

EPISODE # 5 MICHAEL HENY “ALL ABOUT VIRGINIA NORTON”.

SPEAKERS

Mike Heny, Fred Reno

Fred Reno

Michael, welcome to my studio. And this will be fun talking to you about Norton.

Mike Heny

Glad to be here. Hello, everyone.

Fred Reno

Question for you right from the top. I know you went to work at Horton in 1997. Had you had a bottle of Norton before that?

Mike Heny

Before I got the job at Horton Cellars in 1997. I was working at a fine wine shop in DC, Calvert Woodley and the wine manager there this must have been like 1994. I had worked a few vintages in Virginia and had worked a couple of vintages at Meredith, out near Middleburg. I had worked one vintage at Montdomaine under Shep Rouse, where I really had a love for the production but I was doing retail learning about the world of fine wine. And Tom McKnew, the wine manager one day he had three bottles of wine for me, this is probably like 1994. He had three bottles of Virginia wine from this new producer called Horton. So yeah, it's s bottle of Horton Norton, Viognier and Cabernet Franc. He said I Michael, you should try these. They're Virginia but they're pretty good. So yeah.

Fred Reno

Oh, wow. Okay, so then you hook up with Alan Kenni and have lunch with him as I understand it, and you get an opportunity. As assistant winemaker at Horton Cellars.

Mike Heny

That's right. Yes. I started in 1997. Alan Kenni was the consultant and Graham Bell was the winemaker. Really fun and exciting time.

Fred Reno what was that vintage like for Norton?

Michael Heny 97 super memorable vintage for Norton. In that, it was it was a good vintage not great vintage like the 1998 but we were coming off the disastrous '96 Vintage super challenging. 1997 was a good solid vintage. But the Norton was super late to ripen. If you've ever been out to Berry Hill where the Hortons have grown North Norton for 30 years Dennis chose the prime spot in that vineyard for Viognier at the crest of the hill and moving down the hill where a bunch of experimental varietals and Cabernet Franc. The Norton was down at the bottom. Norton's already a late grape to ripen and it sits in one of the cooler spots in the vineyard. It was carrying a heavy crop that year. And that's just a really long way of saying that a lot of it came in when it was really late in the season and really cold. So yeah, remember that well.

Fred Reno

What was it like working with Norton in the cellar for the first time really in production?

Mike Heny

Getting into Norton, maybe before we get into some of the technical aspects of it. Norton, for me is a grape that, you know, brings a lot of mythmaking to it and history and it's unique and a bit different than the other grapes. If you don't mind there's a short excerpt of a William Carlos Williams poem that I'd like to share that doesn't talk about Norton and all but talks about what for me is sort of like the American feel of Norton so I'd like to read a short excerpt from it's a poem called to Flossie that he wrote to his wife Flossie and it starts off; the pure products of America go crazy, mountain folk from Kentucky or the ribbed north end of Jersey with this isolated lakes and valleys, its where death meets these old names and promiscuity between devil may care man with taken to railroading out of sheer lust of adventure. So, yeah, to me, Norton is you know, it's obviously a cultivated plant that we work with, but there's, there's kind of a wild edge to that is a really big contrast to a lot of the vinifera that we work with.

Fred Reno

It's interesting that you put it in poetic terms. As I've told people many times, the last glass of red wine I have every night before I go to bed for well over a year now is a class of Norton. I find Norton to be a very serious wine. And by that, I mean people quaff wine these days, and that's fine. It's okay to quaff wine, but you don't quaff Norton. You sip it, you ponder, you sip it, you ponder it, I find it to be an intellectual wine. It takes me to a lot of different places that I never expected mentally, as I'm slipping through it and learning about it. When you get to Horton, and of course, Dennis Horton, the audience should know that he was one who reclaimed the grape from Missouri, from the Stone Hill winery, which was an ancient winery there and reopened. But how did he approach Norton? I mean, Graham Bell was the winemaker. What was their approach? How did they talk to you about Norton and everything?

