

EPIISODE # 3 “ALL ABOUT VIRGINA NORTON” DuCARD VINEYARDS

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Scott Elliff, Julien Durantie

Fred Reno

So, let's start at the beginning. Scott, you planted your vineyard in 2001. Why did you plant Norton?

Scott Elliff

Well, you know, one of the first decisions you have to make is what varieties you're going to plant because they're going to be in the ground for a long time. It's a pretty scary decision. So, I spent more time with that than probably anything and talked to just about everybody in the industry than I could about pluses and minuses. And you know, a lot of it wasn't really so well-known at the time. But one of the people that I was directed to was the late Dennis Horton, obviously a big proponent of Norton. I have a funny story about his visit. He actually came out to our site, okay. You know, back in the day, people would do that to help each other, which is really cool. He drove around a little bit. And he said, Well, that block down there at the lowest elevation. A little bit of a bottom swale. He said, just put the Norton down there, it won't care, it'll do perfectly fine. You won't have any trouble with it. It'll be a consistent producer, just be one less headache for you. And a quick puff on his cigar and a spit and off he went.

And that's what I did.

Fred Reno Where did you get your plant material?

Scott Elliff

So, I got my plant material from Arkansas of all places. There actually wasn't much supply here either. And they were green vines. I think we only had about a 50% take probably in the first year. It took a couple of replants really to get it going. I don't think we had vintage until 2006 2007. Probably about the time that Julien came, but ever since then, it's been a very reliable producer. We've learned a lot about it over time and the proof is in the pudding in terms of the awards and recognition that it's gotten.

Fred Reno

Well, it is one of my favorite Norton's. There's no question about that. So, Julien, let me direct this to you. You came to DuCard in 2007. Had you ever had a bottle of Norton, farmed Norton, or knew anything about it?

Julien Durantie No, never had any viticulture experience with it. It is a fairly easy grape to grow, is not sensitive to any disease, such as Downy Mildew that you can have a lot in Virginia because of tropical weather climate, there is no botrytis. So, if you are not ready to pick it because your cellar is full of wine from the previous year, we can wait and see what's going to develop. Of course, if there is a big chance of rain, we have to do something and bring it in. But there is no botrytis issue with the rain so it's fairly easy and less worries.

Fred Reno

I understand that Norton has a lot of seeds, it's a see pocket. a

Julien Durantie Yeah, there is not much juice coming out. So, in a normal year with the *Vitis vinifera* we expect 600 liters per ton. With Norton it is at around 530, 540. There are a lot of seeds, and it has a lot of color. So, if you harvest and process the fruit if you got a white shirt, it's toast.

Fred Reno

Well, as I understand it, and I'm curious who made the decision here that led you to switch your trellising from that of traditional Open Lyre to VSP?

Scott Elliff

Yeah, well, we actually had a GDC. (*Geneva Double Curtain*) to start. Remember, I didn't know very much. I was taking opinions from everybody. And, you know, people said, look, there's a lot of plants, house plants that grow in a downward direction and grape vines would do that, and to help them de-vigorate, etc, which I understood to be a good thing. So, we put them that way. And the other people who were already planted, all had it that way. So, you know, they must have known what they were doing. But we changed it around actually to open lyre system, modified lyre system, where we changed it around so we can actually hedge it mechanically, which is a big advantage, but we found in a side-by-side trial of one row versus another that we got better bricks, better acid, less disease, better sun exposure, everything as a result of changing that around.

Fred Reno what year was that?

Scott Elliff That was about maybe 2013. Julien when was that?

Julien Durantie The Vitis vinifera we converted them in after a trial in winter 2009, 2010. So the first vintage of the vitis vinifer was 2010. On the Norton, we converted it in 2011. The next year,

Fred Reno

So, your first vintage of Norton would have been in 2008, 2009?

Scott Elliff

2006 2007, 2008 or so. And then 2010, 2011 was the conversion to a lyre system. It's interesting. I think that we are still maybe the only planting in Virginia, and I think Lucie Morton said maybe the only planting in the world of upward training. Yeah, almost everybody else's GDC or some other high wire system or. Frankly, we think that's an advantage for us because of all the things I said about sun exposure and development of the grape over the season.

Fred Reno

Julian, I'm curious. In the winemaking side, what have you learned over a course of, well 15 plus years of making Norton. What have you done to help mitigate that sort of inverse relationship between Malic and Lactic acid and what people sometimes I think erroneously identified as tannin, which is not tannin, but really high acid. What have you learned?

