

EPISODE # 9 ALL ABOUT VIRGINIA NORTON/HORTON CELLARS

SPEAKERS

Shannon Horton, Fred Reno, Sharon Horton

Fred Reno

Well, the first question is really simple, Sharon, What prompted Dennis to think that he should go back to Missouri get cuttings of Norton and plant them in Virginia? What prompted that?

Sharon Horton

Well, both of us are from Missouri and he was from Hermann, Missouri, and Stone Hill was his backyard. He said that Norton came from Virginia. So, it was a no brainer. We had to bring it back. That was his quote, exactly.

Fred Reno

What year was that?

Sharon Horton

I think our first Norton was planted in 1989. So, we had to be back there I think in '87, he was thinking about it.

Fred Reno

Okay. And is this the vineyard that Mike Heny mentioned called Berry Hill?

Sharon Horton

Yes, That's the only place that we have Norton planted.

Fred Reno

And that's where I met you originally. A couple of years ago. I believe.

Sharon Horton

Yes, it was.

Fred Reno

So how many acres of Norton do you have planted?

Sharon Horton

We have 10 acres.

Fred Reno

You've been farming Norton now for 35 years?

Sharon Horton

I would say yes.

Fred Reno

That's got to be the longest obviously of anybody here in Virginia. I would think.

Sharon Horton

We were the first to bring it back since prohibition.

Fred Reno

So, what's it like farming Norton, versus the traditional vinifera?

Sharon Horton

Well, I'm sure you've probably heard from other people, it takes a lot less sprays. And it's kind of can get wild on you. We do have it on the GDC trellis system, which we were told by Stone Hill from Missouri that that was the best way to grow it. So, we have the divided canopy, and it does want to trail down. It has very big leaves, and has a very small little cluster, about the size of your fist. I have been told it's a seed pocket. Yes. And it has about seven or eight seeds and each little berry.

Fred Reno

What kind of average yield do you get?

Sharon Horton

Your average yield for me is four tons per acre.

Fred Reno

Okay, that's healthy.

Sharon Horton

One year here we had seven and a half tons per acre, but I think that was blown off the chart. It's hard to do that every year since.

Fred Reno

So, Shannon, when did you finally you know, realize, Hey, we got something really interesting here. People are talking about this Norton.

Shannon Horton

I don't know, I guess when I was a kid. I mean, we just always had Norton around the house. My introduction to the winery was slow and was more in the tasting room itself. And the appreciation for the product that was produced more than and marketing that product more than being in the cellar. So, it was around 2014, 2015 that I got really down in the cellar.

Fred Reno

Let's talk about that a little bit because I'm really interested in that. So, in the tasting room, obviously, you were the first to have Norton here in Virginia. What was the reception like when it was first introduced to customers? What did they think, how did they react?

Shannon Horton

We do have a very loyal following of people that are diehard Norton fans, and they come for the Norton, and they look for the Norton and they seek it out. And then there are people that you can convert, it's really neat to do because of the profile of the wine and the acidity off the wine and the big, deep cherry notes on it, to work with people with pairings, because sometimes they wouldn't sit and drink Norton alone, but if they have it with a particular pairing, then they really start to open up about the wine.

Fred Reno

Sharon so '89 was the first vintage?

Sharon Horton

No that's when we put it in the ground.

Fred Reno

What was the first vintage?

Sharon Horton

It had to be three to four years later because Norton really doesn't want to crop until the third year even though we had irrigation and we had it up on the vines and canopy was looking good. It just seemed not to want to do anything much.

Fred Reno

Was Alan Kinne, the winemaker then?

Sharon Horton Yes, he was.

Sharon Horton

He was with Dad.

Fred Reno

So, he was a consultant.

Sharon Horton

Yes.

Fred Reno

Did he have any experience with Norton. Do you know?

Sharon Horton

Absolutely not. And he will tell you that. There were several of our winemakers who never had any experience with Norton. So, I think they had to go along with Dennis's guidelines.

Shannon Horton

I think the first vintage is 1992. Yes.

Fred Reno

I'm curious. What was it like when all of a sudden people started talking about it? And coined it Horton's Norton.