Mike Heny

Dennis approached Norton in that it wasn't the only wine he wanted to make. It wasn't the wine where he placed his greatest ambition. But it was a wine that was really important to him. And of course, there was the Missouri connection. Dennis wanted to make a solid red wine that had good color and nice mouthfeel that could be out on the market at a good price and that people could enjoy every night. So yeah, I think we had all the tools in place to be able to produce really nice Norton. When I first got there, I thought we were selling Norton for like 11 bucks a bottle. And people loved it, bought it by the case.

Fred Reno

Well, when I think about the fact that Dennis Horton, in the 80s brought Norton back to Virginia. It's kind of remarkable. Historically, when you realize it started in Virginia, he was one that brought it back here. And still to this day, people are discovering Norton for the first time.

Mike Heny

Yeah. And, you know, I get a bit sad kind of hearing that in that 19th century industry centered around Norton, like the Monticello Wine Company. I think the Route 20 corridor, where I've lived the last 30 years was then blanketed in Norton vines, you know, with different farms. You know they had their hogs, they grew their own row crops. And over there, they had, you know, four or five acres in Norton and maybe some other grapes. So, what a shame that kind of all that was learned in the 19th century about, you know, farming Norton grapes in central Virginia was lost through the Civil War and prohibition.

Fred Reno

That would have been a different time in place. I realized. You said to me in a recent previous interview, that when the winemaker for Cheval Blanc came to visit Horton, he was interested primarily in tasting the Norton. What was that visit like?

Mike Heny

Yeah, that visit was great. And it was, you know, kind of a great reminder that we're so blessed to have this varietal Norton that's like, from Virginia. You know, as much as I love California Zinfandel and the Zinfandel story, it's more about immigrant story. And Norton, part of its genetic heritage. At least 50% has been here, you know, since Noah went out on his boat.

Fred Reno

Are you familiar with what's being stirred up a little bit right now as it relates to Norton versus Cynthiana. And what Lucie Morton is on the trail of.

Mike Heny

Honestly, I used to follow that research and debate quite closely. And I think where I left off is that they were the same grape as I behind the times now, Fred,

Fred Reno

We don't know yet. But Lucie is on a mission right now, to prove once and for all that Cynthiana is a different grape or is not. There's some DNA testing being done by the head of the Agriculture Extension Service there at the University of Missouri, trying to finally put this to rest. She is convinced Cynthiana is a different grape, is a sibling, not a clone. And as you probably well know, Horton has Cynthiana and Norton in their vineyard. In this year, back in 2023. Shannon Horton decided after talking to Lucie, they made some Norton and made some Cynthiana and kept them separate. In 2023 I was privileged enough to be given a bottle of each right out of a tank, no sulfur, no preservative anything. I took it home, put it refrigerated right away before I got to it. And tasting the Cynthiana alongside of the Norton, as they kept it separate. There's clearly a difference.

Mike Heny

Well, that that's so exciting, because I'd say if there's anyone in this world who could spot the difference between Cynthiana and Norton, it would be Sharon Horton who's you know, been caring for those vines, walking those rows looking at every plant for 30 years. So if there's a difference, she'll be able to tell you which plants to look at, for sure.

Fred Reno

We'll see where that ends up.

Mike Heny

It also kind of harkens back to some of the 19th century producers, you know, on their lineup, they would have both a Cynthiana and a Norton. So, you know, I'd never knew if that was like a stylistic thing where they would make the wines in different styles, or they had different plots that they consider one or the other.

Fred Reno

Well, my amateur impression of the two wines was the Cynthiana was a bit more elegant, it' was slightly lighter in color, and had a bit more finesse right out of the bottle as opposed to the Norton, which was a brute. This big, rich, strong wine without a lot of development yet at that early stage, whereas the Cynthiana had. Then I blended the two at one point when I was tasting. And Cynthiana completely calm that Norton down. What was it like working in the cellar, say Norton versus Cabernet Franc?

