

# EPISODE #8 RAPPAHANNOCK CELLARS/ALL ABOUT VIRGINIA NORTON

## SPEAKERS

**Tom Kelly, Fred Reno, John Delmare, Steve Monson**

### **Fred Reno**

We're going to start with you, John. Why did you plant Norton when you started your vineyard in Rappahannock?

### **John Delmare**

Well, good question. You know, I came from California, a little winery and vineyard in California and my wife and I found ourselves moving to Virginia and we started looking around at what was being made here. I was a complete California wine snob, and I was pretty concerned about the depth, the color, the texture of the red wines in Virginia. Most of them, not all of them, were pretty challenged at the time. And you know, we learned later that was more winemaking technique, which has gotten immensely better over the years. But not knowing any better at the time I looked at Norton, oh my gosh, here's a big, deep, dark wine that has a lot of texture. This is going to be a great blending component with our other wines to bring forward that depth and texture. The first thing we learned after we started making wine with Norton was a little bit of Norton in anything tastes like Norton. And so, everything was turning into Norton's whether you wanted it to be or not, but Norton found a big home in our portfolio. Not in our blends, not just

because it's overwhelming, but with proper winemaking techniques. Those blends don't need it.

**Fred Reno**

I'm curious, you have a 30-acre vineyard. Correct? And you started planting in 1999. Yes. Where did you get your plant material originally for Norton?

**John Delmare**

So originally, we planted a single acre of Norton, and it came out of greenhouses near St. Louis.

**Fred Reno**

Okay, so they came out of Missouri.

**John Delmare**

Jenni McCloud was ordering some vines from the same place that year and we tagged on her order. We were kind of following her lead at the time. She was a little ahead of us in that regard.

**Fred Reno**

Well, she does have the largest Norton vineyard in the world. Tom, I have got to ask you a question. When did you start at Rappahannock?

**Tom Kelly** I started in 2004. That was my first introduction to Norton.

**Fred Reno**

Yeah, that was going to be my next question. Had you ever farmed Norton before? No. So what's the challenge with farming Norton versus other vinifera let's say.

### **Tom Kelly**

Far less challenges to farming Norton than other vinifera varieties. So, you know, it's funny, John and I were speaking in the car on the way up here that oftentimes, we feel like, Norton is sort of the poor stepchild in the vineyard, because it gets everything last. And my point to him was that we do it last because it will take it, you know, whereas the vinifera vines are much more fragile in what they will accept in terms of the timing and meticulous care that you have to give. But Norton stands up a little better to that. And so, we do it last because we can do it last. And it tolerates that. When it comes to canopy management spray programs, it requires a minimal spray program, which, obviously, I enjoy that. But when it comes to the canopy management and that sort of thing, I can push it off a little bit,

### **Fred Reno**

Are you on GDC? We are. Because I know that up at DuCard they went to a French Lyre system. And he had different results. So, Steve, what was your introduction to Norton?

### **Steve Monson**

I was born in Norton,

### **Fred Reno**

So, you're a Missouri boy.

### **Steve Monson**

I'm a Missouri boy. And that was the definition of high-quality red wine, as I got started in the industry, so I didn't know anything else. I started making wine and coordinating the tastings for the state competition with the university before I was legally allowed to drink. All of my tasting experience came from whatever I could scrounge and scavenge from kind of leftovers or, scientific experiments, quote, unquote. So really, I didn't have access to other types of wine. My parents aren't big wine drinkers. I remember anytime wine crossed my path as a kid. By the time you know, I was interested in wine and starting to pursue it as career Norton was the pinnacle. I then took a 12 year break before I circled back around and at Rappahannock now I am making it again.

**Fred Reno** What was your first vintage at Rappahannock?

**Steve Monson** This was the first vintage so it was my one year anniversary.

**Fred Reno**

You had the 2020 so did you finish that wine? Or bottle that wine?

**Steve Monson**

I bottled the 2021. I was the experimental winemaker at the University of Missouri. So, I vinted plenty of Norton as well. And then also had a chance to work with it in the vineyard. Obviously, not in a management role, but as a laborer. I'm pretty intimate with its growth habit, to say the least at this point.