Sharon Horton

I guess because it rhymed. That used to be like Morton Norton. I think Lucie came by and talked to Dennis a lot about it too. She loves Norton. She was so happy to see that it came back to Virginia.

Fred Reno

Oh, well, as long as you brought up Lucie, I want to bring up then and talk about somewhat, I wouldn't call controversy, but what's brewing up here about the difference between Cynthiana and the difference between Norton and of course, you're at the forefront here because you vinted some separately in 2023. And I had the real good pleasure and honor of being given a half bottle of each right out of your tank. So, you were listening to Lucie, what do you think?

Sharon Horton

She came to the vineyard, and we marked off certain rows that I knew was probably not the real Norton because we had replanted eight rows. We've taken eight rows out and replanted and got those vines from a nursery that Lucie was convinced was Cynthiana not Norton. So, she has done filming there and she has done a lot of research, and the leaves are somewhat different. And the petioles are, and the clusters are different too. So, we kept it separate. Caitlin, our

winemaker has kept it separate in the cellar so far. Okay, and there is a different taste. I think Cynthiana isn't as wild of a taste as you're going to get from Norton.

Fred Reno

I was going to tell you my experience was very simple. There was no question there was a difference in the two wines right out of the bottle. The Cynthiana was itself being a bit more elegant. And the Norton coming out as this brute. But as they really started to emerge the next day the wine that I left I blended them. That Cynthiana calmed the Norton right down. Shannon, Have you tasted one recently at all?

Shannon Horton

I think in the last couple of weeks we have, but it's still showing those two profiles, because both of them right now are going through Malic. Because we don't induce Malic, we let it go on its own. So, it's going through Malic right now. And Norton's doing what it normally does through Malic. And it's very jagged, not smooth, very peaks and valleys across your palate while it's going through Malic. And then Cynthiana is much more refined. You can taste the nuances. It's much more subtle, it's smoother. It's like a car ride versus a roller coaster. Oh my god, you know, like, one's a car ride in the country and the other ones like we're going up and down roller coaster, you know, the potential is still there. And then Norton will be very good. It's, it's going back to barrel. But you know, we'll see. We will see what we are going to do.

Fred Reno

Sure, in the vineyard itself. Norton is cold hardy. It's a late budder. How much later does it bud than the other vinifera you have in your vineyard?

Sharon Horton

The only thing that I have that's buds a little bit about, I'd say five days after Norton is the Vidal Blanc. Well, this is a hybrid. Yes. And it's next to the Norton and it's in a low place in the vineyard. Norton was planned in the very lowest place. Because we knew it would be a late but breaker and was more cold hardy. So that's why we started out planting it way down.

Fred Reno

Have you tried to plant in other parts of your vineyard since then?

Sharon Horton

No, keeping that right down there. But it buds out I would say at least seven to eight days later than vinifera.

Fred Reno

Then harvest itself is a little bit longer than obviously.

Sharon Horton

Yes. It's usually about the second or third week of October.

Fred Reno

If I'm not mistaken, thinking back to my experience with winegrowing an ideal season is like 100 to 120 days. So, does Norton take longer or does it follow that average curve.

Sharon Horton Oh it follows the average curve

Fred Reno Okay, so it's like any other grape. It just comes out later and is picked later. Yes. I got to tell you what Shep Ross said to me when I was talking to him, and he had made any Norton in a while I said, Well, you know, you can buy grapes you know, Jenni always has grapes up there at Chrysalis, he says, I just think it's a little colder up there to grow Norton than what I like. And then he got around to telling me what he really meant. And he said, Well, I don't want to have to make wine in November and do harvest in November.

Shannon Horton

When mom starts bringing in the Norton, we know we're over the hump, we are close to the end of harvest, unless you do a late harvest. Like Okay we started our Norton. Yay. We're downhill.

Fred Reno

Well, then that's begs another question. The worst thing possible at harvest is rain. So, what happens with Norton, if you get rain late in the harvest? How does it weather it?

Sharon Horton

I think it weathers it a lot better than any vinifera. It doesn't split open because it's a very, very tiny little berry to begin with and the clusters aren't really tight. It handles rain a lot better than I would say our Cabernet Franc does. No, it doesn't take up the water. It doesn't change the bricks as drastic as it would on other red varietals.

