Chrysalis wrap

**SPEAKERS**

Fred Reno, Jenni McCloud, Jake Blodinger

**Fred Reno**

Say Hi, Jenni.

**Jenni McCloud**

Hello. Thanks, Fred. Thanks for coming up.

**Fred Reno**

And Jake Blodinger who is the winemaker and everything else in the vineyard besides what the vineyard guy does, right? Right. So, but let me start with you, Jenni. This is really simple. Why Norton? What was the inspiration for Norton, you do have the largest Norton vineyard in the world?

**Jenni McCloud** I got to tell you; I had never tasted Norton. And I attended a conference in Charlottesville. Let me back up. I've been kind of a serial entrepreneur, and I sold small business in 1995. A couple of weeks after that sale I was in Charlottesville. Because I was interested in doing something with grapes. I thought, wow, what am I going to do? Now that I've sold a business. You know, I was 40 years old. And I'm like, this is too young to retire. So, I thought, hey, let's grow grapes. And after so many, years, a couple of decades, at that point, drinking California wines and segwaying into French and some Spanish wines. I'd gotten a little ABC. And for those that don't know, ABC is anything but Chardonnay, anything but Cabernet. I love both of those wines, by the way, but you know, variety is the spice of life. So, at the A S E V. Eastern section conference of grape growers in 1995. The theme was alternative varieties. And I thought, wow, that's interesting. I would like to expand my own personal connoisseurship, you know, not from a snooty sense, but just from the sense of experiencing, understanding and being able to identify different varieties has always interested me, I've been into wine since my early adulthood. It was in Charlottesville at the Omni Hotel that I first tasted a Norton. The morning session was white wines. And I also had tasted some Viognier there and I thought, wow, this is really, really good white wine. I sort of glammed on to Dennis Horton, who was talking with his consultant and consulting winemaker, Alan Kenne, and I sat down next to Dennis at lunch, and the rest is history. During the afternoon session, Norton came out and I was like, What on earth is this stuff?

**Fred Reno**

So, this was in 1996 1995?

**Jenni McCloud**

Yeah, it was in July of 1995.

**Fred Reno**

When did you plant your first Norton vine?

**Jenni McCloud**

Well, I engaged Alan, as a consultant. He asked me a really interesting question. He goes, What do you like to drink? And I said, Well, wow, I'm really into this Norton stuff. That's one. And so, I planted our first Norton's in 1998. I was living in Florida at the time, and I needed to find land and needed to come to Virginia was kind of a big deal. I located this farm in ‘97. Closed on it in early ‘98 and we began planting. I was drilling holes out front before I even moved in.

**Fred Reno**

What made you believe that this area, Middleburg, was going to be a good site, especially for Norton?

**Jenni McCloud**

Certainly, some fundamental experimentation of what's the planting zone, you know, it's seven, or, you know, suitable, but not much colder than this. But I also saw a little bit into the future in recognizing the importance of marketing and having a market to be able to, you know, support a winery. It was the Charlottesville area, which I really like, I think it's beautiful there. But I just fell in love with Western Loudoun County, I think it is some of the prettiest land in the world. You know, I'm 11 miles from Dulles International Airport, an hour away from Washington. And this metropolitan statistical area is the number one per capita for personal consumption of wine. In the United States, more wine per capita gets drunk in this region than anywhere else, including San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, so I thought, okay, beautiful piece of land, beautiful area, in an OK, climate zone. So here we are.

**Fred Reno**

So, you planted your first vine in ‘98, what was your first vintage?

**Jenni McCloud** Well, Norton, interestingly, I think one of the reasons why Norton didn't recover so quickly after Prohibition, is that there's a couple negative points about growing Norton. Number one, it takes about an extra year to be able to come into production because it's a little bit of a slower grower. Also, it does not easily root from cuttings. The percentage of successful propagated Vines is less than the Vitis vinifera or other American species. Norton takes a little bit of time. Kind of tough to start and slow to grow. You can imagine you pull out the list. Okay, Fred, let's go here. Prohibition is over. Let's plant some grapes. Okay, Norton, tough to start, slow to grow, next. Oh, Concord. Okay, whatever.

**Fred Reno**

What was the first vintage before you finally got some fruit?

