made. That's one of the reasons I'm doing this Podcast is to create a history that's going to exist.

Shannon Horton

It gets to whether you want to know about the culture. So, it's kind of like, we just recently went to Pennsylvania. They have great jams and jellies and pickles and stuff, but it also was a part of their that culture that came over when they settled that area was pickled things. And so, it depends on what kind of consumer you are. Do you look at the product that you're having, and want to understand the culture that built that product and brought it to market today?

Fred Reno

Let me share one of the things that's come through in the interviews I did with the other Virginia personalities. They all tell me the same story about Dennis but, from different vantage points. It comes down to a couple of things that always have has been sticking with me and that is very simply. He was very generous. Apparently, he was just an open book.

Sharon Horton

Yes, you might not like all he was 100% but he would take you down to his cellar in a heartbeat.

Shannon Horton He would send you the balance sheet. There are people that were starting vineyard. Yeah. He's like, Look, I'll just send you the balance sheet. You'll see how much money you're gonna have to put in. You'll see the nuts and bolts of it. And people couldn't understand how that happened. Like why would a business owner do that? And he was just that way if you were going to get into the industry, he wanted to make sure you had the right foundation. That you to know what you were getting into because in Virginia it's not easy now.

Caitlin Horton

Yea, he would take you downstairs and he showed there was no secret formula if you asked, he would tell you what he did.

Shannon Horton

There wasn't a like intellectual property yeah, like I can't tell you all the ingredients because then I won't have my job anymore because that's my secret recipe and like, whatever here it is. Have fun. Go do it, do it better than me I will watch.

Caitlin Horton And it wasn't like an intimidating thing. He really wanted people to succeed in the business, but you need to understand everything you're getting into.

Fred Reno

Well, yeah, it's one thing to give people the ingredients. It's another thing for them to execute against it.

Shannon Horton

Right. They also didn't have his palette though.

Caitlin Horton

Well, you know y'all are born with that and I was not born with that y'all. I missed out.

Fred Reno

So, he had a really sharp palette.

Shannon Horton

Oh yeah, he could tell whether you needed copper in your land. Like he used to taste wine and then he'd be like, Oh, it needs copper in the field. And they're like, why? Because here watch and he put a copper penny in it swishing around he goes now try it.

Fred Reno

Oh my god.

Shannon Horton

He would do that trick all the time.

Caitlin Horton

Yeah, that's why we switched to synthetic cork. So early on, we switched in 1999. He could taste that. What is it, TCA? Yeah, whatever. He's one of the .003% of the population that can taste it. Yeah.

Fred Reno

He had a perception for it.

Shannon Horton

Even though he was a smoker. Yeah.

Fred Reno

Well, I'll divert and tell you a little story. When I met Andre Tchelistcheff from BV Vineyards in 1983, he was on a retirement sort of tour that Ch. Ste. Michelle did for him. I was retailer at the time in DC and I got invited because I was a big supporter of Ch. Ste. Michelle, for whatever reason. And I muscled my way to sit next to him at dinner. He chain smoked the entire dinner. And I was surprised. I said, Mr. Tchelistcheff, how can you taste wine and smoke cigarettes? He said, "Son, that's the only way I can taste wine. I wouldn't know what it tasted like without the cigarette smoke. And I thought that was really amazing.

Sharon Horton

So that was probably what Dennis could do to taste. He was smoking proudly.

Fred Reno

So, Sharon, I'll ask you this question. If Dennis could say, All right, here's what I want my legacy to be when I'm no longer here in Virginia. What would he have said, What would he have liked it to be? What do you think?

(long pause)

Shannon Horton

She looks at me. Yeah. It's hard to say. It really is. Because he had a very diverse personality. I think he would want credit for what he did. 100%. Because there would be times when people would come into the tasting room and say

things like, Oh, you have a Norton, or you have a Viognier. You have Pinotage. He would have come across that bar like you would not believe.

Sharon Horton

I witnessed a lot of that. And it was so sad because he really was hurt.