**Fred Reno**

What's the challenge to producing Norton once Tom gets it to you and it gets into the cellar. How's it different from dealing with Cabernet Franc or some other typical vinifera?

### **Steve Monson**

Norton is very weird. It just doesn't follow any of the rules. So, it's got unfermentable sugars. You'll get your sugar at 23 bricks and think you've done a great job. And that's only going to get you 11% alcohol because then it'll only go to a density of zero instead of negative two. That's kind of always a bit of a shock. You have to really change your mindset when you're working with Norton. It's notoriously slimy. I think just basic winemaking practices. I haven't really run into too many issues with that. But you know, and then the big thing is that it's just a lot different when it comes to its coloring material it is just different compounds inside of it that hold proteins, doesn't hold tannins. It's just a strange wine that you have to attack balance from a different angle.

### **Fred Reno**

John, I'll ask you this question. I've got a little bit of a commercial question. I'm very curious. How is Norton introduced in your tasting room when your customers come in? And they may have never even had Norton before? How is it introduced to them and how do they respond?

### **John Delmare**

Well, it's been different over the years. When we first opened in 2001, to the public, a still wine made from Norton was a big part of our lineup. We told people what it was, of course, at the time, we thought it was a native grape and then realized it was actually a hybrid. But we talked about it being Virginia's native grape, and at that point, the sort of

hardcore Virginia wine drinkers had been exposed to Horton's Norton, and so there was a bit of a familiarity with it. But we found as time went on, and we weren't afraid to tell people that Norton was a very polarizing wine. And we felt like you know, either you love it, or you hate it, and there wasn't much in between with the customer base. I think over time as we have learned, different ways of making Norton, different uses for Norton, different ways of approaching Norton, that more and more people are finding themselves enjoying it. And it's, become much less of the love it or hate it. I think people in their minds, if they've been around Virginia wine a long time and had a lot of exposure to Norton, just because they've always hated it. They still hate it, but we'll get people to taste it more now. And they enjoy it.

### **Fred Reno**

I experienced that, coming from the outside myself. In fact, when I moved here, from California 2019, after 40 years in business, I'd never had a bottle of Norton in my life. I didn't even know what it was. But what I've discovered now over the course of four or five years, is if it's young, it has to be decanted. You just need to decant young Norton when you're serving it folks. When I started in the business, that's what we did. We decanted all of our classified growth Bordeaux's. But now that they make Napa Valley Cabernet in Bordeaux, you don't have to do that. It just jumps right out. It's an ancient practice, I guess, the key thing, but if you ever have the pleasure, I know you fellows probably have, of having a 10 or 15 plus year old Norton, it's a completely different animal. In fact, Tom, why don't you speak to us because you were just at this conference at the Virginia Vineyards Association where Shep Rouse pulled his 2004 out. What was that like?

**Tom Kelly** Yeah, it was funny. I mean, there was a lot of positive attributes to it, obviously. It was a fine wine and Shep has done a good job with his Norton program over the years, it definitely seemed like it tamed over time, and was much more approachable.

### **Fred Reno**

Steve, how do you handle that what we would call that inverse relationship between the Malic and Lactic acid

### **Steve Monson**

It varies from year to year. So you know, I think having every tool, but this is true for everything we do in Virginia is having all the tools available to you. That's what makes making wine here so exciting is that we can be Burgundy and Bordeaux. We can draw on techniques from across the world. And you definitely need all of them with Norton. In this year, I was lucky enough, which is a strange word, to have been making some Pinot Noir. And in Virginia, where the chemistry comes in completely out of left field, and you're just like, Ah, I don't even know how to start this. But it all kind of just comes together and works out. The same thing is true with Norton you need to have a plan but there is a way to get the wine to harmonize. So, specifically using a yeast that will degrade malic acid a little bit, just give you a little bit of a head start is a big one. And then I think you know the big thing is time on the vine. I'm not sure how I feel about time in the cellar. I think time on the vine seems like that's the universal that seems to pay dividends for us, especially this year.