Julien Durantie What I've learned is that Norton doesn't have a lot of tannin. It is the highest seed grape. But with the lyre system that we converted in 2011. There is always that aromatics that people refer to when they talk about Norton with that foxiness, which I don't know really what it means. I think it's more like a methoxypyrazine issue. The fact that we have this lyre all the fruit can see the sunlight and is more exposed, we're having less of that foxiness, which I think is developed

by the methoxypyrazine. Also, the fact we have this lyre, we also can trim so whatever develops the methoxypyrazine into the fruit is actually the vegetative growth so the amount of leaves. The more they shade the leaves and shade each other the more methoxypyrazine in the fruit is going to develop. So, the fact to be able to trim the Norton frequently, every two weeks, we don't ever have as much methoxypyrazine which I think is the foxiness.

Fred Reno I don't know if you do this every vintage, but one of the vintages, in 2017 I believe you also blend it in some Cabernet Franc.

Julien Durantie Yes. So, basically we do a 75 to 85% depending on the vintage and only 15 to 25% of Cabernet Franc.

Fred Reno

And that gives you a little bit more gracefulness in its youth. Yes, exactly. I think that's what attracted me when I had that first bottle of Norton ever in my career. It was, as I said, before, DuCard and I was like, This is really good. I have got to learn more about Norton and see what's going on here. Because it was really, really good. 2017 was an exceptional vintage just in general wasn't it.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, it was and that I think that was the wine that we entered in your first Norton Cup Challenge and won it actually so it's really fun that it kind of went all the way around. It was the first Norton you ever tried. And later, we put it in the first ever broad-based contest, and it showed so well,

Fred Reno

As long as you touched on the Homestead Norton Cup Challenge, I want to ask you about that. On that Saturday, when we did the big reveal when I was on the stage, revealing the wine that came out on top of the 10 Norton's I had chosen. I was looking across the ballroom

right at you. And what do you think when I said, and the winner is DuCard vineyard, and I saw that look on your face.

Scott Elliff

I knew you were staring at me all the time. And you're you know you weren't even judging but the organizer, but you knew which one had ended up on top and you are grinning like a fox that weekend that I know you're just busting to try to tell me, but you didn't. But your body language kind of gave it away. But I'm still surprised. You're always surprised when anything like this happens and just delighted that you know people like what you've put a lot of blood sweat and tears into to produce over time. So, it's really a fun ride. We're in your office here and recording this and I'm looking at a friggin bottle of that 2017. And my guess is given you came here in 2019 at that Farmers Market, we probably had that 2017 bottle. Which was the one that you first tried.

Fred Reno

Well, you can thank Debra for that, because she was the one who picked it up.

Scott Elliff

We always thank the ladies so much fun, Fred. Thanks.

Fred Reno

Well, you know, that leads me to a really interesting question for me. How do you introduce Norton? And how have you introduced Norton to your customer base in your tasting room?

Scott Elliff

You want to talk about how we describe it?

Julien Durantie I would describe it as an acquired taste. It's not for everybody. When people come to our tasting room. Sometimes it's a very naive approach they ask for, do you have something similar to Pinot Noir? Oh, something similar to Pinot Noir? Well, so when they say that I believe they're saying if you got something a bit on the lower

tannic side, and with more freshness, aromatic freshness, I say, why don't you try the Norton. It's very expressive. It's very automatic. But there is a lot of acidity but there is no tannin which you might be offended by. So why don't you give it a try, and they actually appreciate it.

Fred Reno

And I assume over the years Scott, you have acquired quite a following for your Norton with your customer base.

Scott Elliff Yeah we have for sure. You know, in our wine club we make a selection as to what you're going to have each time but people are free to change it around. We have some people say, give me Norton in every allocation. Okay, you know, fine. We mentioned earlier that a lot of people that come in are kind of adventurous, you know, because they're trying Virginia wine around the countryside. It's not just their palate is open; their mind is open to trying new things. So, when it's on our flight, we describe it as something that's unique, that you probably haven't had before. And as Julien mentioned, this low tannin you know, I think a lot of people, if they tell you they don't like red wine, it's because of the tannin, I think it's overwhelming to them. So, a low tannin is good that way. And you know, it's strong. So, it's very distinctive. And people have a reaction to it. Good, bad, or ugly, you know, It's fine either way, but they appreciate it. And the fact that it's local, also, I think, is a very big deal. People are really looking for authentic local products here in lots of different categories. And to be able to have that with wine is interesting. And it's a pretty special opportunity for us in Virginia.