Fred Reno

What's the total acreage you have at your vineyard in total? Everything? Not just Norton.

Sharon Horton

At Berry Hill, we have 53 acres in front of the winery. At the winery we have six. In front of my house, we have seven and a half acres.

Fred Reno

When you were planting and were involved in Honalee did you ever put Norton up there.

Sharon Horton

Yes, we did. Well, you did. We did but they took it out. Their consultant figured that that was not something that made good wine.

Fred Reno

Well, that's erroneous. For me I believe it makes very serious wine.

Shannon Horton

Everybody has to make their own thing. We don't grow Chambourcin, we don't grow Chardonnay. Everybody got their own thing. We don't grow Cabernet Sauvignon; we don't grow Merlot.

Fred Reno

But you grow just about everything else, or you tried right.

Sharon Horton

Dennis quote was always "he took out more grapes than other people planted".

Fred Reno

Then I'm curious. The next person to come along to actually grow and produce Norton? Can you recall? Would it have been somebody like Burnley or was it Jenni at Chrysalis?

Sharon Horton

No, I don't know what year Burnley planted Norton. But I think Jennifer, because she came and talked to Dennis a lot before she bought that property. And she was really, really interested in Norton.

Fred Reno

Well, of course Shep would have been making it early on to I think, his first vintage was 2002. He produced a 2002 because he opened the bottle for me when I was down there several years ago. And then he gifted me a bottle and it was just beautiful wine. That's the other thing about Norton. You must have the most extensive cellar I would think of anybody. To be able to go back and taste a 10, 15, 20 years plus year old Norton, it's just, it's a different animal isn't a Shannon?

Shannon Horton

Yes, it's completely changes. With a lot of age, Norton will get some chocolate notes, you will get dark chocolate right in the mid palate close to the finish. And that just naturally comes about with Norton is really kind of cool. It does it more quickly if you add brandy to it. When we made our Norton ports, they have these huge chocolate notes in the middle. And it just that's what happens when we put brandy with Norton and age it. Yeah, it's very cool. My dad made a commemorative series for Jamestown Spirit Voyage Courage to commemorate the founding of Jamestown at the 400th anniversary. And a lot of people kept requesting the Courage all the time and we couldn't figure out how he made it and what he did with it. And where's the recipe? He never

wrote that stuff down. And I was cleaning out a box and it was like on the scrap a piece of paper. And I found it. I'm like, oh my god, I found it. Then like six years ago, I started aging it because there were all kinds of different vintages of Norton Port. And we bought some grapes from Chrysalis because we were just getting in enough Norton to meet our market demand for regular Norton. And I needed extra to be able to put this away for four or five years to age it. So, the Courage is a blend of like five, four, three years barrel aged Norton port.

Fred Reno

Have you sold any Norton Internationally?

Shannon Horton

I have not, I don't think so. We do get high demand from people that have more of a non-USA palette, people that are from other places because it is so unique. It is so different. It's something they've never experienced. And when they do they think it's really cool.

Fred Reno

Going back to the Cynthiana, Norton subject Sharon do you see much difference in growing it in the vineyard.

Sharon Horton

No, not at all.

Fred Reno

So that's why probably it has been disguised or mixed. Right.

Sharon Horton

I think that when I said the leaves were different and petioles and all it's very, very subtle. You have to have a Lucie Morton eye. And she just trained me how to do that.

Fred Reno

Are the yields pretty similar to Norton.

Sharon Horton

The clusters are a little smaller, and the yields are a little less.

Fred Reno

Okay. Well, I really trust Lucie. And if this proves to be true with this DNA sequencing, they're doing right now at the University of Missouri. This is a bit of a game changer here in Virginia, because she believes a lot of the vineyards are inter dispersed with Cynthiana and Norton.

Shannon Horton

I think ours is the only one Lucie has run across where it is a defined line. These rows are Norton, these rows are Cynthiana and it's just a defined line. It's not like a plant here, then three Norton plants, and then Cynthiana, it is a defined line with the different planting.

