

# EPISODE #1 INTRODUCTION TO ALL ABOUT VIRGINIA NORTON

## SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Frank Morgan, Joy Ting, Paul Ting, Bruce Zoecklein, Todd Kliman, Erin Scala

### **Fred Reno**

Let me start with Frank Morgan. Frank, what do you think overall of these wines?

### **Frank Morgan**

Overall, I would say that Norton has come a long way, in the last 10 to 12 years that I've paid attention to Virginia wine, you taste a lot of Virginia wine. It has some way to go. Because, in my opinion, the difference in quality range is, is pretty profound.

**Fred Reno** Interesting, very interesting. Paul, Paul Ting here, what do you think?

**Paul Ting**, I have to agree with Frank, I think Norton has come a long way. It's much more impressive than it was the first time I tasted it eight years ago. I think that these are not necessarily all wines that I would go rushing out to buy, there's still room to see how they develop and see what else can be done with them I don't know if that is techniques in the winery or techniques in the vineyard. But it'll be interesting to see how they continue to evolve.

**Fred Reno** Well, Joy, I have a question for you. How do you think this, in your mind differed this year in judging from last year's judging, you mean the wines themselves? Yeah, just from your experience with tasting through the wines this year versus last year's competition?

**Joy Ting** I think one of the things that struck me as I was going through the wines is that I last year, we had a lot of conversation about what was kind of Norton's varietals character, and how much of that to embrace because when we're judging a wine we want to think about is it expressing its varietal character. But there are some things that we associate with Norton as their varietal character that are kind of challenging. And one of the things I kept writing down on my sheet this time was I would identify this wine as Norton. But it's not like that off putting (whether that is good or bad, says Bruce Zoecklein in the background) exactly like I don't, I'm really trying to see that as something I like, I don't want it to be a bad thing to be Nortonee, I want to say what's a really great expression of being Norton. And I felt like there were a number of wines on the table, this time that did a good job of being Norton without being kind of, there's always going to be a certain wildness or rustic quality to that, that we need to embrace. But I felt like they were well in balance in that sense. And so, I was pretty impressed with most of the wines. For that reason.

**Fred Reno** Well your comments would concur with my feeling when I got these 10 wines together and, I thought I put together a much stronger field than we had last year, for this tasting, there just seemed

to be a better quality of wines to be assembled, and so I was really looking forward to what the results were going to be as a result of that. There's obviously the different styles and techniques, and you're going to find out where the grapes came from once we reveal, and we get through the Final Four. But I just felt like we had a stronger field.

**Joy Ting** My thoughts, I wonder if we'll see this later. Once we know what they are, is if that's a vintage difference. If the majority we can see some vintage differences in which ones were within the timeframe last year, and which ones were in the timeframe this year, there are certain vintages that maybe stand out as being good vintages for ripening Norton to balance all of these different things that we've seen in that grape.

**Fred Reno** Of course, I left that to the producers, they were the ones who decided which wine they were going to put in. I just told him they couldn't put in anything older than a 17 Vintage as an unfair advantage as part of this judging. And by the way, just for the record, there were no '17 vintage wines in there. So, nobody put a '17 in. Well, they couldn't as I told them they couldn't and the wines could go back to '18, five years it was all pretty much young wine.

Erin, this is the first time you were judging. Thanks for joining us.

**Erin Scala**, I am really interested in Norton for a lot of reasons. Back in 2006, 2007, I was working on the downtown mall in Charlottesville, Virginia, and all the restaurants at that time were pouring Horton Norton by the glass. It was sort of like this really cool local option. And it was just a thing. It was a vibe on the downtown Mall. And so, for me at that time, it seemed like this was a normal thing that was a part of it was a vibe life. But then as I've gone on in my career, there's the story of Norton which is much more complicated. I would be In New York City; I would talk about it with Paul Greco at Terroir Bar, and we would sit down and sometimes have old Norton's from different states and things like that. And then last year, I worked a lot in Richmond, and I was really close to where Norton was born. So, I became even more fascinated and the graveyard where the Norton creator is buried. Dr. Daniel Norborne Norton.

**Fred Reno** Todd That's a cue for you. What do you think of this judging yourself? This is Todd Kliman Who authored the book, The Wild Vine, the history of Norton? I will tell you folks, if you've never read this book, go out and buy it because it reads like a novel.