Fred Reno

Well, in what you just referred to earlier Julien about growing Norton and how it's to some level, bulletproof. It is a little strong term Dennis Horton would use, but it's impervious to a lot of diseases. So given

climate change, which is reasonably undeniable at this point in time, it looks like a bit more sustainable grape to grow.

Julien Durantie Yeah. So, on the Norton side yes, and there is a different approach that needs to be taken regarding Norton on the viticulture side. We have got to go to higher density planting as well. Especially if we do get more rain the fact to have more density planting will certainly increase the amount of phenolic material going into the wine.

Fred Reno

I'm curious about something else. Have you ever bottled any Norton in a Magnum or larger size bottle?

Julien Durantie No, we have not.

Fred Reno Nobody has

Scott Elliff

Maybe we should.

Fred Reno

I would love to see what Norton tastes like out of a Magnum 10 years later, because we all know that the larger the bottle, the vessel that you bottle in, the more complex and the longer the wine ages. Wouldn't that be something? Can you imagine a nine-liter bottle of Norton?

Scott Elliff

Can we even lift that? I don't know.

Fred Reno

I thought it would be wonderful if somebody would look at bottling some outsize bottles, because they're good. First of all, for marketing promotional purposes.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, we've been doing that with some of our vinifera in the better years, we'll bottle a few Magnums, and they sell well, especially at Christmas time. It's a special thing. So yeah, let's take that on. It's easy

to do, we just sort of divert out of the bottling line and hand bottle some larger, larger formats. Why not?

Fred Reno

Yeah. Well, I'll issue the challenge, because nobody's done it yet.

Scott Elliff

Okay, done.

Fred Reno

Have you thought about planting or expanding within your vineyard, any more Norton?

Scott Elliff

We're out of room. We're out of room, you know, and the thing you got to remember is, this is Virginia in general, but certainly us. We're farming 20 acres now. 60 tons, whatever, an acre and a half of Norton is fine. It's on the menu, probably for three or four months out of the year or so. Because we rotate around with the other wines and all. But, you know, vintage release for us is like 100 cases, right? I was going to say it's not a lot of wine. We explain to people, it's just simply different. Because a big brand from California wine would be half a million or a million cases or whatever. And then I pause and tell them ours is 100, like a three-minute supply versus a big brand, so it's a different product, and special and unique that way.

Fred Reno

Right? Well, I think Norton, in fact, I find Norton to be so misunderstood. Even to this day, on the Wine Searcher website, which is a very good website, not just for finding where different wines are sold all over the country, but they have an educational platform. And under Norton, they say erroneously and inaccurately, that Norton was discovered in Missouri, which is completely as we know inaccurate. It's a Virginia Grape.

Scott Elliff

Well, you're setting the world straight on that. You already have to a large extent. Thank you.

Fred Reno

I'm trying to get them to understand and to the point you mentioned earlier Scott with Dennis Horton, thank Dennis Horton, because he was one who brought Norton from Missouri back to Virginia, having played it in that old cave, of that winery, very famous Stone Hill Winery in Missouri, and that's where he went to get his cuttings and bring them back here to Virginia to its rightful home. It's Virginia's grape.

Scott Elliff

I mean, we're learning with it, as Julien said, and we're innovating like changing the trellising and going to higher density planting. But it's not like we're just sitting still, we actually have two other products, one that has been released and one that is a sort of secret project, I guess, maybe Julien, you could talk about that.

Fred Reno

Oh, I'd like to hear about that. This is interesting.

Julien Durantie Fred, I know, this is not something that you'd like to hear, because you'd like to have the Norton as a single variety, and you told me that once, but we are also making a Port and I like to make a Port out of Norton because there is a lot of acidity that can retain the sweetness of the port. The project is, well it won't be secret anymore. But we are making a sparkling wine out of Norton. So, I first had the sparkling Norton I believe at Casanel vineyard up in Leesburg, and I really enjoyed it. And I was like, wow, that's a way to do it. So, the following year, I happened to have some Norton in inventory, and I was like, Scott why don't we try to make a Norton sparkling wine.

Fred Reno

Are you making a traditional style? Yeah, yeah. Well, that will be fascinating. What is it going to taste like?

Scott Elliff

Stay tuned.

Julien Durantie It's been sitting on the lees for the past two years, waiting for the acidity to come down. But this is super interesting.