Shannon Horton

Yeah, like I don't think he cared about much else. But no, the credit for that, like Cabernet Franc, or Tannat they are the staples of the Virginia wine industry. And I think that was something that he would, he didn't care if you copied him. But as long as you said, Hey, I visited with this weird dude, you know Dennis went, you know, in between cigars. He told me what to do. That was fine with him.

Fred Reno

Well, I can only say thank you to him for bringing Norton back here because I have become the biggest passionate Norton supporter I think there probably outside of Jenni McCloud, maybe? In my 40 years in the wine business, I never had a bottle of Norton in my life. So, I came to Virginia. And then all of a sudden, it's like, how did this ever escape my radar? The beauty of Norton. You've have been so generous to sell me some older bottles out of the cellar here. And it's just remarkable how good these wines are. Especially when you get one with bottle age, when they're older.

Caitlin Horton

They're amazing when they're older, not many people have an opportunity to taste an older Norton.

Shannon Horton Yeah, because they just go through it so fast.

Caitlin Horton & Shannon Horton

They don't think to keep it. Like especially Virginia wine. Who has a bottle of '92 Virginia wine besides us. Yeah, maybe Barboursville, maybe Prince Michel. Ingleside has some from the '80s too because I found some the other day in the cellar. Dad was drinking them then and he was also drinking everybody else's. He drank more of everybody else's than he drank of his own. Yeah, when he got

older in life. He was drinking like three or four of his own, but the majority was his wine.

Sharon Horton

He did that for research. He wanted to know who was making what?

Shannon Horton

Yeah. What did it taste like? What was it's Potential?

Sharon Horton

Or did it have potential, or should it just be scratched from our repertoire? Yeah, yeah. What I'm saying,

Fred Reno

Well, this is more recent, but I have to tell you, the 2018 Norton, from your property here at Horton, has just begun to taste interesting.

Shannon Horton

Yes. It is really opening up now.

Fred Reno

And of course, now you're just released 2019. So, I'm telling people if you can go get some bottles right now. Because it is just in the last six months, I've noticed a dramatic change in the quality of this wine and the expression. It's like, oh, and now all of a sudden, it's like, I better buy some because now we're going into 2019.

Shannon Horton

Yeah, Dad always said it could grow on concrete. So, if you remember 2018 was infamously known as one of the toughest harvests. I mean, they were picking grapes wearing like sheer plastic because they ran out of the field and the tractor couldn't get it. They got stuck and they hauled by hand. What did you haul out? 12 tons of Norton?

Sharon Horton

In 2018 Yeah. Oh, it was more than that.

Shannon Horton Yeah, hand by hand, lug by lug because the tractor could not get in there because the ground was too wet.

Sharon Horton

Well, it was Davison soil, and you know how slippery that gets, right? That's like ice. We had grass, but then the tractor just kept sliding into the vines. I said, that's it, guys we're hand carrying all this out. And we're picking every day in raincoats until we're finished.

Fred Reno

So, Caitlin, what do you think your grandfather would think today about how far the Virginia wine industry has come?

Caitlin Horton

I don't think he would understand the amount of wineries in the state. Um, it imploded, even like, we just drove to Lancaster, and we just went to an event in Northern Virginia. We passed 20 wineries just on the road, it is definitely imploded.

Fred Reno, He wouldn't recognize it, would he?

Caitlin Horton, I don't think so. I mean, because especially like, when I was a kid, there was, I remember most of the wineries that are still around here, but I mean, Orange County has gotten several more in the last three years. I mean, it's just astronomical, the amount of wineries in the state. I don't think he would recognize it. He didn't build this place and I don't think he ever would realize that they were be huge wedding venues or as a Hangout.

Shannon Horton That's the other thing that beyond the event venue part, he would not have understood this whole, like, let me have one glass of wine and

hang out for the day with my friends. That was not how he built it, that's why there's 10 parking places out there. Yeah, this was the traditional California model where you came in, you tried wine and you left. There might be a couple of picnic tables out there but there wasn't these huge Pavilions and huge umbrellas and, all of this stay around for the day.