**Todd Kliman** Check is in the mail. (laughter) It was interesting to taste 10 Norton's at one time. It's been a long time since I've done that, maybe never done that. I've tasted a lot of Norton's at once, but it'll be interesting to see the next round, but it was fun.

**Fred Reno** Well, we're getting down folks to the Final Four. And I will get some quotes from everybody after they get there. But I want to ask Bruce, Zack Clint, who's worked with me on both these competitions, has been a guiding light to me. On how the structure this? What did you think, this year, Bruce versus last year?

**Bruce Stoecklein** two things I thought that relative to last year, the integration of the structural textural components, which is always been difficult for this variety, because of the high malic acid and because

of the seed Tannins. The integration of those components in these two flights were, as a generalization, much better than many of the wines last year, which I think definitely represents an improvement. The other important aspect with regard to quality is the aroma and flavor monopoly. And I thought that the sort of young varietal Norton character, which is kind of like burnt cinnamon to me, was constrained in most of these whereby there's actually some nice pleasant fruity tones and some fairly interesting integrations. Again, I think for structure and aroma and flavor, balance, the wines represent the evolution of Norton in Virginia.

**Fred Reno** Okay, we're going to get to the Final Four here in a little bit, this will be an interesting conclusion. The Norton is the most perplexing grape out there, isn't it?

**Bruce Zoecklein** I so have a little interlude, I was thinking, after you said you wanted to do something like this. We had as an invited visitor fellow who at the time, was widely considered to be the preeminent expert on viticulture, and AXR fella by the name of Richard Smart here to do some seminars and some field workshops. And this was the very early 90s, as I recall, his first visit. And he said something to me that I thought was kind of interesting. He says, "I can't understand why you don't have more, Norton planted. And I'm just thinking that when we invited him over here, well, here's something that will be different for him. I'm sure he's never tasted Norton. And I didn't realize of course that his bandwidth was such that he tastes wines all over the world. So of course, he tasted one. But he reminded me that, you know, you've got a kind of a gold mine here, this particularly in regard to sustainability, and at the time, I thought he was talking about the fact that Norton doesn't have a freeze problem. It has a very winter hardy one. But I think his expression was a little bit broader and more diverse. Because if you look at Norton, it is very disease resistant compared to our Vinifera varieties, and which now these days means a lot less spray material. And that is another definition of sustainable, being able to stay in business, particularly producing a grape whose yield is so ridiculously low that it's, it would be comical.

**Fred Reno** Well, it's interesting, you say that because in my discussions over the last year and a half, two years with producers of Norton, what I'm hearing from a lot of people, especially Norton, for longest time in Virginia seemed like it had been being though, okay its bulletproof. We don't have to do anything. And they just left it alone in the vineyard and picked it last. And now what's happening is they're cultivating just like their, their top vinifera. They're doing all the things in the cultivation, all the things that vineyard they would do, if it were a noble grape, as they like to say. And I think that's what I'm seeing improvement in quality and just in the last couple of years, a couple of producers as I taste their wines. I've seen an improvement in their quality.

**Bruce Zoecklein** Yeah, it used to be that somebody had a vineyard plot, and they would take the lousiest part of that plot and put the Norton there. And I asked why do you do it at all? Because it will grow fine. It doesn't make any difference where it goes, kind of not the point you want to put in the place where they don't do well. But yeah, well we've evolved from that. Thank goodness.

**Todd Kliman** I also think that questions of quality are missing the point. I know we're judging Norton. But we're talking about something that is native to this region. And when people get a hold of Norton, which is very divisive, you know, it's a love hate grape They talk about it. And they, put it up against the

wines they've had from France, from Italy, from Spain, from the US West Coast. And it's different. It may never be like those wines, even as the winemaking gets better. And that's okay. In fact, that's good. When I was a restaurant critic, and I was editor of a magazine, and that magazine, people would read that magazine to know what was good, what was great. And I always said that I wasn't so interested in what was good and what was great. I was interested in what was interesting. And then if interesting happened to intersect, with good or great, great. But we talk a lot in this country about local. And this local cheese or these local oysters, well, if you put those up against the cheeses of Europe, cheeses of the world, most of those cheeses aren't any good. Most of those oysters aren't any good, most local products are vastly inferior to the best you can get somewhere in the world. That is okay. It's not about quality. It's not about how it stacks up. You know, we're a very data driven country, and we're very much about science and analysis, and the poetry matters and the sense of place matters. And what you get with Norton is you get something that doesn't taste like other things. And in a time when so much in our culture is being eroded. When so much has become plastic and generic, so much character being leached out of everything. It's nice to have something that tastes like that.

