

## **EPISODE # 11 MATTHEW MEYER**

### **SPEAKERS**

Matthew Meyer, Fred Reno

#### **Fred Reno**

Say Hi, Matthew.

#### **Matthew Meyer**

Thank you. Hello, everybody. Always good to be chatting with you, Fred.

#### **Fred Reno**

Well, thank you. As I like to always start in the beginning, what's your story? How did you get into the wine gig and a little bit of background yourself before we jump into Norton?

#### **Matthew Meyer**

Oh, it's been a lifelong passion. Me and my father drinking wine together at a very, very early age. You know, tasting, smelling, talking about it. He was one of the last Great Imbibers, and I was actually doing something completely different. I left San Francisco, because of a girl. We went to DC, and I was going into international relations, public policy, and had aspirations of being a diplomat. But every weekend was spent at the wine store, collecting wine, talking about wine, I set up a wine club in DC. And someone said, why don't you go back to California, go to UC Davis and be a winemaker. And I was like, you know, making your hobby your career. I was in my 20s so, I'll never forget the date I called Ann Noble, who did the wine aroma

wheel and she said, Alright. This is what you have got to do. I did and have been happy ever since. What year was that? This would be in the mid-90s. It's been a long road. But a beautiful one.

**Fred Reno**

You spent a little bit of time? Well, a very brief period of time I recall at Grgich. But then a good period of time at Heitz Cellars, right?

**Matthew Meyer**

Yes. So during my UC Davis days, I would I played around up in the foothills of Sierra foothills. They were you know just some cowboys out there having a good time. Making some good wine. After UC Davis when I graduated my first job was at Grgich Hills. It didn't work out as well as I like and then found myself at Heitz where I really got a chance to mentor under the Heitz family and Joe Norman. That was great. The Heights family treated me like family. I made it to assistant winemaker/cellarmaster. But you know, if your last name is not Heitz, you're not going to go too much farther. But it was great.

**Fred Reno**

What brought you the Virginia? A girl?

**Matthew Meyer**

A girl we're not together anymore. But that's what brought us here.

**Fred Reno**

So, you came here in 2002. And then was Williamsburg Winery your first winery job?

**Matthew Meyer**

Yeah. I flew up from Napa to Williamsburg and interviewed with them. They said yes. It was interesting and I had a good time. I was there for about 20 years.

**Fred Reno**

Were they producing Norton when you first got there?

**Matthew Meyer**

No. I ended up talking to Jenni McCloud, obviously. And she said, hey, you need to buy some Norton. It was great because she prefaced it by saying, Look, you're in Williamsburg here. You know, Colonial Williamsburg. You guys should have a Norton, you know, to represent. Virginias grape and all that. So, I said, Yeah, that's a good idea. My first grapes were from Jenni. And that's pretty much all I ever bought from her.

**Fred Reno**

What was that first year that you bought grapes and made Norton?

**Matthew Meyer**

I must have been like 2014, it could have been 13.

**Fred Reno**

Had you had any experience whatsoever with Norton prior to that?

**Matthew Meyer**

No. In fact, I tasted an older Norton that someone had given me. And I'll never forget, because I had come home from an evening, not completely debauched evening, but the evening with food and wine and imbibing and I wanted a nightcap and there was that bottle of old

Norton and I opened it. And I remember, I actually started calling people late at night, saying, Oh, my God, I am drinking an old Bordeaux. I'm drinking a Norton, and it tastes exactly like an old aged Bordeaux. I cannot believe it. I was absolutely blown away by that, and then I had subsequently afterwards started to get another Norton. I'd be like, well, it wasn't the same. But man, when you age them It's a whole different ballgame.

### **Fred Reno**

Boy, isn't it though? I'd had actually no exposure to Norton after 40 years in the wine business in California, obviously. And then when I came here, I had a Norton, and thought well this is interesting. And this Norton was from the DuCard vineyard. And then a second bottle of Norton I had was when I was interviewing Shep Rouse, Rockbridge winery, and unsolicited he went and pulled a bottle of his first vintage, which was 2002 Norton. Now, this is in 2020. And I had the exact same epiphany you just described. I was like, wow, that's what this thing turns into with bottle age. That wine reminded me of an old BV Private Reserve from the '70s. And I was just blown away and stunned by how silky smooth and expressive.

### **Matthew Meyer**

The complexities!

### **Fred Reno**

It surprised the hell out of me. And that was what got me interested in Norton originally, some four years ago. So, you had the same experience. What was the first thing that surprised you about working with the Norton grape when all of a sudden Okay, here I am, I've got

some of Jenni's grapes, some of the best here in Virginia. And now I'm going to produce Norton and I've never crushed it before.