Fred Reno

I can't wait to taste that. Well, you know, there's also another winery to go unnamed on this Podcast, not to step on DuCard here, who has also made a wine and blended a little Norton into Chambourcin. That wine is flat out delicious. So, I think Norton can be used as a blending grape as well?

Scott Elliff

The challenge on that is it's so strong and so distinctive. Julien, what would you say if you put more than five or 10% in another wine it dominates the profile really? You have got to be really careful about that I think. For me, the blending usefulness of it is really limited. I think it has to be mostly stand alone in these three different ways. It can be varietal; it can be a semi sweet dessert wine. And maybe we'll see. It could be this nice sparkling wine. So, we'll see.

Julien Durantie but if you add a little vinifera into the Norton, you definitely can, especially if you got some Cabernet Sauvignon with a lot of tannin, it will help balance the wine.

Fred Reno

Julien, we're enjoying this nice bottle of white burgundy, Meursault from Thierry Matrot. What do you think of this wine?

Julien Durantie Ah, this is, this is lovely wine. I love the freshness and the density, and the tension of the wine, it is beautiful.

Fred Reno

You just nailed it when you said, the tension.

Scott Elliff

That's a great word, isn't it.

Fred Reno

Well, it describes this wine so beautifully, because there's so many layers of things going on. And there's a tension between all of them trying to get attention.

Julien Durantie There is something about these burgundy wines, Chassagne Montrachet, Meursault, they all have this beautiful tension in acidity that is unbelievable and brings so much density to the wine as well.

Scott Elliff

This is a Bordeaux guy giving some props to Burgundy. You may never have heard that before.

Fred Reno

I'm curious when you enjoy Norton on your own say at the dinner table. What do you like to pair it with?

Julien Durantie Personally I would go with Asian food.

Fred Reno

I would never expected that.

Julien Durantie because you can always find a food spicy because and basically Asian food are very acidic. They have this strong spice sometimes you can find some sweetness in there and I think the Norton is the perfect pairing for Asian food.

Fred Reno

I try to tell people who've never had Norton before. Or very limited experience with Norton. If it's a young Norton, you need to decant it an hour beforehand just to let it get a chance to open up and display itself. When I started the business, well over forty years ago, we decanted all

of our classified Bordeaux Growths before we drank them, that's just what you did. But now that they produce Napa Valley Cabernet in Bordeaux, they don't have to do that any longer. You know those wines just come right out of the bottle very expressive and full bodied.

Scott Elliff

It's a challenge with staff in the tasting room for them to do that. But we like to decant just about everything. Not too long but you want the aromatics to come. You know, the wine has been bottled up for a while. And you want it to express itself a little better. We do that even with our flights, actually most of the reds, we will decant as part of a flight that is served at their table.

Fred Reno

You made me think of something here Scott, when you were the guest Winery in the feature vintner of the month at the Homestead Virginia Wine Experience Program in the very first year, at the finishing dinner on Saturday night. And it was the first time we had a Norton that we served the guests at dinner, I remember watching this and the reaction of the guests at the dinner, none of them have ever had a glass or a bottle of Norton before and to your point I had the staff decant the wine about an hour before then pour it back in the bottle so it could be served out of the bottle. I was watching the guest's reaction around the table. And it was the wine that everybody wanted more of, it was the biggest hit of the night. That's when I had that proverbial aha moment myself about Norton. I watched and said to myself, Oh, I get it now. The problem isn't the consumer understanding or enjoying Norton, it's the trade and the press don't understand it. And so therefore the consumer. But a consumer served Norton, with no preconceived notion, correctly in the right setting was, you know, with the right food, they just loved it. And that's when I went on my crusade with Norton personally, it was like, Hold on there's something going on here, that

everybody's missing in the trade. And now every night, I told you this before. My last glass of red wine I have every night before I go to bed is a glass of Norton. That's been a year and a half now. It's the most fun for me to open a bottle, have a glass, put the cork back in the bottle. Go back to it over 2,3,4 Or five nights. What I see in the evolution of the wine is just remarkable how it evolves.

Scott Elliff

Keep it up.

Fred Reno Well, DuCard is always in that rotation. There's no question about that.