Mike Heny

Yeah, so Norton's a whole different beast. I think Norton, first of all, it's a tiny little cluster and a tiny little berry packed with seeds. So, the juice to berry ratio, you know, much, much smaller than any other red grape we work with.

Fred Reno

So, you really get a much smaller yield at the end of the day of juice?

Mike Heny

Yeah, it's again you get maybe 70 75% of the yield you would with a vinifera red grape. Because of that it behaves a lot differently. It was something that we always attempted to make in tank because simply if you put into a bin and you tried to punch down, good luck with that, trying to like punch down concrete for the first week or so we'd always tried to make it in a tank. And even then, trying to get those first pump overs going was really difficult. When you did get it going, you had to be really, really careful with how much fruit you put in each tank. Because when fermentation did kick in, there tended to be a lot more of a cap and way too many mornings, you'd walk into the cellar, and you'd see these kind of red tears of Norton dripping down the outside of the tank. Yep I guess I fill that tank too much.

Fred Reno

I can see how the cap would be a lot thicker, I was at Ducard, and I was looking at some Norton grapes. There were five and sometimes six seeds in one little berry. Blew my mind. So let me challenge your memory here for a second. What did you think was your favorite vintage at Horton that you produced.

Mike Heny

Every vintage at Horton was exciting to work with Norton because you know. The Norton that the Hortons grew even in an off vintage like 96 or '03 or '11 still had enough heat to ripen them which in Norton, for me, the main challenge is getting the asset down enough. Most native grapes bring an overabundance of acid, particularly malic acid in Norton. So, you know, one of the secrets to the success of Horton Norton is, a good site, awesome vineyard management team under the watchful eye of Sharon Horton. And so, you can make a good wine out of it, you know, pretty much any vintage. I tended to think in terms of if I felt the wine was maybe more of a Bordeaux style or more Rhone style. So that's kind of usually where my brain was working. At Horton, we had Rhone blending grapes to work with and Bordeaux blending grapes to work with. So, I break it into vintages like '98, '01, '07 '10 maybe the warmer vintages that I would put more of a Bordeaux winemaking cap on and then some of the other vintages I'd have more and more of a kind of Rhone vintage winemaking cap where maybe the wines may be a bit fleshy a bit fruitier, a little more kind of red raspberry on the nose. With the Bordeaux vintages you know, a bit more restrained and classic.

Fred Reno

Well, you know, I've been fortunate enough that Shannon Horton opened up their cellar to me and I've been able to go in there and buy some older vintages of Horton to put in my cellar. And in fact, I have wines going back to maybe even the early 1990s. And I recently had a bottle of 2010 which was just terrific. How good that wine was.

Mike Heny

Nice. Yeah, I don't doubt that at all. And yeah, of course we're talking about Norton in a dry winemaking context. Also, we'd always use a bit of Norton in the port. Norton works really well in the port context as well. Those wines instead of being able to age decades I see no problem in those wines aging centuries for sure.

Fred Reno

What was your reaction the first time you had a bottle of Norton that had let's say, five- or 10-years bottle age on it?

Mike Heny

It was always exciting to try an older bottle of Norton at Horton. The wines were so popular, and we made them at a price point that we were always getting them to market. So usually, people were drinking them when they're kind of younger and fruitier. Yeah, tasting well-made Norton with some age on it's a real winemaking pleasure.

Fred Reno

You know recently you produced a wine for the Homestead resort as part of their Homestead Collection and you blended about 25% Norton into what was primarily if I'm recall mostly Merlot dominated. I'm wondering about Norton as a blending grape and why more people don't try to use it. What's your thoughts about Norton as a blending grape and what does it add?