Fred Reno

So that kind of made it a bit easier for her when she just recognized it right off the bat.

Shannon Horton

Yeah, she stood in between the two rows and said these two rows are different, and then they went through the rows and figured it out. Well,

it made it easier for us to keep it separate and for when mom's harvesting, not having to skip plants on the same row.

Fred Reno

Lucie's upcoming documentary is going to be rather fascinating because it encompasses hybrids in general, as well as the Norton, Cynthiana story and hats off to Lucie. She's kind of remarkable. She is. What a talent she has. So, the question I've asked everybody, have you ever put Norton up in a larger format bottle?

Shannon Horton

No Dad did Dionysus and Cab Franc but he did not do Norton. He never did Norton. Yeah, they're just not highly marketable. And I think that's the obstacle that a lot of wineries need to overcome, because there's not a large demand in the open market. A lot of times having a larger format does make it better for the aging in the bottle, very different. And it's just it's a whole different experience with the wine. It has not been a great marketing tool.

Fred Reno

I'm just curious, because I think about large format bottles from a marketing standpoint of visual.

Shannon Horton

Yes. Yeah, they're great. They're in wooden crates, and they're just beautiful. And all this stuff. And then they just sit there.

Fred Reno

But Norton is going to last and last and last. Right? Yes. And get better and better and better. Yes.

Shannon Horton

We're working on doing an inventory with our actual library, like our whole library, and looking at trying to do a library sale of the whole thing. And I'm trying to put packages together. Like, here's the Norton, all the way through from getting a bottle from 92. All the way to present.

Fred Reno

Oh, my God, what a prize.

Shannon Horton

So, we're looking at trying to do that this year, because it's our 35th anniversary, and we're looking to try and do something like that.

Fred Reno

Oh, that'd be a hell of an auction lot.

Shannon Horton

That's what we're looking at. An auction lot, no question.

Fred Reno

In the cellar, has the regimen changed as far as oak an aging? I mean, what have you seen there?

Shannon Horton

For us, everything's French neutral except Norton. Okay, that's my hard line.

Fred Reno What is Norton in?

Shannon Horton

Virginia and then Missouri oak. It's fermented in a stainless steel tank, right? And then we get it into the wood, we get it into oak, it's American.

Fred Reno

How long do you generally age it.

Shannon Horton

As long as I possibly can, as long as the wine needs it. Because we take it out from time to time and we taste it from time to time. Surprisingly, one lot that we just tasted of Norton, Mom and I both had the other day in PHP1. I was like, we could bottle this today. I don't know what it is about that batch. But it's the first batch that she brought in for 2023 is awesome.

Fred Reno

Well, one of the things that has come across my mind I've been thinking about as I've been doing these podcast interviews is we still sell and talk about Norton as a varietal, but there's no discussion about terroir and every wonderful wine, every terrific wine in the world, there's a terroir associated with it. And as I like to say, let me explain what I mean by terroir because everybody's got a different interpretation. To me. It's a three-legged stool. There's climate, that's number one, it has everything to do with agriculture. So, you got the climate, then you have not just the soil but site selection, elevation, all the things that go into a site selection. And then equally, if not, more importantly, there's the hand of man and what they do with that resource. I'd love to see

us begin to get into that discussion as an industry about what is the best terroir. How do you identify Norton. And why is that Norton different than their Norton? And get into that discussion? Instead of this endless thing I hear all the time well, people either love it or hate it. I still don't understand they love it or hate it. To me, that means people either understand it or don't understand it.

Shannon Horton

It can be an aggressive grape. As a marketing person in the tasting room, having someone come in and their new to wine and exploring their palate and branching out. It can be in a very aggressive wine, meaning that it does a lot on your palate. And you kind of need to take a breath. And think about it when you're actually drinking. And you need to contemplate it.

Fred Reno

You just took the words right out of my mouth. Shannon. I tell everybody you don't quaff Norton.