Fred Reno

Well, yeah. And that's what I always ask people. Are you in the hospitality business, or are you in the wine business? He was in the wine business.

Shannon & Caitlin Horton

This place is a factory. Yeah, it feels like a factory. It's got the wiring of a factory. I call the electric company every time the power goes out, and like I tell them I have a partial brownout, and they're what, Yeah, and only Phase One is down. I just need you to come fix Phase One, I have two and I have three. I just need Phase One fixed now. They are like how do you know that? I'm sorry, why? I don't have lights in some places.

Shannon Horton So, I mean he took that traditional model. I think now since the pandemic because there has been an insurgence of a demand of this hospitality side, this have an experience just hanging out with your friends and have a glass of wine for the day, and you may only visit one place. But that is all you're doing. Like there's tasting rooms now that are being opened in California that have never had a tasting room, and they've been in business for years. Yeah. And they're just opening their tasting room for the first time. You know, so it is definitely a very big change in the industry across the United States.

Fred Reno

Interesting.

Caitlin Horton Yeah, it's more of a Hangout. It's a destination versus you're coming to like a grocery store, like you're not going to go hang out at a grocery store. I think Grandpa really saw this as more of a you come in, you buy a couple

cases of wine and I'll see him in six months. Like, this is where you fill up on wine. This is where you go get your eggs, it's the same concept, versus now it's like well, here's five of my friends we want to split a bottle and have some snacks and hang out.

Shannon Horton Yeah, it's just not our infrastructure and you can tell by the way he built the building. We have five parking spaces 10 maybe. Yeah, and there's no there was no look to that. I don't think that was a change that he possibly did not foresee.

Caitlin & Shannon Horton

Yea and like I have an upstairs and there is not one pretty view, there's not a window, well there's a window but there's a beam in the middle of it. It was meant for meetings. For wine meetings, Board Meetings or Pesticide meetings, like it was a meeting room and that's what the electrical boxes says on it, Meeting Room. Like it really was a meeting room. That's really what it was meant for. It wasn't meant for to have a big rehearsal dinner, not even just event venue, but the whole I'm just gonna go hang out with my friends. We're gonna meet up in pretty places like yes, parts some parts of it are pretty But it's not like the hotel kind of hotel lobby. That's what my husband who's not in the wine industry, wasn't born in the wine industry, didn't come into the wine industry, when we started going around to a couple of vineyards four or five years ago and going other places, because we were going to change up how we offer things to our customer we needed to see what everyone else is offering, right? Because customers expect that from us. Most of these wineries have that hotel lobby look, in a good way. But it's kind of like there's couches. Yeah, there's coffee tables. And there's this sitting area, and then that sitting area over there, and it was definitely a big difference. It's a change.

Fred Reno

Well ladies, this is fascinating. But let me end it with one thought here. And I'll start with you, Shannon. And give the other two ladies their chance to think about this. All right. One Word. If you had one word to describe your father, what is it?

Shannon Horton Tenacious!

Fred Reno

Caitlin, Your Grandfather, if you had one word to describe him what would it be?
Take your time. (Pause)

Caitlin Horton My grandfather

Fred Reno, you got more than one word.

Caitlin Horton Well, no, I just there was, he's a lot of things. And the grandfather I knew wasn't always this big mogul. Like I never saw him in that way, I didn't really understand who he was until I was older. Like when I was a kid. I yelled at him once because I got a participation trophy when I was like six, and he's like, What are you gonna do? Use that participation trophy? And I'm like, what did you get in San Francisco Chronicle. A Bronze. It's not First place now is it.

Shannon Horton Yeah. And you said, Well, that's your participation trophy, like she was four years old, and she let him have it!

Fred Reno

All right, we're gonna give you the last word, Sharon.

Sharon Horton

GENEROUS!