

## **EPISODE # 10 BARREL OAK WINERY/JEREMY LIGON**

### **SPEAKERS**

Fred Reno, Jeremy Ligon

#### **Fred Reno**

Jeremy, welcome to my podcast this morning.

#### **Jeremy Ligon**

Hey, Fred. Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here, excited to talk about Norton and talk about Barrel Oak and some of the fun things we're doing with Norton. So, thanks for having me here.

#### **Fred Reno**

So let me start at the beginning. What's your story? How did you get into winemaking and wine growing?

#### **Jeremy Ligon**

Well, my family started a vineyard in Southern Virginia, when I was 14 years old, and I usually joke with the customers that they've made me work on it, which is a little bit true sometimes, but definitely spent a lot of time out there working in the vineyards as a teenager. That's what kind of got me going in this business. When I was in school, I decided I wanted to study winemaking and an Enology. And we actually talked to Bruce Zoecklein. He had written that book with Kenneth Fugelsang, the wine analysis and production book that most all of us still use to this day, and he said, If you want to be a winemaker, go to Fresno State. He said, If you want to work on developing yeast and work in a

laboratory, go to UC Davis and at that time, you know, a long time ago, UC Davis and Fresno State were the only two programs in the United States. Now there's a lot more options. But for me, Fresno State was, you know, a great experience. We had a 100 acre vineyard right there on campus. We had a 15,000-case winery on campus, and I could go learn in the classroom and go right into the winery and set that filter up or pump and do whatever you got to do and be hands on. So, it's definitely a great learning experience.

### **Fred Reno**

Fresno State wasn't that where Bruce was teaching before he got kidnapped and brought to Virginia,

### **Jeremy Ligon**

I believe so but I was fortunate enough to be under Kenneth Fuglesang who wrote that book with Bruce Zoecklein, the Wine Analysis and Production. Bruce was more the chemistry guy where Fuglesang was more than microbiology guy, but I was fortunate enough to be under him. And really, he took me under his wing and was a mentor to me. And it was nice to have that asset to learn from.

### **Fred Reno**

So, when you moved back to Virginia, what was your first winemaking gig here in Virginia, other than what your parents made you do?

### **Jeremy Ligon**

That's a good question. Along the way I helped my parents a lot and we were making some wines in Southern Virginia, they still are, Hunting Creek Vineyard. If you're down there, please check it out. They will treat you so nice, but we're way off the beaten path down

there. But my mom will probably give you the tasting herself. If you show up and she may not let you leave, you may still be there for dinner. So please check it out if you're down there. But when I came back, you know, I'm from Virginia, I'm a Virginia boy. I've got family all over Virginia. The plan was always to take that knowledge and experience that we gained from California and bring it back to Virginia and use it to help elevate the wines here as well. So, when I came back, it's 2012. I took on the winemaker position at Phillip Carter winery up there in Hume in Faulkner County and I was fortunate enough to work with Matthieu Finot. He was a consultant there at the time. It was a learning experience for me to go you know, from volunteer work for some amazing winemakers in California to coming back to the east coast and being able to work at Philip Carter's place with its rich in history and making some wines there.

### **Fred Reno**

Were they making Norton there? I know they made some Norton off and on at times.

### **Jeremy Ligon**

We did. Funny you should ask that because it was my very first experience with Norton as a producer was at Philip Carter, vintage was 2014. We were really happy with it. I was very happy with it when I left. I did leave Philip Carter in 2015. So, I did not get to see that wine all the way to bottle but very happy with it. We put it in some new heavy toast, deep toast American oak, which for the grapes that we got worked really well and softening the North grapes. Those grapes, I believe were from Chrysalis. That was my first experience as a producer with Norton. Let's

## **Fred Reno**

Let's dive into that. And so here you are. You've never touched Norton probably before in your career at that point. What surprised you?