**Jenni McCloud**

For Norton? It was 2000.

**Fred Reno**

That’s actually pretty quick.

**Jenni McCloud**

Yeah, normally, you can get a small crop and then the second leaf, you know, when you plant it, and it has a leaf. That's its first leaf. It's not even a year old. That first vineyard is now in its 25th leaf. So, ‘98 to ‘23. Inclusive is 25 years.

**Fred Reno**

Jake, let me turn to you here for a second. I'm curious. You came to Chrysalis what year now in 2018 or 2019. Prior to that, I believe you said you were in North Carolina.

**Jake Blodinger**

And I made wine down in Georgia and a few places in North Carolina.

**Fred Reno**

What was the first time you had a bottle of Norton?

**Jake Blodinger**

2019 when I came to Chrysalis.

**Fred Reno**

So, you had not had Norton before that. No. nice introduction.

**Jake Blodinger**

It was perfect.

**Fred Reno**

What was the first thing that surprised you about working with Norton?

**Jake Blodinger**

Working with Norton? Well, okay as I have been instructed no profanity on the Podcast. I think I've never experienced something that doesn't make sense. Like, you look at it, you know the textbook chemistry for wine is a ratio 3.4 ph. 24. Bricks, and you know, this ideal like 5 TA kind of thing. And you've got beautiful red wine. Norton is basically like 26 Brix 3.6, pH, and then the TA is eight. It's just an acid balm, but it tastes so sweet when it's on the vine. And then you get it in the cellar. And it's, it's not that at all. It's well, it's Norton.

**Fred Reno**

Jenni, what was the first surprise you had? After planting it and starting to harvest it?

**Jenni McCloud**

I'm just a lover of Norton. I just think it's so incredibly extracted, intense. You know, people ask me well, what does Norton taste like? I tell them, I don't want to be flippant, but it's like asking somebody what an orange tastes like, it tastes like an orange. It tastes like Norton. And the logical follow on to that comment is that of course, as in every great grape of the world, doesn't every great grape of the world have its own unique identity or taste of itself, that always impresses the daylights out of me that it has a taste of itself and has a wild character sort of speaks to America, you know, the New World and brashness of this new country. The fact that it's so disease resistant, and it's ours, and it's historically so significant, renowned, in the wine capitals of the world, Paris and Vienna. So, I thought the idea of being involved in the restoration of America's native gem was worthwhile.

**Fred Reno**

When you started here producing wine in 2000, outside of Dennis Horton, how many people were producing Norton Do you think.

**Jenni McCloud**

Not many. I think that Shep Rouse down at Rockbridge had some Norton in the ground. And that really is the only other one that I remember at that point. I mean when I started, Fred, I would tell people, yeah, I'm going to do Norton. And they have like this blank stare. What's that? Nobody heard of Norton. Not nobody. That's an exaggeration, but particularly with the general public. 85 90% of people didn't know what that grape variety was. So, I am thinking Okay, this is going to require some hand selling here.

**Fred Reno**

That’s why I'm here today, because 80 or 90% of people still don't know who drink wine what is Norton? Do they Jake?

**Jake Blodinger**

No. I get the eyeroll from other winemakers when I started talking about Norton, and I fell in love with it in 2019. It's a love hate relationship. But talking about it with consumers in the tasting room occasionally. You know, at first, they're like, what is that? And then they try it. And they're like, oh.,

**Fred Reno**

Jenni I'm curious, because you have the most experience with this outside of Horton here in the state of Virginia at this point. What was it like when you finally had a well-aged Norton and how'd that stir the mind if you will?

**Jenni McCloud**

Wow. That just added to the excitement to be honest with you because I've been very fortunate to have been an entrepreneur and been fairly wealthy from my young adulthood really, from my early mid-20s. So, I had the wherewithal to enjoy classified growth, Bordeaux’s, and the finer wines of Spain. I certainly knew what good Meritage blends tasted like. And I certainly also knew what happens when you properly age a quality red wine. We have wines now that go back to 2002 that we sell here. I still have multiple cases of 2000 from 23 years ago, and those wines are still beautiful and still advancing. Something about the chemical constituency of Norton, its structure, its acidity, its extraction. It's very intense fruitiness, you know, wines can die. And you know, if there's not sufficient fruit element in the wine, the aging, it just sort of goes flat and it loses its fruitiness and then it's not very pleasant. Norton has fruit in spades. These wines from the 2000 timeframes they are just developing that beautiful bottle bouquet and they've got years to last.