### **Matthew Meyer**

The first thing I did was, I approached it, and this might have been something that Joe Heitz taught me. You know, some people talk about Norton as a Oh, it's a hybrid. It's not *Vitis vinifera*. Or you will hear it is just Norton. I don't like that. A grape is not just a grape. They're all the magnificent in their own right. I took Norton, and I treated it as if it was, you know, the top-of-the-line *Vinifera* like the best Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. And that was my goal was to treat it with respect as I would with any other *vitis vinifera*. I even, might be a little different, people are probably question this, shake their head and be like, really, but I cold soaked, it probably wasn't necessary. But again, I wanted to run it through a gamut, okay, I've got these really good grapes. I really want that cold-soak them. I cold soaked it for like four or five days. Pressed them, and then I put them into French oak barrels, again, with the concept of I want to treat this, like I would any great grape. And I think that made a big difference. The first vintage was, I believe, 100% Norton. And then I started to play around with Petit Verdot and putting a little bit, like 10% of Petit Verdot into the Norton, just kind of round out the edge a little bit. I thought it was a nice marriage. And I'm a big believer in blending, taking something and making it very specific to what you want. Right. Now, if I go back, I would probably if I'm going to age them, which I think we are. It's just going to be 100% Norton and focus back onto that. Still, hopefully, having the ability to cold soak it for a little while.

### **Fred Reno**

Because the cold soaking softens the Malic acid?

**Matthew Meyer**

I am sure you've heard the term Foxy; it is all you hear. I don't know what that is. I know what a canine smells like, you know, Foxy, that's like when someone says I don't like that meat it's too gamey or that fish is too fishy. What I know is that confuses me. But I think it softened it. Clearly, I didn't need it for color. But I think it rounded it and it brought some of the fruit up a little bit more. Maybe tamed the acidity just a little bit. And then the barrels.

**Fred Reno**

Is that bottle of Norton there on my shelf 2019. Yes. So, the very first Norton Cup Challenge at the Homestead that wine finished in the Final Four.

**Matthew Meyer**

Yes, and this is actually back to 100% Norton, 13 months in French oak barrels.

**Fred Reno**

Well, that was my bottle of last glass of red wine, Norton, about three weeks ago, all week long. And it was beautiful Matthew. To me it was just beautiful, smooth and balanced every night. It was really quite interesting. And it will be fun to someday have a 10- or 15-year-old Norton you produce and see what it turns into. The one challenge I've given every vintner who's been here that I have been interviewing and talking about Norton. I've never seen it, has anybody put Norton in a larger format bottle?

**Matthew Meyer**

Nothing I know about.

**Fred Reno**

Yeah nobody seems to have a one. Can you imagine?

**Matthew Meyer**

Magnum or a three-litre

**Fred Reno**

Or how about a nine-liter bottle of Norton. Will we live long enough to drink it?

**Matthew Meyer**

Your grandchildren will enjoy it.

**Fred Reno**

Or even a Magnum

**Matthew Meyer**

I think a Magnum would do really well. I love the large format bottles, particularly champagne. So, if you put Norton in a Magnum, I think it would actually do well. You'd be looking at 10 years. But it becomes a challenge, honestly, because you know, it used to be back in the 70s and 80s. Even in the early 90s, you would buy a bottle and you would think about putting it down for 15 or 20 years or you would buy an older bottle. Today I see people that are making wines that are not meant for aging. But Norton really is. To me, one of the things I liked about Norton is it does take me back to a time where people did want to age their wines. And they wanted to have that, to see how it evolved.

**Fred Reno**

Well, you remind me what I've experienced. If a Norton is young, you're going to serve it to, especially to folks who've never had Norton before. You have to decant it at least an hour to two hours before dinner. Now that's what we did when I first got into the business with all of our classified Bordeaux growths.

**Matthew Meyer**

You would decant them. You would just assume. You're just like, go get the decanter, you don't even think about it.

**Fred Reno**

Exactly. But now that they make Napa Valley Cabernet in Bordeaux, they don't have to do that. It's that the practice of decanting seems to have been gone. But boy when you decant and, in fact, the anecdotal story I always like to tell is that speaking of the Homestead, the very first dinner feature we had that we had Norton was to DuCard Vineyards. It was the wine we finished the dinner with. I had the staff decant the wine an hour and a half before the dinner, then put it back in the bottle. So, the consumer could see the brand being served out of the bottle. And universally it was the wine that every one of the guests wanted more of. None of them had ever had a glass or a bottle of Norton before and that was the wine they clamored for. And I'm watching and I said to Scott, now I get it. It's not the consumer when they're served Norton under the right circumstances correctly and they have no preconceived bias or notion. They loved it. It's the trade and the press that are the problem. I get it. They're the ones standing in the way of the consumer accepting this, because they've been told, Oh, it's just Norton.