## **Jeremy Ligon**

Well, you know, well, I'll turn the dial back just a little bit more and I'll say my first experience having Norton was at Chrysalis which is for most a lot of people in Virginia how they first experience it. But while I was in school at Fresno State over the summer, visited home, and former graduate of Fresno State by the name of Curtis I can't remember his last name was the winemaker at Chrysalis around 2009 2010, somewhere around there. So, we visited Jason at Chateau O'Brien in Northern Virginia, and other different places. And we stopped by Chrysalis because I wanted to say hey, I'd never met Curtis, but he was a Fresno graduate, I'm a Fresno graduate, let's link up. And that was my first experience with Norton. You know, I had it before, but at that point getting so into wine, it really smacked me in the face. I was like, what is this? What's going on here? Right? And it was different. It was cool. And it was, it was puzzling, like, how can we figure this out? And four or five years later being able to process it, you know, I did some research and obviously went back to Chrysalis, tasted all through their Norton's and gained some more knowledge and perspective. We went with how we were going to make that wine and we were pretty happy with the way it turned out. Like I said, I didn't get to see it all the way to bottle but it was definitely fun.

## **Fred Reno**

I understand Norton is, unlike other grapes, especially vinifera It's like a seed pocket.

**Jeremy Ligon** It is, you know, that was one learning curve that you definitely figured out that first time processing Norton, because all of your machinery is set up for vinifera grapes, right? All of the equipment, it's made in Italy, it's made in Germany, it's set up for the vinifera grapes, it's not set up for Norton. Most of them don't have a Norton program. And so, Norton has so much pulp, it's so thick. So, first time we're running it into the press, all of a sudden, no juice is coming out and no air is coming out. And all the slots are just gunked up with that pulp from Norton and you go, Oh, God, this is another beast, right? And so that's what I learned, I got to make my own press cycle. For this, I got to do it manually. We need to start developing ways to process that grape differently so that you aren't gunking up your machines, but it is definitely a different beast. I Always said Norton fights back. And I don't mean that in a bad way. But like I said, you have to develop your own way of processing it to where, if you don't roll it around enough in the press, it's going to gunk it up. If you don't step down on your filtration system, and you go too hard, you're going to clog them up. You always have got to be on top of it and treat it like it is. Treat it like a Norton,

### **Fred Reno**

How did you end up at Barrel Oak?

### **Jeremy Ligon**

Sure. So, I was at Philip Carter winery, and things are going great. Some publication came out saying I was the number one up and coming winemaker in 2014, to kind of keep your eye on and then I had I had an interesting opportunity to move to Creeks Edge Winery in Northern Virginia which was a brand-new winery in 2015 in Loudoun County. I enjoyed my time there. Beautiful place, but at both Philip

Carter winery and at Creeks Edge winery after being there for about a year as the winemaker, vineyard manager. I was promoted. I'll put that in quotations as the GM as well. And when you try and do all three I found I was getting away from what I love, my passion, which is winemaking and vineyard growing and it was like, we need to do more weddings, we need to do this and I just said I'm not that guy, you know. I am a wine production guy, we're not good at talking to people and selling weddings. I was kind of getting away from what I wanted and when the opportunity came up at Barrel Oak, you know, I was familiar with that area from being at Philip Carter, and I'm familiar with Barrel Oak and we have grapes on a premium site. I mean, we're right there in the Middleburg AVA, rolling hills and mountains. What a great elevation. We've got great terroir. And that's initially what drew me I said, Well, okay, this is the place. And I said, Well, this place is making so much wine there's no way they're going to ask me to be the GM too, right? I put in my letter to say I am not doing that. But as a vineyard manager and making 15,000 cases of wine it is definitely a full-time gig there.

### **Fred Reno**

Any idea because I can't find in my research, who was the consultant for the original owners to plant that site?

### **Jeremy Ligon**

I don't know exactly who the consultant was. You know, when Brian and Sharon started the winery, I know they were working very closely with Jim from Delaplane. He was the owner of Delaplane Cellars. He was helping them out a lot. And I know Sharon actually did volunteer for Jim Law a lot as well in the early years just to gain some knowledge

on winemaking and vineyard growing as well. They definitely had some research and people in the area that were giving them a hand.

### **Fred Reno**

I was just curious who that was or why they planted Norton. How much Norton do you have in the vineyard?

### **Jeremy Ligon**

We've got about five acres. I'll tell you something interesting about the Norton that we grow. So, the Norton is attached to our site, but it's not technically our land. It is the land next to us, which is the Oak Hill plantation. It was a delegate, John Marshall, who lived there, John Marshall, the delegate, and I believe it was John Marshall's brother-in-law's daughter that married Dr. Norton. There's a connection there to Dr. Norton. And so, what we did at the winery was we wanted to lease that land in front of Oak Hill. Supposedly Dr. Norton lived there for a short period of time in his life and grow Norton on that hill to pay homage.