### **Fred Reno**

So, Tom and John, you can chime in here too. Are you aware of this, what I don't want to call controversy, but there's a buzz going on right

now that Lucie Morton is trying to satisfy. Which is to say that Cynthiana is not Norton. It's a completely different grape. She's going through some, Steve, you may know this, there's some DNA sequencing going on with the head of the Extension Service, at the University of Missouri right now, to prove that theory. If that turns out to be the case, this will be a real game changer, because a very large majority of Virginia wineries, according to what she has seen, have Cynthiana interspersed in their vineyard with Norton.

### **John Delmare**

Yeah, I'm going to jump in before Tom does, because he can call me out on it. But I thought it was really intriguing when Lucie's hypothesis first came out, and we have two distinctly different blocks of, I'm going to use the words Norton. Our original block, as I mentioned, came from St. Louis, and it was on its own roots, it came green growing, that block was planted, and it's always been a little less vigorous. And then we planted, Tom will have to remind me maybe 10 years ago, or 12 years ago, we planted the second block, we got grafted vines onto grafted rootstock. And that has been a much more vigorous block. I can't say that we have kept them separate to be able to distinguish different taste profiles, but they certainly grow differently. So, Tom, I will let you chime in, could that be a difference between Cynthiana and Norton? Or is it just simply one's on rootstock and one's not?

**Tom Kelly** Yeah, well, it could be, there's a good chance of that. I just recently heard that Lucie was looking into that as well. So that's on my action item list now for 2024, once we have leaves on the vines to go out and start seeing if I can figure out the difference, if there is a difference, right between the blocks. And figure out which one is which



or if they're both one or the other. The difference in vigor is significant between the two blocks. Now, the block that we planted that's on rootstock is on a variety of different root stocks. And I don't see a difference between them. So, I've got some planted that one of them is 10114, and some on SO4, and 3309. And they're all pretty consistent throughout the block, there's no area of the block where you can say, well, this is much more vigorous than that. I do have some vines, where we extended some rows on the old block, that was all on its own roots. And that was on 5bb rootstock, which is notorious for being very high vigor. And it's not that much more vigorous. So, I think that the rootstock doesn't have a lot to do with it. It's kind of what I'm getting from it. I've planted on rootstock, and I planted it on its own roots. And on some sites, it does fantastically on its own roots and it's very vigorous. And on other sites, I've seen it planted on its own roots and has been small and weak. I have a feeling it's more soil and site related than it is rootstock.

## **Fred Reno**

That leads me to a different question. I was going to make a comment here. Shannon Horton and Sharon had listened to what Lucie said. In 2023, they kept a certain block of what was identified as Norton. And, another block that was identified as Cynthiana in their vineyard and kept them separate and vinified the wines separately. I was fortunate enough to have been given a half bottle of each taken right out of the tank back in November, December. Not sulphured or any other preservative. I just took them home, put in a refrigerator right away, and then I got to them that night. Then tasted them over a couple days. And there was clearly a difference in the wine profile. The Cynthiana was slightly if you want to say lighter in color, not a lot, slightly lighter in color. Definitely a bit more elegant at that stage. The Norton was this

brute right out of the bottle as you would expect. And then the next day, both of them obviously mellowed a little bit and I blended them, and the Cynthiana just toned down the Norton immediately. It made this cohesive blend with some elegance that really surprised me. There was definitely a difference in the taste profile. So, there's a challenge for you this year to vinify a small amount of each of those separately you can always blend them back and see what you have. It might be interesting. Again, this is an evolution of grape growing. But what you've made me think Tom was, and I think this it goes a little bit to this love it or hate it thing that I encountered when I came here to Virginia, for the longest time in Virginia, Norton seemed to be planted in the worst spots of the vineyard. Because it was like, it'll do fine there. Just put it there. It's bulletproof. It's not going to die. And what I realized too, in these podcast interviews is there's no discussion about Norton and terroir. All the discussion about Norton is about the varietal and every really terrific wine produced anywhere in the world there's this combination of discussion of the varietal and terroir and let me define what I call terroir. It's like a three-legged stool. Okay, there's basically the climatic condition that a grape is growing in which influences, obviously, clearly any grape or agricultural product no matter what it is. Then there's the soil and site selection, as well as exposure and all the things that go with that. And then there's the Hand of Man. And to me, that's what terroir is. How man fashions that terroir. And we don't have that discussion yet here in Virginia. But I think as we move forward and people start to take Norton, as seriously, as they take their vinifera, they might start to realize, hey, if I plant this in a better part of my vineyard, maybe I'm going to produce something more different than... John, you're going to chime in. But one more comment about that first. Jenni McCloud, sort of stumbled into this, because she has the largest vineyard planting of Norton in the world as she claims. And she's been

able to identify for over 20 plus years what the best blocks are in her vineyard. That's terroir, right?