**Fred Reno**

Well, Jake chime in here a little bit. The first time you had a well-aged bottle of Norton, you're a novice making Norton all the sudden, what do you think?

**Jake Blodinger**

I remember having the conversation with Jenni when we were working on the 2019 Locksley and I asked the question of Jenni, I said, I don't understand what why we're doing this. And she said, Well, let me show you. Let's go down in my cellar and she pulled up a bottle of 2008 Locksley and we opened it, and she poured it. And she said now Wait, wait, wait, wait, just give it a minute. You know, it's been cellared and okay, I was waiting and waiting and waiting. And she finally pours it she goes, Okay, now try it. And the only thing that went through my head was oh, that's why we do this this way. That's why we make Locksley for aging.

**Fred Reno**

So, you're talking about your blending methods with the Locksley Reserve and what you do in the cellar.

**Jake Blodinger**

Everything from the vineyard all the way to the bottle. I mean, the cork choice, it is all meant for aging.

**Fred Reno**

Jenni, unlike other people who produce Norton, you produce a lot of different Norton's.

**Jenni McCloud**

Well, yes, we do. Well, it is our flagship red varietal. But more important than that is its incredible versatility. This is an incredibly versatile grape. We can make wines like a fruity Sangria, like, you know, a hamburger drinker, all the way to a wine that can age for 30 to 40 years in the bottle.

**Fred Reno**

Well, I'll speak about that like the 2008 Locksley Reserve. When we had the first Norton Cup Challenge at the Homestead in 2022, and the poor judges I had selected we're going through all these young Norton's at 11 o'clock in the morning. So that evening for dinner I hosted the judges. And at the end of the dinner, I had brought a couple of bottles of 2008 of 2008 Locksley Reserve I bought here at Chrysalis with me and poured it for them. And you could see the look on her face when they were tasting this at dinner towards the end. And going, Wow, that was the expression Wow. I said I just wanted you all to see what happens to this grape when it's properly made and properly aged, so that you can catalog that and understand why I'm so passionate about Norton myself. And they were blown away. They really had a hard time believing that was Norton that they were tasting. It was just like a classified Bordeaux growth. It was a really remarkable wine at that point. So, I get that part of it. It's a matter of other people trying to understand that.

**Jenni McCloud**

You know, one thing that is perhaps a bit of a shift, which lends importance and credibility to doing a number of different styles of Norton is that there seems to be fewer people that have the patience to take a great bottle of wine and put it in proper storage and sit on it for 15 years. We make wines, sound dry Norton's, but that are vinified in a manner that allows them to be consumed young and still be very enjoyable. And that's where Jake's skills come in. And then both Jake and my blending input create a number of different high-quality Norton wines.

**Fred Reno**

What I still don't quite understand, and I'll look to you, Jake to start. But Jenni chime in here. How does Norton work making sparkling wine?

**Jake Blodinger**

Carefully. So, you know, acid is always the biggest concern in Norton. I think that's the thing that Jenni and I are always talking about ways to deal with and adjust acids and, you know, in a natural sense. I don't do chemical additions. Jenni and I argue passionately about making additions to the wines. And we're both on the same page. We only do what it takes to make it in the best, best way possible. So, when it comes to sparkling wine, Norton's got all this acid. And you know, the rule here at Chrysalis Vineyards is you don't pick Norton until October 1st at the earliest. And so, when we make sparkling like the pet Nat, we pick that on October 1st, and it's just the right amount of sugar, PH and TA when it's perfect. And it's a nice, interesting bottle of sparkling.

**Fred Reno**

You do make sparkling wine for aging purposes as well. Do you not?

**Jenni McCloud**

Not exactly Initially, we never sort of designed a Norton sparkler, which we've only done in the pet net style. Now, that's what I was getting at. So, we have not done a true traditional Method Champenoise.

**Fred Reno**

Well, will it lend itself to it? I'd be curious what it might produce.