**Matthew Meyer** Yeah that's the just statement that bothers me. But that bothered a lot of wines. People say, Oh, that's just this or that's just I think Norton does have a nobility to it. I think it would be exciting to see it. What it does in other parts of the world, or other parts of the US. different climates.

### **Fred Reno**

I agree. I mean, to digress for a second folks just took a sip of this 2018 Meursault. Matthew is doing the same now. This wine is starting to open up and it just gives some lovely textural mouth feel. What do you think?

### **Matthew Meyer**

It needed to open up. It needed to breath. It was hermetically sealed with that wax top.? But this 18 is great. It looks older but tastes younger. But it's evolving.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, Meursault always has seem to have a little darker color doesn't? Yes. Well, to your point about Norton and other areas of the world. One of the things that I have discovered is the wrong word. But it's come to me, especially over the last several Podcast interviews with Bruce Zoecklein, and a few others. It dawned on me we talk about Norton, and we still talk about it as a varietal. There's never any discussion of terroir. Now, I know you gave me that controversial book which relates to this subject. So let me explain what I'm talking about. When I talk about terroir, I look at it is three-legged stool. The first is climate, climate dominates all agricultural products no matter what. So, climate, it's obviously an important piece of the whatever the equation is. Secondly, It's not just soil. Its site selection, its elevation. It's

everything that goes into site selection. And then you combine it with something you said earlier in this interview. It's the hand of man and what you do with that resource. And that's how I look at terroir. We don't talk about Norton in Virginia in the terroir sense. And I think partially it's because a lot of the vintners who planted it here, were told it was bulletproof. They can plant it anywhere, so they put it in the worst sections of their vineyard. They were told its going to survive, don't worry. Jenni McCloud of Chrysalis of course, I always kid her and say you kind of stumbled into this, you have the largest vineyard of Norton in the world 40 to 50 acres. Over 25 years now she's been able to identify within her vineyard what are the best sites. And then as a result, she makes a number of different Norton's, as you know, that are reflective of what she can get out of that site. And that's what's missing, in my opinion, is that discussion about terroir, in the concept that I was just using? What's the best site? How does this relate to the climate we have? And then hand of man.

### **Matthew Meyer**

Right? And that would be true, if you put it anywhere, you know for instance Texas Hill Country, what a good site for them for what they have, what they're doing, but I think you're absolutely right that it wasn't discussed. And it's still not being discussed, because it's known as just the bulletproof grapevine, plant it and it will be fine. You won't need to spray as much. You know, Hedge it, its disease resistant. It really does well in the heat in the cooler areas. It's an amazing grapevine, and grape. And it would be fun to see more of that information. So hopefully Jenni can disseminate it out and really just have other people try it, and also experiment and just plant it somewhere.

### **Fred Reno**

Are you aware of recently what Lucie Morton is up to and what she is saying that she is convinced that Cynthiana is not Norton? It's a completely different grape. And she is doing a documentary right now, the Odyssey of the Forbidden Wines. It's an interesting trail she's on. She spent about a month in October past in Missouri filming at mostly Stone Hill Winery. And she came to this conclusion. She has been working with the head of the extension service at University of Missouri, doing some DNA sequencing to prove that Cynthiana is a completely separate grape she believes it may be a sibling, but it's not the same grape. And if that turns out to be true, and she can prove it that could be an interesting game changer in Virginia, because she says a number of the vineyards are interspersed with Cynthiana here. In fact, at Horton, she's identified a certain row of vines that are Cynthiana and certain rows that are definitely Norton. And then in 2023, they harvested them separately, kept them separately in the cellar, and had been vinifying them separately. In November of last year Shannon Horton gave me a half bottle of each one. Right out of the tank not sulfured at that point. I took them home, put them in the refrigerator and opened them that night. And there was no question there was a difference in the wines. And then the second day, they had obviously changed, the Norton was still this brute while the Cynthiana was much more feminine would be the way I would describe it. And then I blended them with what I had left. And that Cynthiana just calmed that Norton right down. And it just turned into this elegant sort of expression of the Norton. Have you had any experience with that? Or have you had anybody talk to you about Cynthiana versus Norton or anything like that?

**Matthew Meyer**

I've heard the debate. And it's not the first debate that's going on about, you know, lineage of a grape vine and where did it come from? I think we all went through that through Zinfandel, and all of that fun stuff. I haven't had much experience with Cynthiana. I would look forward to seeing if it is in fact different. I would not be surprised. I'm just focused on Norton. Well, I should say, for what I maybe thought was Norton. Maybe somebody was selling me Cynthiana and they said it was Norton. It wouldn't be the first time.