### **John Delmare**

I was just going to jump in and raise my hand and say guilty as charged. When we planted our vineyard, we put the Norton in the least of our entire site. Now, it doesn't vary greatly across our site, but it's the lowest elevation, it's the thinnest soil. And we planted it on East /West rows, as opposed to North/South because it happened to fit the site better that way. It really was treated like the poor little orphan child. And so, as I said, guilty as charged there.

### **Fred Reno**

Okay.

### **Steve Monson**

If I could jump in a little bit, you know, winemaking is a very old practice, and vines were planted on the rocky hillside where you couldn't plant your wheat? I think that's kind of an interesting concept. Nortons hardiness in general, its disease resistant, obviously, different sites, different terroir, I think a lot of things should be planted in a variety of places, it gives the winemaker more options. But I wouldn't be tempted to say double down on that strength of Norton and keep putting it in some marginal places. Because that's where wines from a place eventually come from. I mean that's the history of everywhere else, and then eventually you decide if it's a high enough price product that we can put it in prime growing places. But I think that's what kind of shows what Norton can be from, you know, a native, endemic, grape species.

**Fred Reno**

That's an interesting perspective. I hadn't thought about it like that, Steve at all.

**Tom Kelly** You know, the other thing, too, is, it's sort of along those lines is that having developed some number of vineyards, over the years, there's always someplace on the property that doesn't suit anything else. People want to maximize the potential of their land. And so, when it's like, well, I've got this land over here, but gee, I can't plant Chardonnay in there. And I can't plant Cabernet Sauvignon in there. But what can I plant in there? And the answer might be not, I won't argue with the point that you know, being more intentional about it and putting it on the better part of your site might probably make a difference. But the fact that you can put Norton in places where you couldn't put anything else gives you the ability to maximize your land. And I suspect that there's a lot of people out there who have Norton, because they planted it in places where they could put it in, but might not have planted it otherwise.

**Fred Reno**

John, so Norton ties in a different thing here I picked up if I am correct, you are big on solar energy and what you're doing in the vineyard. Is that just PR, or is that true?

**John Delmare**

Well, we have a very large solar system panel system that produces all the power that we use at the winery so that's impressive.

**Fred Reno**

Yeah, that's impressive. Because Norton in and of itself, may be into sustainability. Unlike other grapes.

### **John Delmare**

Absolutely. Tom and I were talking about that on the way down here. Your inputs from vineyard perspective are a fraction of what we put into many of the other grapes. So, if you're looking at sustainability, you start from the ground up. And so, we started in the vineyard, everything from producing our own power to minimizing inputs into vineyard and across our operation. I think as an industry, worldwide as an industry, the wine industry is making a lot of efforts and progress towards sustainability. Certainly, from the other discussion we had all the way down here was this notion that, you know, we're all facing the changing climate, right, a year, like 2023, the climate change was to our advantage, it was a wonderful year, it was dry, it was warm, wasn't too hot, it wasn't too dry. And, you know, unfortunately, we looked at our Brethren out in British Columbia, who just suffered an enormous loss with subzero temperatures, and they lost 95% of their crop this coming year, and probably lost a lot of vines. So that's going to happen in Virginia, we're going to get the other side of that coin. And we are looking at things like Norton and several other hybrids as hopefully being our balancing act. How do we get through in those years when other grapes that are more susceptible and require a lot more input like the vinifera, Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc and so on, may not make it through, or may not make it through in a very positive way?

### **Fred Reno**

Well, you know, Bruce Zoecklein said that to me in my interview with him, he said, Well, if we have a couple of those Cold Clippers come through here, two years in a row in Virginia, people might be taking a

closer look at Norton, because it's going to survive it, as part of this, because climate change is undeniable. It's clear now what that really means in the long run I don't know. When you describe 2023 and I hear from other vintners it sounds like a California vintage to me.