### **Fred Reno**

That is fantastic. I remember reading about that. I'm glad you brought that up, Jeremy. That's great history.

### **Jeremy Ligon**

So, our Norton's not a throwaway site, you know a lot of times people put it in the low parts of their fields or whatever. It is a beautiful site for Norton. It's a nice rolling hill, and at about 600 ft. elevation. And it's grown, possibly, where Dr. Norton lived for a number of years.

## **Fred Reno**

Well, I know you brought it up. That's one of the things I'm starting to really hone in about Norton, as I developed this. We talk about Norton, here in Virginia as a varietal we never talk about in terms of terroir, and all the really terrific wines in the world there's a terroir story associated with them of some kind, right? And I think the reason is what you just touched on is the majority of the vineyards that were planted to Norton in Virginia for the longest time, were just, they were put in the worst sites because it was told that was bulletproof and it was going to survive no matter what you did to it. So now that explains why I like your wine. So much of what I've tasted from that site, although I haven't tasted your particular wines yet. I'm looking forward to that. But there's a sense of terroir, a sense of place to the wine that I've tasted from Barrel Oak, as far as Norton is concerned, there's this sense of place.

## **Jeremy Ligon**

Absolutely. Especially over there in front of Oak Hill plantation. It's a little chalky, it's definitely Rocky. But of course, you've got the rich soil in there as well. And we grow it on basically a double high wire. So, one vine being on both sides, so we're really spreading it out because it's very vigorous on our site. What's great about it is we get these big leaves, and everything spread out, but uptake is not nearly as much as our other vines. We're not having to spray it nearly as much on our other vines. The Norton spray programs are cut in half compared to our, you know, Cab Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, and those varietals of that nature. So, you can really see how it was made to grow in this area. It's native, right? It's something like you said, bulletproof. I am a bit scared to say bulletproof because it's not out of the frost zone yet, but it's a very hardy grape.



**Fred Reno**

As Bruce Zoecklein said to me, Fred, if we get a couple more of those Winter Clippers coming through here, I think people are going to start taking a look at Norton as a grape they should be growing here in Virginia.

**Jeremy Ligon**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Fred Reno**

It belongs here. Well, we're not drinking Norton here today, folks. We're having a little bit of 2020 Premier Cru Chablis, it's a really nice breakfast drink. What do you think, Jeremy?

**Jeremy Ligon**

Yeah, it's excellent. I love the nose. It's got a nice orange blossom on the nose. Subtle hints of pear and then great acidity and just easy to drink, which is nice.

**Fred Reno**

It's delicious folks, sorry you can't be here to join us. It's delicious. Well, the Norton story is compelling. That is really a great connection there. What's the first vintage you yourself at Barrel Oak will have crafted with Norton?

**Jeremy Ligon**

I came in July 2021 right before the July harvest, basically. And I didn't bring in my '21 today because they're not quite ready to drink yet. I bottled them back around August and I tried it and it's just not ready. I

didn't want to give you something that wasn't quite ready yet, but I am excited about my first year and we did two different styles of Norton. We did one that was true to showcase Norton, right? We wanted to have all those Norton smells, and Norton flavors and if you've had Norton, you know exactly what I'm talking about. And if you haven't, you're like what is this guy talking about? But yeah, that's it. That's why you should try it. And then we did one in 2021 completely opposite that I treated much like a Bordeaux style wine. For that Bordeaux style wine fermented it actually with some oak. Added some tannins in there using the traditional Bordeaux style yeast. And then for that one, that's our traditional Norton was let it shine through some neutral barrels, we also use some Virginia oak for that as well, that we age it in. And then no really big additions or manipulations on that wine just really let the Norton grape shine. We do have a yeast that we like to use for that that's better for processing malic acid, because as you probably know, Norton is so high in malic acid, and if you don't get that process through, then your wine is going to be very acidic at the end, over acidic and you want to calm that acid down I believe in Norton as much as you can.