**Fred Reno** That's interesting, the way you put that, and I definitely would agree with you. I remember, just a little anecdotal story, when I went over to Sonoma-Cutrer in 1988. And they were considered, you know, the top Chardonnay at the time. And I'll never forget my first sales event, a sort of public relations thing with this group of consumers. And I stopped and said, "let me start by telling you, we do not make great wine at Sonoma-Cutrer. And it was just aghast in the room. I said the challenge we have, as every new wine region has, is to make interesting wine. And if we make interesting wine over a long period of time, maybe we have a shot at something great. But let's start with, is it interesting? To your point you just made Todd and that's really the key. And what drove me to Virginia five years ago, and why I came here was the wine quality evolution I saw happening but more importantly, a tagline I've used. I'm surprised the board hasn't picked us up as a marketing moniker. But to me, Virginia wine has Soul. Whereas California wine has, as you made your point well Todd as well as lost its soul. Those wines don't have any soul. They're doing everything to get alcohol down. They all taste the same 10 Napa Valley Cabernets you can line up they all taste the same 10 Russian River Pinot Noirs, you can line them up, they all taste the same. Virginia has soul, there's a sense of place here in the wines. Now whether they're good or bad, or whatever it might be. There is a sense of place that I get out of Virginia wine.

**Todd Kliman** Also if I travel, if I go to countries that are winemaking, I want to drink the local table wines. I want to drink what people are drinking and not what's being exported. That's what Norton is to me. I mean, it's not a trophy wine, and it really, we're drinking them blind now. And we're also drinking them alone. They really need to be had with food. And you know, if we had plates of sausage and lentils and roasted turkey and seared duck breasts, we would see a different side of Norton. And Norton is a table wine at its best. It's a really fantastic table wine. It's got that character and Norton has got the earthiness that, you know, the great table wines have a good story.

**Fred Reno** Well, yeah. And Todd captured it in his book Wild Vine. I told him I have conservatively sent at least 80 copies of your book, over the last several years out of my pocket, to vintners and people around the country in the trade who I know who don't know anything about Norton. And whenever I

meet a Virginia vintner of note and I say have you ever read *The Wild Vine*, and they say no. I respond and say there will be a copy in the mail to you tomorrow. It's so well written but it really captures the story of Norton. And when my friends out on the West Coast, I send them a bottle of Norton and send the book *Wild Vine*, the really top palates say Wow, what is this? I never had anything like this. So yeah, I was 40 years in the wine business, mostly in California, I'd never had a bottle of Norton in my life. So, when I came to Virginia that changed.

**Todd Kliman** It definitely cuts through the clutter. And there's a lot of clutter. As you said, there's that internationalization of wine that's going on, the consultantisation of wine that's going on in the extreme.

**Joy Ting** So well, two things there. First of all, thank you, Fred, for sending the book, I did read the book. And in sort of the spirit of sending it to me. We bought one copy, we had two copies in our house, and we brought one copy today to be signed. And Todd was very keen to do that. The other one we couldn't find, and I'm pretty sure that I lent it to somebody else. So, somebody else that was asking me about Norton, I just went ahead and handed the book off. And that's it. It is a really great introduction to some of the thought processes behind Norton. I'm curious about those of us at the table, and I don't want to take over. I have a question. You know, as a as a winemaker, we all recognize that there's this lovely story behind Norton, it's very compelling in a lot of ways. And yet, there still are real challenges with making an excellent one. I agree that we need to understand that Norton is its own thing, and we don't need to kind of be constantly comparing it to all the other things, but there are some measures of quality in wine. And so, there are some challenges in making Norton and I'm just curious, for those of you that were tasting today, what are the things that you know, as a winemaker, you would say, well, to the winemakers, what are the things that we think are good about these wines? And what are the things that that are challenging on the on your side of that, that winemakers need to think about in terms of approaching how to make the very best Norton that we can?