### **John Delmare**

It was, you know, we can count those on nearly one hand in Virginia, at least over my tenure here. And so, it was a great year was a very west coast. I hate to say it's very California, like, but it was, I think the good news is we've had, you know, Steve mentioned having all these different tools in your tool that again, understanding techniques in Burgundy, and Bordeaux, but also California. Now that we've had five, or maybe this was our sixth vintage, we've learned how to deal with that vintage much better. You know, 2007 was the first one that most people would remember around here. And we did a lot of things wrong with the 2007 vintage, not just at Rappahannock, but across the industry. Our prayer that year was, Oh, God, please give us another 2007 We promise not to screw it up. So, I think over the years, we got the 2007, we got the 2010 and the '17 and the '19. And then we get to 2023. And now we've got some experience base to really take advantage of that vintage, but you know, Norton falls into that category of what happens when you have a couple of terrible back-to-back cold years, but also our other hybrid program. Tom, you can remind me it was a 2020. When we have our Frost 2020, 2021 we had a we had an early frost and Norton had not budded out yet, right. And it was protected. But our Seval all got completely frosted off. And of course, as we know, hybrids have the fruiting capability of the secondary buds is much greater. We have a record crop off of that block after having the initial primary buds all frosted off.

**Tom Kelly** Interestingly though, that was the same year, we had record crop with Norton. We had 8 tons an acre.

**Fred Reno**

That's amazing because I understand Norton is pretty shy bearing.

**Tom Kelly** That's, you know, we were talking about challenges. That's one of the challenges with Norton is that I find it to be fairly inconsistent, at least on our site. In terms of yield. We're up and down all over the place. And some years, I'll get little or nothing. And some years, like 2020 I mean, we've never had a crop like that before, but we've got 24 tons off three acres.

**Fred Reno**

Steve, how do you deal with this seed pocket that the Norton grape presents in the cellar?

**Steve Monson**

I guess it's kind of less of a concern than you would think. Norton structurally, is not set up to carry tannins. You're always going to, I don't want to say always, I think there's probably a way to get it real harsh, but as long as you're not grinding it up, it'll make a smooth wine. Yeah, which is an advantage. I mean, you know, I guess then the means we kind of treat it like we do in the vineyard of, I don't want to say it's an afterthought, but it kind of always plays second fiddle because we have a very prescribed plan for extraction levels, you know, on vinifera grapes, and with Norton, it's a little bit more laissez faire. You know, I think the results of that, essentially the time in tank to

get the extraction from the grape skins themselves. It gives you that Norton flavor. But after that, structurally, the wine is going to be what it's going to be more based on acid and sugar levels.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, Tom, let me ask you a bit more of a professional personal question here. You were selected as the Wine Grower or The Year for the Virginia Vineyards Association 2023. That must have been a surprise when you were awarded or did, they give you a heads up.

**Tom Kelly** Oh, they gave me a heads up. Yeah, when I was with the VVA, we used to try to surprise the grower every year. But it became such a challenge to try to assure that the grower was going to be there to receive the award. In fact, I had a terrible time trying to convince Jeff White to come to the meeting to give him his award. He kept saying I don't have time, I am busy in the vineyard, I got other things going on. And it was one excuse after another so finally I had to tell Jeff. So, after that, we kind of bailed on it. They gave me a heads up that it was coming. And you know, as much as that award is about rewarding people for being quality growers, it's also really about rewarding people for service in the industry. And having spent 10 years on the VVA Board, I kind of knew in the back of my mind that someday it was coming.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, somehow, it escaped me. But I just joined the VVA as a member. I've been a member of the Virginia Wineries Association since 2017, when I was still in California because I wanted to know what was going on. But somehow it always escaped me. And I finally realized, I



needed to be a member of the Virginia Vineyard Association. That's where it all begins. So, I sent them my money. And hopefully, they'll get to cash the check. I'm happy to support them. I mean again, my intellectual curiosity about wine, about vineyards, about growing grapes, is boundless. That's the beautiful thing about wine. You learn something new every day if your mind is open to it, right? Just like, wow, okay, that's happening. So, John, looking forward, what do you see for the future of Virginia wine at this point? What do you see happening? And finally, I mean, obviously, the Wine Enthusiast gave recognition to one area in Virginia. That's a start. But we have to build on that. What do you think? I mean, people just need to understand Virginia is the most exciting wine growing region in the country today hands down. The quality is on par with some of the best wines produced anywhere, not just in this country, but around the world.