Mike Heny I really love Norton as a as a blending grape. Straight Norton on its own, you know, there's not a lot of natural tannin in Norton. So, it doesn't tend to have much body without either some kind of manipulation in the cellar or some blending. And what once you kind of break beyond that 75% varietal barrier, and you can kind of look at using Norton at 40% or 30% things get really interesting because you can bring mouthfeel from other grapes and maybe toned down a bit of that over-the-top kind of fruitiness that Norton brings. Yeah, I love making Norton in that blended context. We have a client that I'm excited to work with Woodbrook farm that's close to Montpelier. And they have Norton planted along with Petit Verdot. I'm really excited to work with those and look at the possibilities of blending a super-premium wine with Norton as a component but not as a varietal.

Fred Reno

You know, I often hear from a number of winemakers and also from people in the trade that Norton is sort of you, either love it or hate it. I think that's a little bit misunderstood. But where does that come from in your experience?

Mike Heny

Yeah, without a doubt, I'd say Norton is the most divisive grape grown in Virginia and it divides winemakers, unlike any other which is a shame. I would love to see what some of our super talented winemakers would do working with Norton. So yeah, I think what divides the waters is a poorly made Norton which can for sure turn people off. You know, if it's if it's not ripened properly, the acid can be too high, the body's too thin and then you've got this you know, weird fruity aroma. Yeah, I get that. Who wants to drink that? If you've had that experience with Norton, it can turn you off for sure. Norton can be tricky to keep Brettanomyces away from. So, if you've had a Brett Bomb in Norton, that's not a fun drinking experience either. So yeah, Norton requires special attention and care both in the vineyard and the cellar. But we're fortunate in Virginia and have a group of dedicated Norton producers making awesome Norton's.

Fred Reno

Well yeah, because it seemed like in some cases, people have said, well, I can just plant Norton in this part of the vineyard because it's going to be bulletproof. It's going to survive no matter what, now there seems to be a trend towards No, we need to handle Norton just as we handle any noble grape in the vineyard.

Mike Heny

I think Jenni McCloud really has kind of proven, you know, her investment in Norton both in the vineyard and I've had the great honor to work with some of that fruit and she is able to, produce Norton fruit that is definitely a world class fruit and they can make world class wine from, so yeah, I think she's proven that. Let's plant Norton, in our best sight, invest in taking proper care of it in the vineyard. And I think that the results show in the way she makes her wine for sure.

Fred Reno

What I find interesting, in my experience so far, with Norton is it can be made in an awful lot of different styles. And I see people making, in some cases, sparkling wine with it. You know, in the case, when you mentioned Jenny McCloud, she has something called Barrel Select that she makes with carbonic maceration. What is magical about the Norton is that it lends itself to a lot of different approaches, does it not for sure.

Mike Heny

Lke on its own, and Norton has a lot of color and, you know, super fruit fruitiness to it. High natural acidity. So yeah, I can see it working in Sparkling Wine.

Fred Reno

Well, we're not drinking Norton here this morning because it's too early for that but what do you think of this Chablis we are having? The acidity in this wine is so crisp and well knit within the flavor profile of the grape itself. That's pretty good.

Mike Heny

Yeah, not bad for a French wine. Chablis is a spiritual homeland a Chardonnay for sure. And definitely, thanks for sharing it.

Fred Reno

Norton is a tricky grape, obviously. But was it not planted or at least approached in Europe at one point?

Mike Heny

Ah Yeah, you have to ask Lucie about that one. If there's a renegade grower with Norton in the vineyard she's going to know. We did have a California producer working in Japan, who spent about a week with us at Horton a number of years ago, and he was looking at planting Norton in Japan. I'm not sure whatever became of that, but his thinking was like, well, it's hot in Japan there in the summer and it's quite, humid. So, if it does well here in Virginia. It can be hot and humid.

Fred Reno

That's very interesting. There is a Norton vineyard in California, in Yolo. County, they're in Clarksburg. Clark Smith, who you probably know, produces some Norton from it. I bought some of that and brought it back here. It was really quite good, but distinctly different than Virginia Norton.

Mike Heny

Wow. Yeah, West Coast Norton, that'd be interesting.