**Jenni McCloud**

I don't know to be honest with you. I mean as an example, Australia has done those sparkling Shiraz and that seems to be particularly popular, but I think it's a kind of a niche thing. I'm not quite sure. However, now that being said, as a potential constituent in a cuvee with a little bit like adding for adding color and fruitiness in like a pink champagne style, pink sparkler. That may very well be the case. Do we let this cat out of the bag? We are doing some Method Traditional. We are making some traditional, sparkling champagne style, but it's not with Norton Fisher this year.

**Fred Reno**

Well, I've learned in my 45 years in this industry that every winemaker I've ever met has a side sparkling wine project down in their cellar. So, everybody seems to have some side, sparkling wine. I guess the allure of it must be something that they have to do.

**Jenni McCloud**

Fred, can I back up for just a second because I want to just add a little bit to what Jake was talking about in working with the acids in Norton. It's been sort of a mission, going all the way back to a very horrible vintage in Virginia, the 2003 Vintage. Up here in Northern Virginia, we had a killing frost on October 2. And the Norton was not ripe, and we were freaking out. To make a long story short, we realized that if you were able to drop the acid a little bit in Norton, you bring up the mid palate richness of the wine, imagine I'm moving my hands where, you know, it's sort of like a V where the fruitiness of Norton, then the mid palate sort of drops and is not as rich, and then the acids present, you know, kind of on the way back up, pull those acids down. And you can imagine flattening out that view. And that has been an epiphany for me and now how do we do that naturally. And that's done in the vineyard with really good viticultural and careful viticultural practices, keeping the sun on those vines, opening it up, making sure they're nutritionally supported, but that also in the cellar, and that has been a process over the years of making up the line processes that help us reduce some of the malic acid in Norton to bring up the midpalate.

**Fred Reno**

I've heard many times about Norton that it is bulletproof in the vineyard. If you could break that down, Jake, what does that mean?

**Jake Blodinger**

The idea is that you can plant it and it'll grow like a weed and that is true. It doesn't mean it doesn’t get disease, but it doesn't get impacted by the disease pressure. Bugs kind of ignore it, all the pests and deer love it. Right about the end of October, they're on top of it. The birds love it at the end of October, but it doesn't get powdery or downy, it doesn't get black rot the same way. I mean, it gets black rot, but it just keeps growing and ripening.

**Jenni McCloud**

It’s interesting to note that Norton is the most disease resistant bunch grape in the world. Not one of, Thee for any kind of fruit production, raisins, table, fruit, or wine. And so that in and of itself was one of the most significant elements in growing this grape to me, because of its low environmental impact, from a sense of growing something that wants to grow there. You know, we don't have to coax it to grow, we don’t have to cajole it to grow. As Jake said, you know, oh, my God, it's Norton. Get rid of it if it's not in the vineyard. It's a weed.

**Fred Reno**

Well, and I think I'd like to dispel maybe a myth, some people might have. Norton is not really prolific; you don't get a lot of juice out of your grapes do you.

**Jake Blodinger**

That is correct. The difference, you know, on average is about 165 gallons per ton. And Norton is about 145. Okay, even in ‘23, this vintage, we were seeing at the bottom of like 120. And that's hard pressing, I mean, just trying to squeeze everything out.

**Jenni McCloud**

Norton has a large skin and seed to juice ratio. It's a small Berry, and there's could be five seeds in there. So, there's not a lot of juice and it's kind of goopy. It's also a little bit difficult to handle in the cellar and move it around because it's pretty thick.

**Fred Reno**

So, Jake, when you came here in 2019, clearly, Chrysalis had close to 20 years underneath its belt as a Brand. You're walking into a new challenge. What are you thinking? I'm coming to this place that has the largest planting of Norton in the world. It's got this reputation for Norton. I'd never produced a bottle of Norton in my career. What was that challenge Like? What were you thinking?

**Jake Blodinger**

So, I had read the book Wild Vine in college, it's required reading and so I was excited about coming to Chrysalis and the opportunity to give it my best shot. And, you know, I had saved myself for the best Norton on the face of the planet. I wasn't going to have somebody else's Norton, I was going to have Chrysalis Norton, and I remember having that first Chrysalis 2016 Barrel Select and I was like, wow, this is incredible. Just walking in the cellar. I was excited to spruce the place up and the first day I harvested it, I was like, I have no idea what I'm doing.