Shannon Horton

Yeah, so and that's where I think you get the polarizing thing. Like I always tell people, it's a love or hate relationship, especially when I have two people standing in front of me in the adjacent room. And one of them absolutely adores Norton, the other one can't stand it. And I say, You need to try a Norton that's 10 years old. You need to give it time in the bottle. Let the other person buy a case. And then you drink a bottle every year, you find out you're going to like Norton, because she does change. And she does evolve, but you don't know where you want her to be.

Fred Reno

Well, my sort of Epiphany, proverbial aha moment was several years ago, down at our Homestead event, and we had DuCard and Scott Elliff and his wife, Karen, as our featured Vintner. It was the first Norton we've ever served at one of the dinners. I had the staff decant it a couple hours beforehand, then put it back into bottles, so was served out of the bottle, that way the guests could see the brand. I watched the group, and we finish the dinner with it. And nobody in that room had ever had a glass or a bottle of Norton before. So, to them, it was a new experience. And at the end of the dinner, it was the one wine that everybody wanted more. Universally, they wanted to get more of that. I think partially because it was served at the end of the meal. So, they were sipping it, not coffee. And they were pondering it. And then I looked at Scott and said, Oh, I understand now, it's not the consumer, when consumers are served Norton in a proper way with food and setting, they love it. It's the trade and the press, they are the problem. The messenger is in a way of the consumer, exploring this. And we have built actually a bit of a cult following for Norton, people love Norton, it's kind of refreshing to see the way you're introduced to it matters.

Shannon Horton And the presentation, just like anything else that you have in life, the presentation can make the experience. If you present Norton in the right way, and in the right avenue, you can reach more people, and it'd be much more approachable. But if you're somewhere where you're just doing a flight. And it's just all kinds of random things, it can be a little bit harder, but Norton does have a lot of characteristics of dirt and earthy and then fruity up front. And so there's a lot of things going on, and trying to capture all that and then figure out like, you're not just going to drink it on its own. I think the time that I

loved Norton and really fell in love with Norton as a drinker myself, was the first time I paired it with Vermont extra sharp cheddar and Granny Smith apples, the acid in those foods paired so well with the Norton. All of a sudden, I was getting the cherry flavors everybody was talking about. Because before I was like this just burns my tongue. And when I did that, that's when I fell in love with Norton and started out in white wines and then eased into pinks and cotes de Orange, like Chateauneuf-du-Pape was my introduction into reds. Then all of a sudden came Norton, like I skipped Cab Franc all together and went right into Norton, because I was like, what is my mom talking about? Why is this so great? And it was when I did that pairing that I really understood that foods really change wines, and they morph into different things. And so that was a really cool moment for me and my life as a wine consumer.

Fred Reno

You're touching on something that gets me thinking about a different thing that I'm quite honestly a bit scared of. There's a backdoor neo prohibition thing starting to happen. We better be careful, we better wake up and realize this, because if you recall the history of prohibition last time, the producers of wine, didn't think they were part of this. This was about the saloon, and the man at the end of the week spending all his paycheck on beer and booze. And they just didn't think and then all sudden, they got blindsided, and they were caught up in the movement. And that's what eradicated all the wine growing on the East Coast, and then all the vines got ripped out. In fact, the whole irony of it. During Prohibition, the first couple of years, acreage of grapes grew in California, because there was a demand back here for grapes for home wine make. But, this is serious, I don't think this is something to be taken lightly. When you have the World Health Organization and

everybody coming out saying no amount of alcohol is healthy. That's a bit scary.

Shannon Horton

I've been talking about that for the last two years, talking to major organizations about that, that this was coming, like pay attention, it's going to come it's going to change. You can even see it in the grocery store, with the amount of square footage that's given to alcohol, and what kind of alcohol is there? So, there are already wineries that are looking at trying to make a zero-alcohol wine to branch out. And then there I've been looking for other avenues for where are grapes can go?

Fred Reno

I just think what wine has to do universally, the community, needs to separate itself from alcohol, and beer. And understand the wine is food. I mean, it just is. And to your point, which you made just earlier Shannon, it's this pairing. It's this symphony together with food and company and people and social. That's so important that we can't lose because that's the lifeblood of wine. It's the history going back how many generations and eons, it's about the whole works together. I was looking at your bottle over there, Horton Norton. And how long Shannon, or Sharon, do you remember, was that label, that picture that grabs you?