Fred Reno

Well, you know, and I find the same to be true when you taste, and you have bottles of Norton from Missouri. Virginia Norton is just different and more unique to me. There's a hardiness to it. Right. Yeah. Strength. Yeah, that seems to shine through on Norton. And again, if people have an opportunity to buy

a bottle and buy multiple bottles in order to cellar and taste them with some bottle age. I believe I've told you this before, but when I was interviewing Shep Rouse from Rockbridge Winery, back in the fall of 2021, when I first started my Podcast, at the end of the interview, he pulled out a bottle of his first, Norton, which was a 2002 Vintage. When I took a sip of that, I thought, oh my god, this is unbelievable. So, this is what happens to this grape when it gets decades of bottle age. It tasted just like an old BV Private Reserve I used to get from the '70s early in my career. It was so mellow and balanced and just remarkable. I was stunned by how good it was. That's what got my curiosity up about Norton after having that bottle of wine. He generously sold me a bottle. I still have in my cellar that one day, I'm going to open it. It now is 21 going on. 22-year-old Norton. So that'll be what I've always wanted to see how much more it will evolve. I've been trying to encourage Jenni at Chrysalis and some other Norton producers to bottle Norton in larger formats. I can't even imagine what that might taste like. Because you know this as winemaker, the larger format wines aged better and tastes different when they get some bottle age. Can you imagine a three-liter bottle of Norton 10 or more years from now? It would be something to enjoy and behold.

Mike Heny

All right Jenni hear that, bottle some 2023 Magnums.

Fred Reno

I tried to tell her that, because you just can't even imagine what that would be like. Probably fantastic. The other thing that intrigued me about Norton and I would love your comment on this. When I've talked to other wineries. Everybody seems to do something different. In the cellar. One of the vintners told me he ferments it hotter than any other grape he's ever used. Another one said this was counter intuitive but he would cold soak the Norton before pressing. And everybody seems to do something. something different to tame that malic acid in its youth. What would be your approach now that you know what you know, and even if you're not currently active producing Norton, as a winemaker. But if you actually got thrown into that opportunity, again, is your approaches sort of straightforward. What would you do? Would you experiment?

Mike Heny

Yeah so, I actually have a tiny bit of Norton I'm still working with and one of the sites is probably not a great site for Norton for making a dry red wine from it. It's just south of Winchester in Shenandoah Valley. So, with that site it really needs to have a warm dry vintage in order to get the grapes ripe enough to make a dry red out of it. If it's not, then it's a great vehicle for me for making ports and fortunately the client is kind of lit limber enough with it and with their marketing they leave it up to us whether to make a dry red or port out of it. I think it just really goes back to Norton can do wonderful things in Virginia, but it can't be planted everywhere it needs to be to be planted in appropriate sites and well cared for in terms of, you know, with the high malic acid the trick is just get it planted in the right place. Then make sure it gets ripe enough before bringing it through the door.

Fred Reno

If you make Port out of it, what do you use to fortified it.

Mike Heny

We use brandy to arrest the fermentation kind of partway through and keep some of the natural sugar to it. Then your high acid instead of being a detriment, it's a plus to get the wine balanced with the natural sugar.

Fred Reno

Well, I was going to ask if you miss producing Norton, but it sounds like you've got a little hand in the fire. We're still doing Norton. So

Mike Heny

yeah, I love if someone says, You can't you can't make a good wine on Norton then I'm like, Okay, let's give this a shot.

Fred Reno

On that note Michael, I want to thank you for coming in.

Mike Heny

Thanks Fred. Thanks for having me.

Fred Reno

I'm going to try to do my part to spread the word about Norton and get people really intellectually interested in Norton because I think they'll find it different, but yet unique and fun.

Mike Heny

Yeah, it's a unique thing to Virginia. It's not the only thing we do here but an important part of what we can do here and something you can't do anywhere else in the world. And that's kind of cool.