### **Fred Reno**

I've found that some people have used carbonic maceration on their Norton to do that with the Malic Acid.

### **Jeremy Ligon**

Yes, I had the carbonic maceration Norton from Chrysalis that they did. It was amazing. It was so good. That is something that we'll try in the future, we actually just finally got set up to where we have some tanks that we can actually do red wine ferments in that we haven't really had the capability of until 2023. And so being able to do some fun stuff like

carbonic maceration, and things of that nature are becoming more accessible to us as far as our production area, which is pretty neat.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, the challenge I'd put to all the vintners I talked to who produce Norton, I say, who's going to be the first to finally put Norton in a larger size bottle.

### **Jeremy Ligon**

I'd say I'm doing some weird stuff with Norton this year that you might think is interesting. It stemmed from this conversation I had with a Master Sommelier. We were going through my wines and going back and forth, and he asked me the weirdest question. He said, "Do you have any wines with VA? And I said, on purpose? He said, Yeah. And then he's like, do you have any cloudy wines? He's like, you know, people want something different. People, especially coming to my restaurant. (Fred says, "they want bad wine") I wasn't going to be rude. But, you know, I get what he's saying, people are getting bored by some of the traditional, they don't just want a great Cab Sauv or a great Viognier, which I think I'm giving them good stuff. They want now just something different. So that kind of helped spawn this idea that came into fruition during the winemaking season. We had about three more tons of Norton than I really expected. We ended up doing a sparkling Norton out of that wine, and we broke all the sparkling rules, we didn't harvest it early, you know, we harvested more normal, closer to about 24 bricks, and we ferment it, ice cold, we did a traditional press program for a sparkling wine. And then when we put it into the tank, we put it in in the tightest tank, it's very tall and skinny. And what we're trying to do is concentrate the smells. And the idea was, at some point during the fermentation of Norton, it smells like pink bubblegum.

So, I said, what we're going to do is to try and harness the smell and keep it and make a very light sparkling Norton that we stopped at about two and a half percent residual sugar. And so that actually keeps the alcohol down and then kind of puts you closer to Spumante, a little bit sweet, sparkling wine but then try to really harness the pink bubblegum smell because it's weird and fun. And I said, Hey, you want something fun? Let's get weird, right? So, we're trying something fun, and it's different and I'm excited for people to try it. We have racked this wine so many times to keep it clean, clean, clean. So that's a neat thing that we're doing with Norton this year. And then the other thing that we're doing with Norton this year is we're making a port wine out of it. And we actually let those grapes hang and this is the first time I've done port wine with Norton. I did my research and made the decision last spring that this is what we were going to do. I was so lucky that the 2023 growing season was perfect. And we just let those grapes hang and they got up to 28 and a half bricks naturally on the vine before we harvested the ones for the Port so that was great. We fermented that wine and what we did was we saved about 250 gallons that was just juice that was nice at 28 and a half bricks and we put that in right at the end of fermentation so that we hit our marks about 19% alcohol and about 5% residual sugar before we go into barrels and we used barrels from Bowman distillery in Fredericksburg, Virginia, so we keep it all Virginia.

### **Fred Reno**

So, it's all Norton and no fortification.

### **Jeremy Ligon**

Not in this, there's no fortification in this. You know, a few years ago, people started kind of boosting up their grapes to try to get, you know,

33,32 brick level started and then you can ferment it down to about five bricks and stop the fermentation. So, that will get you about 19% Alcohol. This year, we didn't do it with a high proof Brandy addition, we did it more with our natural sugars.

### **Fred Reno**

Okay, so now that you're working in the vineyard for several years with Norton, again, what are the biggest challenges on an ongoing basis to grow Norton, produce Norton, because you start to see vintage variations? What kind of challenges do you see?

### **Jeremy Ligon**

You know, every year on the growing side, it's a jungle in the Norton vineyard, right. Managing those five acres is more labor some, as far as when you're in there thinning out leaves and your harvesting. And it's going to take a lot more time than, you know, running our VSP and doing our Chardonnay and stuff like that. As far as managing it takes a little more time. But it's neat to see the difference from year to year, and just the different sites from having Norton at my place. And then having Norton at Jenni's place and figuring out those different intricacies of what we can do with Norton at our place to make it the best possible and really elevate it to a great wine. And it already makes a great wine. So now what can we do with it to put out something really cool. I've now had three vintages at our farm with it and am getting to know our grapes better and better each year. I'm looking forward to the future with it. I think trying not to make it something that it's not. Try to make it what it is, and really elevate the flavors that are in that wine and not trying to mask it into something else is probably going to be I think the way to do it.