**Fred Reno** Well, Bruce

**Bruce Zoecklein** Vineyard is the short answer to that. But the quality issues are the ones that I mentioned before, there's structural textual balance, which is usually difficult because of the seed tannins, and because of the malic acid. But again, we did some work early on looking at ways of opening up the canopy. And as long as there's not an acute leaf shading leaves and you had some cluster exposure, you got what we call phenolic ripeness. The problem that Norton has even when you get it right, is that it is a small little seed pack. And so, you got a lot of those seeds. So those people that can't do using conventional winemaking end up balancing these seed tannins with the acid then need to deport sooner or not have as much skin contact time, etc. We did a lot of work on various styles and what not. But circling back to the point, the main issue, winemaking is simple. What is difficult is understanding what simple means. But the big challenges are in the vineyard. The others are when we say details.

**Joy Ting** And I can't speak for all of the winemaking here, but the folks that I know that are making Norton, I don't know anybody that's like extended macerating their Norton. And I think that message has gotten through from what I've seen, at least that not a lot of people are doing that. And yet we're still sort of seeing that there is that challenge that continues.

**Bruce Zoecklein**, We have some winemakers that still want to follow this sort of a French idea with Norton in general and that is more of a marketing idea. You want to make wines for drinking and wines for keeping, in other words, one wine that is kind of universal for on both extremes that doesn't always work out with Norton because Norton's young varietal character is how can I say, different. It somewhat over dominates. And you can fatigue of that. As if you're making wine that is actually designed to be laid down, then those aromatics integrate, you can have very nice product but really the difficulty with Norton is that we can't put these wines in some kind of time machine because if you could age these wines appropriately. If you as a consumer or you as a producer could afford to do that you would have products that would really get a lot of attention. I mean there's nothing like it. And that's a positive thing.

**Fred Reno**, You open the door for another anecdotal story from me. So, my wife did not like Norton early on. And about a year into my quest to understand Norton and for Mother's Day, not last year, but the year before. I had a bottle of 2008 Chrysalis Norton that I decanted. She said, what are we drinking tonight as well we get the Norton, and she goes, You know, I don't like Norton, what are you doing? I said, trust me. So about halfway through the decanter, she lifts her glass up, looks at me and goes, Do we have any more this? This is really good. And she got it. You may remember from last year's judging, I had a bottle of the 2008 Chrysalis Norton which I decanted to serve at the end of the dinner for you all, because you had to put up with younger Norton's during the judging and what a different creature it was, you might recall that.

**Bruce Zoecklein** I mentioned one of the very first short course programs I conducted in Virginia Tech was in 1986. And I had all the producers come down to Blacksburg for a couple of days' worth of programs and at night, I brought the folks over to my house, we have kind of a social and I did what people had done to me and I hate and that is like, played the brown bag game. So, I brown bagged Norton's and didn't tell him what it was. Told them it was a vertical and I didn't give them the ages. But it was this was in 86 "The wines were '72 '76 '78 and '82. I open these up, said drink them, enjoy them and then I want to have a discussion and you tell me what this is and tell me what you thought about it this that and the other. And of course, I got from the age Norton's, and these were Stone Hill wines from Hermann Missouri. From the age Norton's. I got the Right Bank, Left Bank, you know, they were thoroughly convinced these were Bordelaise wines. Because these age wines which were indeed 100% Norton had this very alluring cigar box character that you find in all wines of Bordeaux. They were kind of all over the map. But they were thoroughly convinced that these were French wines. And these are winemakers they weren't the garden variety folks off the streets. Which was a great example of the fact that maybe imagination is greater than knowledge, But anyway, when I brown bagged these wines, they were astounded.

**Todd Kliman** And that's my experience tasting older Norton. It's like an entirely different wine. I think that for winemakers it's a challenge because Norton is this Roustabout and then you've got to treat it with sensitivity and gentleness and the thing is that if you do try to turn it into a Bordeaux, you work against what it is, if you don't calm some of these qualities they take over, you know that vegetal character the acidity, but if you correct too much to balance too much, then you lose what makes it is. It is what it is to be handled really sensitively. It's a bit of a problem child. But it's fascinating for the

drinker. I wouldn't want to try to make it. I admire you for that effort. But I think it's important that people make it what it is and not try to moderate some qualities. Let it be itself. Hope for the best as it ages.

**Fred Reno** All right, on that note, that'll be the last word. And we're going to move into the Final Four Norton's here shortly.