Julien Durantie You might be the only professional within this industry who actually cares about Norton. And I agree with what you said about the press. I'm also having some trouble with wine competitions because I think this is the same thing with a wine competition. They don't like to get dirty. They want polish and finished wine without too much personality.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, it's interesting for us, my approach is as the boss, I suppose I'm the boss and one thing you do is set direction. Julien's always asked me, would you like me to kind of trump up these wines a little bit to make them more, more, you know, presentable for judges and stuff? And I say, No, we want to make the best wine we can with every vintage. I want it to be as unique as possible. As expressive as far out the edges as possible. We're not trying to make something that's, you know, in the middle of the road. We're trying to make something that's special. You go around once and let's give it a roll.

Fred Reno I just learned in a recent interview with Chelsey Blevins from 53rd winery vineyard that she did an experiment this year for the Virginia Winemakers Research Exchange with Norton. And that was

encouraging they let her do that and could submit it. That's progress within the industry that they're going to start to take this seriously for what the potential for Norton can be. And Frank Morgan just told me recently, for the Governor's Cup judging which he's now running, now that Jay Youmans has stepped back. He said he's had well over a half a dozen entries of Norton for the first time. There's a movement happening here. People are starting to pay attention.

Julien Durantie You have to keep pushing forward Fred.

Fred Reno I don't know if I'm going to take any credit for it. But I will say that it's really refreshing to see that it's being taken more seriously.,

Scott Elliff I know where you're going with this because we've talked a lot and had a few drinks about it and everything, but you're going to provide such a context and history and breadth of information base about Norton, it's tortured history and it's movement around the country, around the world. You can get Lucie Morton and some other people involved in it. And everything, you know, I think that's going to give a lot more sort of foundation that makes it actually more comfortable for the regular trade industry to embrace it. And if that's starting already a little bit, you know, that's great. Appreciate it.

Fred Reno

I'm just stunned by the lack of intellectual curiosity that I see at times, within the wine trade and in the press. That didn't exist when I got into business some years ago, there was always an openness to learn, and to understand different wines that somebody had never had before. I'm just trying to push that forward a little bit, to get people to think that way.

Scott Elliff Like Julien says a consumer is totally interested and it's fun for them. It's really more the trade needs to be brought along a little

bit more. So, we'll do our thing in the tasting room. We serve it to consumers, and you know, take it from there.

Julien Durantie It's definitely more difficult for the winemaker, vineyard manager and also for the owner of the place to put a bit more money into Norton development if the press don't care too much about it because what sells in the end is this, brands that is showcasing a particular variety or particular vineyard or something like this. So, if we want to experiment with higher density planting and VSP there is room for it. there is definite we can make better Norton, that's what I think. But we need to have a bit more engagement from the press.

Fred Reno

Okay, I understand as a winemaker, it's a lot of work with Norton in the cellar.

Julien Durantie in the cellar, it is a lot of work because the wine wants to turn into vinegar. We can have some volatile acidity, which is your vinegar aspect of the wine, and it can go can spike pretty quickly in the Norton, so you have to watch all the time.

Fred Reno

So of the vintages of Norton, you have produced Do you have a favorite?

Julien Durantie You know, my favorite wine usually is the one I struggle with the most. I'm not going to talk about a particular one. Like that's going to be intentional like 2011. We had to make palatable wine and then 2020 we're going to make a palatable Norton and these vintages are very difficult because they are very wet, very humid, and they are very troublesome. And then they are the ones I'm most proud of. But I don't have a favorite one. They all our my babies.

Fred Reno A favorite of mine, the 17 DuCard Norton. That's for sure.

Scott Elliff Well, stay tuned for 2023 for Norton, as well as everything else in Virginia. It was just a fabulous vintage.

Fred Reno It was that kind of vintage. Everybody talks about 2023 as it might be one of the best vintages ever here in Virginia.

Scott Elliff

Yeah, we think so. I've always had my favorite, 2010, I guess. We have a stream that goes through our vineyard. And Julien pointed out to me midsummer, the stream was completely dry. I mean, even the bottom of the rocks were dry all summer long. He said the only time we've seen it like that was 2010. And so that was a great vintage and that was kind of an indicator for me that we probably were onto something.

Fred Reno

So, I guess a drought is good, but not continuous. Right? Not every year, year after year.

Scott Elliff

We're looking at some snow outside so it's rehydrating the ground and everything no problem. Well, we'll take it when we can get it for sure.

Julien Durantie Yeah, 2023 was easiest vintage, ever. If it was like this every year the industry would be bored.

Fred Reno

On that note. I'm going thank both you gentlemen for coming into my studio here enjoying some white burgundy and talking about Norton.

Scott Elliff

We're delighted. Thank you, Fred. Thanks for having us.