### **John Delmare**

It's one of those things, we just have to keep doing what we're doing. And you know, the quality of Virginia wine has gotten better every year. And we've been in the industry now about 25 years, it continues to get better. Just as importantly, as you mentioned, the Wine Enthusiast recognizing the Charlottesville area, that's a rising tide floats all boats for all of us. Yes, do we wish it was our area of Virginia, but I think the bottom line is that people are now starting to finally except that Virginia makes fine wine. And we're no longer sort of a forgotten footnote to the wine industry. We are a prominent player in the wine industry. And so we need the quality to continue to grow. You know, the wineries that are making great wines don't have as much room for growth as some of the wineries who probably need to up their game a bit. But that's happening. And, when we first got here, we felt like 20% of wineries in the state were making really nice wine and 80% had a lot to improve

upon. And I think those numbers are reversed now. And this is 20/25 years later. And so, as an industry, we just need to keep doing a little better, keep spreading the word. In the last few years we have gotten a lot of recognition. So again, we're no longer the footnote, we're a prominent player in the world of wine. And we are still continuing to grow as an industry. You know, the whole worldwide industry right now is facing a little headwind, right. And we've all got to get over it and I'm sure this too, will pass. Again. I think we have to keep doing what we're doing and the state's done a really nice job of promoting the industry and it's finally taking hold.

### **Fred Reno**

I look at it from this perspective. I think the wine community all over needs to wake up and realize there's a neo-prohibitionist movement going on in the back yard. And wine has to get out there and separate itself from beer and liquor. When you look back at the history of prohibition, the producers of wine didn't think they were going to be included at all. Initially this was about getting drunk. It wasn't about the dining experience. And there's this Clarion cry right now that the young folks are not drinking wine. They're choosing other beverages of alcoholic substance. Well, part of this, I think, is because how I got introduced the wine was the traditional way, it's a dining experience, it was over dinner with a meal. And the younger generation, for the most part, doesn't dine anymore, everybody's eating on the run. They are doing this without that dining experience without connecting wine as part of a wider experience. And I think we really got to do a better job of getting back to that and preaching that to people because otherwise, we can wake up one day and be surprised, once again. And that would be a travesty. In my opinion it can happen. But back to Virginia, my viewpoint. It's the diversity of Virginia that drew me here, as far as

when I tell people who don't know anything about Virginia in the wine industry that I've known. We have to think about Virginia like France, or Italy. France, for example. They don't grow Pinot Noir in Bordeaux, and they don't grow Cabernet Sauvignon in Burgundy. And for good reason. Well, there's just certain parts of Virginia that certain varietals do better than other parts of Virginia. And there's that diversity that needs to be explored and understood. That is what attracted me to Virginia was that diversity? You can take Viognier from one part of the state and Viognier from another, and they have a completely different flavor profile. That's the beauty of it. It's not homogenized. It's got as I was quoted in one press article as saying, "Virginia Wine has Soul". It still has soul. And I believe that there's a sense of place when you taste Virginia wine and to that diversity Norton has its place. Absolutely. And it is a standout place for Virginia because it is Virginia's grape. Undeniably thanks to Todd Kliman and his book the Wild Vine and doing the research and documenting it all.

### **John Delmare**

So, there is something definitely to be said, for the dispelling the notion that you have to be all things to all people. We have a wide variety of grapes that will grow well here. Not every grape will grow well here, we need to not try to put the round peg in the square hole. We have a lot of diversity and a lot of variety. And we need to focus on those things that do best here. I think that's a really important path to be on.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, on that note, gentlemen, I'm going to say thank you. I'm super delighted to get you here in my studio. We're going to finish this bottle of Meursault at some point and carry on. But thanks.

**John Delmare, Steve Monson, Tom Kelly** Thanks for having us.