**Fred Reno**

You just touched on this a couple of different times in your conversation here about terroir, which is interesting, because as I said before, most people just talk about Norton as a varietal. But we have to start talking about site differences and different techniques and all the things that are associated with terroir, the hand of man, climate, site, all that.

**Jeremy Ligon**

Right. I guess that for us, we put it on one of our best sites, it's a good drainage site, it's got tons of airflow.

**Fred Reno**

What are your average yields per acre?

**Jeremy Ligon**

Off of our Norton, we're getting close to about three to three and a half tons. We don't really try to go too high on any of our grapes. The Norton we have, we traditionally made two of them in the past, you know, two different offerings of Norton, two different styles. We're getting closer to making more like one style that we really like, and then maybe doing some fun stuff like the port that we're doing.

**Fred Reno**

That makes sense. You basically have a signature wine, and then you have these kinds of projects. Right,

**Jeremy Ligon**

Right try some different things out, you know, and that's what's fun about Norton. And because we're still figuring it out, I don't think there's

a definition out there to say, this is what I expect Norton to taste like. Like when you have a barrel Chardonnay, you have expectations when you have a Cabernet Sauvignon, you have expectations. Where with Norton, I don't think there's a full expectation yet of hey, this is exactly what this one needs to be as we're still figuring out different ways to make really nice Norton.

### **Fred Reno**

I'm not going to assume this. So, have you read the Wild Vine by Todd Kliman?

### **Jeremy Ligon**

I'm about halfway through it. I haven't finished it. I've got three young kids. My reading time is limited. I read a lot of kid's books at night. But, yeah, I'm about halfway through and it's really cool. It's cool to read about Jenni. It's like, Hey, I know this person. Like I said, I know Virginia. Boy, I've got family all over the state and to be able to read about the history and relentlessness some of these guys had to not give up on trying to do viticulture in Virginia, and really the pioneers that were just trial and error, not give up it's just inspiring to read about and I'm excited to finish in the book, but I haven't quite got there yet.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, you touched on something else that's become interesting to me. And that's this whole history. I don't think people understand in the business, the trade, let alone the consumer. The history of winegrowing of Virginia goes all the way back to the early 1600s When it was required. I mean, acte12 was legislated by the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1619 which said if you were a male landholder you have to plant 10 vines for future wine cultivation. And then Prohibition

completely wiped out all the winegrowing on the East coast. Weird thing about that vineyard acreage grew in California as a result of prohibition because there was a demand for grapes back here for home winemaking which was legal. So, vineyard acreage actually grew. But I'd stumbled on a fact, I didn't realize when it comes to prohibition, we were really ahead of it here in Virginia, because we were the second state in the country to pass a prohibition law before it became a Federal law back in 1914. Virginia went dry. Yeah, it was prohibition before 1919. It was like, unbelievable, you know, and so to see where we are today, the most exciting wine growing region in the country, in my opinion, there's no question about that. What's happening in Virginia is so exciting. The diversity here is so great. As I always say to people, you need to think about Virginia, like you think about France or Italy, like in France, they don't grow Pinot Noir in Bordeaux, and they don't grow Cabernet Sauvignon in Burgundy. There's a reason. And that's kind of Virginia, you see that diversity about different grapes do better in certain parts of the state?