**Jenni McCloud**

Now, fortunately, I had an older experienced consultant that was working with Jake in that first vintage.

**Fred Reno**

That always helps, right? Who was that? I'm curious.

**Jenni McCloud**

Jason Burrus. Jason had been our winemaker and what in ‘13 or 2014, and then had left to hang a shingle as a consultant. So, it worked out really, really, well for us. And I was able to help Jason in his new entrepreneurial endeavor as a consultant, and then also train up a talented, enthusiastic, younger winemaker.

**Fred Reno**

Well, so looking down the road here, what do you think the future of Norton looks like?

**Jenni McCloud**

Well, I haven't changed my perspective, Fred, in 25 years. I'm as excited about Norton today as I was when I started, maybe even more so as we understand the grape more, as we're able to go through vintages of experimentation and toward our vision of creating the best red wine from this grape that we possibly can. I think any failings that we've had are my fault for just not telling the world more about Norton. I think the exposure to more wine drinkers with this grape, we'll get them on board.

**Fred Reno**

What's it like in a tasting room if you're there, and somebody comes in as a consumer, and they've never had a bottle of Norton, and they're like, What is this? I mean, what's that experience? Like? I'm curious.

**Jake Blodinger**

I think that's the hardest thing to do is explain to somebody who's never had Norton or heard of Norton. They always ask, you know, what is it, what does it taste like? What's it like and it's, it's, it's just Norton and so I don't even say that anymore. I

**Jenni McCloud**

Just pour them on glass, here you go. Okay. You know, it depends on what somebody is into if like for me who came from years and years and years of enjoyment of high-quality wines, it was exciting to me because it was a new character, new flavor, unique identity. And I was looking for that. I think for people that are snooty, maybe you know, the type that like, I only drink this kind of grape variety. Yeah, maybe not for them yet. But I find that I'm going to give a visual thing again, here. think about a bell curve, right? You know, and this bell curve is new wine drinkers too experienced old wine drinkers on the right. I'm finding initially that those who are just being introduced into wine, really like Norton, and really love knowing they haven't been sort of what do I say, pigeonholed into Oh, only French wines make good, you know, or whatever. And then all the way over that curve to the end of it is like people that have been around the block like me, right? And it's like, wow, this is an interesting grape, this is something different than I can wrap my head around and try to understand, what I'm finding is, is that those tails of the bell curve are going up, they're inching up. And more and more people, as they become aware of Norton, are finding it is a logical grape to add to the cellar. Again, we started off talking about variety being the spice of life, you know, would if I only had Norton to drink when I want that now, if I only had Cabernet Sauvignon to drink or Meritage. So, the idea of experiencing different wines is what is one of the things that makes a lifetime enjoyment of wine interesting.

**Fred Reno**

As you know, for my part, going on close to two years now, the last glass of red wine I have every night before I go to bed is a glass of Norton. My observations about Norton playing into what you were saying about the consumer. I find Norton to be a serious wine and an intellectual wine. You don't quaff Norton; people quaff these days. You don't quaff Norton, you sip it. You ponder it, you sip it, you ponder it. And I find myself going intellectually into all these different corridors, as I'm going through that process. And that's why I find it fascinating.

**Jenni McCloud**

Well, now you're only drinking the best stuff. So well, just to counter that we do make wines that you can, in fact, the new wine right now we don't know what we're going to be calling it but it has been known as Sarah's Patio Red, we're going to update the name on our Patio wines, just like we've updated some of our labeling of late.

**Fred Reno**

So, the Patio Red is a quantifiable wine. I will say that.

**Jenni McCloud**

Right. So that goes back to the versatility of the grape versatility.

**Fred Reno**

That's I guess the last word. I would say, by the way I wanted to get this in. Most folks don't know this. And I don't know why we don't recognize this date. But today is the 90th anniversary of Liberation, or post prohibition. Repeal was 90 years ago today. So, time to celebrate over a glass of Norton. Jenni and Jake, thank you very much.

**Jenni McCloud**

You're very welcome. Thanks for your interest.

**Jake Blodinger**

Thank you.