Shannon Horton

From the very beginning we never have changed it. The original painting is in the archives at the Library of Congress when Dennis was doing research on the grape, and he paid for the painting to be restored for the government, because it was falling apart. Okay. He paid for it to be restored. And he was given the rights to use it on his

label. He's the only one to be able to use that. Oh, that's great history. Yes, Stone Hill Winery is waiting for us to stop using it. They were mad. Held was like, Oh, man, how'd you get that? Like, it's mine now. So, they're waiting, we'll never change that label. So that is the painting. I think it was 1835, an artist named Fleischmann. He was commissioned by the Department of Agriculture for the United States to do all the indigenous plantings. And he did that rendering.

Fred Reno

Oh, great. I didn't know that.

Shannon Horton

It's on the back of a Label.

Fred Reno

My eyesight is getting to where they are such small print. I need a magnifying glass to read the back label and see what's on there. But no, that's fascinating. It's interesting you bring up Stone Hill. One of the things I discovered before I started this Norton Podcast was that there's so much misinformation as you know about Norton out there. And thank Todd Kliman for writing such a wonderful book. Folks, if you haven't read the Wild Vine, go buy a copy you can get it on Amazon. Because it's not a dry read. It reads like a novel brilliantly put together and written. But where I was going with this is Wine Searcher their website, which is really good for searching for wines all over the country, but they also have an educational platform. That's well done. But under Norton, they say it was discovered in Missouri. I have called them out a couple of times on this Podcast, and I'm expecting that somebody will bring it to their attention and change it one of these days. But that's just a good example of how much misinformation

exists about Norton, where somebody of that credibility and its well-done website can print that and we know it's not true. It wasn't discovered in Missouri. It was discovered here in Virginia. It was pirated to Missouri. And they do a good job with it. But yeah, it's Virginia's grape.

Shannon Horton

Yes. Dr. Daniel Norton outside of Richmond. and his family. A relative recently was at the Effingham Winery at the Norton tasting they do. They'll pick up varietals and they'll taste like four or five different wineries at a tasting there and they did a Norton one. And his great niece was there. Oh, wow. Yeah. Because they were going around and asking like who was there. Why were you here? Did you come because you loved Norton and blah, blah, blah, blah. You know, our and the one lady's like know Dr. Daniel Norton's my great, great, great uncle. Yeah. She still lives in Northern Virginia.

Fred Reno

So those folks at Effingham we're probably floored.

Shannon Horton

I am like Lord did you get her name or number?

Fred Reno

That is really cool. Boy, So you have a loyal following for Norton at Horton. Yes. And again, I want to thank you on air for being so generous to open up your cellar. Let me buy a couple older vintages because when I had the 2010, I had opened up an older Chrysalis Norton the weekend before, a couple of years ago for my wife for Mother's Day. I tell her story all the time. And she said, "What are you

doing? You know, I don't like Norton. And I said, Just trust me. So, I decanted it. And about halfway through the decanter, she looks at me and goes, do we have any more of that? It's Good. And then a week later it was like, okay, Sunday I'm going to open up the Horton, older Norton and get on this Norton journey. It was your 2010 and about halfway through the decanter, I looked at her and I said, you know, that Chrysalis was tasting like an old BV Private Reserve. It was just beautiful. This wine tastes like a really high-level Village Pommard. I thought, what a wacky grape that one can taste like a Bordeaux. Another one can taste like Burgundy. Obviously vintage had something to do with that and the different terroir, different location. And I was just fascinated by all those expressions. The Norton grape could be so different in vineyard sites that aren't that far away.

Shannon Horton

But we're growing on that Davidson clay. All of our Norton's on Davidson clay. I don't know what soil; I think Jenni is on silt.

Fred Reno

I believe so. That would have an influence, no question. Well, I want to say thank you so much for taking the time to come here to my studio today. And of course, folks we are having some White Burgundy. A Chablis Premiere Cru Beauroy from Domain Christophe Camu and it's 11:30 in the morning and tasting beautifully. So, thank you very much.

Sharon Horton Sharon Horton

Thank you. Thank you so much.