### **Jeremy Ligon**

Yes, absolutely. I mean, you see it, especially in Virginia, where I have a tough time finding merlot in Northern Virginia and we had some at Barrel Oak, but it had to be ripped out for red blotch. And then, of course, it does great in Southern and Central Virginia. And so, getting everyone to spread the word and knowing what grows best where. I teach a wine pairing class, it's kind of what you what you said, and always say, you know, people say, Well, how do I choose wine from the store? I never know what to do. Just get the one that grows best in that region, and you won't be disappointed. Let's not get too cute or too fancy. And then I think in Virginia, we're still shaping that right. You know, 20 years ago, it was Viognier is Virginias' grape. And I think a lot



of us are finding that it's very site specific. And, it grows great on some sites and other sites, it bears no fruit at all. And so, it would be hard to call that Virginia's grape, right? Like you said, we're learning and we're figuring out and a lot of it too is working with the media to educate consumers. Just like Norton, you know, some folks say I've never heard of Norton and then Vidal Blanc and all these amazing grapes that we have. People just don't know. They come in the tasting room all the time. They go, I don't need to try your Chardonnay, I don't like Chardonnay. I go, Whoa, have you ever tried Chardonnay from Virginia? Well, no. Well, let's try some, you know, this is all across the country. Right. It's education.

### **Fred Reno**

I'll tell you my story about Barrel Oak. When Marie Levitt, the sales manager contacted me, it had to be three, four years ago because she got wind of the Homestead program and wanted to meet with me and taste wine. So, she did, and I was like, well, the wines are okay. But I wasn't wowed by them. Then she left Barrel Oak for a while and came back. We reconnected and I went to Barrel Oak to see the vineyard and winery myself and I tasted the wines that you had produced. I said there's something going on here. These wines are way better. Way better. And I'm not a big fan. Really. Honestly, of Vidal Blanc. Your Vidal Blanc is sensational.

### **Jeremy Ligon**

Well, I appreciate you saying that. Thank you.

### **Fred Reno**

I was like wow; I want a bottle or two of this wine to take with me.

## **Jeremy Ligon**

It's funny. When I came back to Virginia in 2012, a lot of winemakers, still would poopoo Vidal Blanc and we were producing at Philip Carter so I was urged to make the best one possible and it went from you know, a wine that was hard to get smells and things that up to now we developed a way which is so tropical and so nice. The hard thing on the sales side is to put a bottle of a Vidal Blanc in front of you. And I'll put another bottle in front of you that is called Jeremy's white and they're both Vidal Blanc, you're going to go I love that Jeremy's white. I want more of that and it is the same wine. I just called it something different. The Vidal Blanc might put you off or whatever, but I appreciate you say that about my wines as Barrel Oak. A lot of my '21 red wines, the big Reds, have not come out yet. They're still under bottle shock. We've got some great white wines out and we've got some reds that we're pouring that are very nice and definitely encourage people to come out and try it as we're as we're moving and elevating things as we move forward.

## **Fred Reno**

Well, I know it's not Norton but another grape of interest to me when it's made correctly here in Virginia is Chambourcin. And in fact, a blend of Chambourcin and Norton that one winery did was unbelievably sensational. When I told Todd Kliman about it, the author of Wild Vine, he said, Fred, those two grapes were made to go together. What's your Chambourcin like?

## **Jeremy Ligon**

That grape is a workhorse for me, as I've done a lot of different things with it, and it grows so well on our site and it's easy to get. We use Chambourcin for a few different things. I use it for Rose. And my

favorite grape to make Rose out of is Merlot, but I just don't get enough of it. If I get really good merlot I'm making red wine. We go Chambourcin press straight off the skin where I'm actually getting pink juice coming right from the skins. And we're taking some Vidal Blanc juice, and this year we changed it to Seyval Blanc juice because the Vidal Blanc kind of makes the mouthfeel a little heavier than I'd like and the Seval keeps it a little lighter and crisper and will blend about 60% of the Chambourcin juice with 40% Vidal Blanc juice fill up a tank and let it cold soak for two weeks. That juice is perfectly pink and crystal clear before we even begin fermentation. And then we make a very purposeful Rose and I'm making it of these hybrid grapes where we do a traditional French style, it's bone dry, it's light, it's crisp, it's easy to drink, and Chambourcin works great for that. But then on the other end, I've made port out of Chambourcin which works great. Our Bowhaus Red which is kind of our easy drinking flagship wine. It's a good summertime red. I have folks that are new to red wines and don't want the big heavy stuff. It's super easy to drink. So, we'll do some Chambourcin in that and blend a little Cab Franc in that as well just to beef it up a little bit.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, Jeremy, I'm going to say thank you for coming to my studio today and sitting for this interview. This has been delightful and enlightening but so, thank you.

### **Jeremy Ligon**

Thank you, Fred. I appreciate you having me.