### **Fred Reno**

So, talk to me about your project that we were talking about earlier that all they have planted is Norton, what's the name of the vineyard?

### **Matthew Meyer**

It's Gauthier Vineyards. And it's a very small, family owned, woman owned, veteran owned business. They started it on a whim. Randy Phillips at Cave Ridge really helped them plant their Norton to help give them advice that, you know, Norton would be a good thing to plant. And I decided after being with Williamsburg for a long time and starting my own thing, and working with them throughout the year, just helping people out that I like helping. That's what makes me feel good is when I can go into a winery and help them so that's what I'm doing. They're going to grow the business. But he said should we plant more grapes? And I said, No. I said, we're good. You've got Norton. It's a beautiful vineyard. And I think that's not to say that we will plant more Norton or more something else, much later in the future, but it appeared to me that with the changing climate, where we are, we're in the Virginia Peninsula, AVA we're seeing much warmer winters. So, we're not getting the kill that we need for it, to kind of hold back phylloxera. The bugs aren't dying. We're seeing later frost pretty

consistently. We're also seeing stronger weather patterns that will come in. Now that's globally, I'm sure in a lot of places. But with all of the great places that can grow grapes in Virginia, the Shenandoah, where we are here in Charlottesville, Northern Virginia, I always like to buy grapes from all over, right, so I didn't want to focus on planting more grapes until I can really get a handle on it, but Norton will definitely thrive down there.

**Fred Reno**

Were they making wine before or just selling grapes?

**Matthew Meyer**

No, they bought the property it started out as a horse farm and have evolved it. So, they just started with Norton.

**Fred Reno**

So, the vines are young.

**Matthew Meyer**

10 years of age. They planted the vineyard and built the winery, didn't have a lot of experience, but have muscled on and they have a nice, beautifully tranquil, inviting environment that people come and it's very relaxing. So, when I saw the potential, I got excited, I was like this is a this is a great place. I'd love to help them grow this, change the wines, do some other things.

**Fred Reno**

What is the closest town or city to where they're located?

**Matthew Meyer**

We're right between Williamsburg and Richmond. Okay. And it's in New Kent County, which is interestingly, the fastest growing County in Virginia. And it's in the top 10 fastest growing counties in the United States. New Kent is just exploding.

**Fred Reno**

What's driving that?

**Matthew Meyer**

Richmond, the I64 corridor to Williamsburg, property availability. It's convenient. And you can still get away. You can be there and be in Williamsburg or Richmond in 25 Minutes.

**Fred Reno**

Oh my god. Well, back to Norton for a second. So, as I understand it, the grapes themselves are a seed pocket, you get like four or five, six seeds. How do you deal with that in the winery.

**Matthew Meyer**

Make grapeseed oil. (said in jest). You press them, I haven't done it yet. But you I have always played with different ideas. A good way to remove seeds, which is kind of a fun thing to do is when you're doing a pump over, just pump it over into another tank. Just let it go. Come back the next day and pump that back on top of the skins and you will have a bunch of seeds leftover. You can also just do seed removal through other normal winemaking techniques. But I think that's an interesting thing that a lot of people don't do. I learned that in Bordeaux from a winemaker. And I was going to try this and it is it's an interesting as it does work. It's frightening at first because you're literally taking

your red wine and putting it into another tank. So, you have a whole bunch of skins over here and a whole bunch of juice over here. Then you come back the next morning and pump that back into the top. But you got to be strong willed on that one, but it does work. I'm not too overly concerned with seeds. Some people are its too much but it doesn't really worry

### **Fred Reno**

Also, the yields end up being less for Norton versus your classic vinifera, right? Yeah.

### **Matthew Meyer**

Yeah. And it's a pretty small grape. It actually is. I left Napa and was here and the Grapes in Napa are really pretty as you know, they're blessed with pretty optimal growing conditions. I won't ever forget when the truck came in with Norton, and I saw those grapes in the half ton bins, and I was like these look exactly like Cabernet Sauvignon that I used to deal with at Heitz. They were that really dark blue, like a blueberry, they were perfect. And that's what I was like, okay, I'm going to treat this as if I would top Vitis Viniferas and give it the utmost respect this is going to be good. It is a small grape with a lot of seeds. And low yields are okay. I'd rather have less of something that's really good. Then more of something that's not.

**Fred Reno** I've got a question for you that you may or may not have experienced, but I'm wondering back to Williamsburg for a second. They obviously had a clientele that had been loyal and been coming back for a long time, when it came to the tasting room, and they were presented Norton, what was the reaction like?

## **Matthew Meyer**

As a winemaker, we have our own passions and what drives you to what we want to do. But it is important to listen to the marketing and the salespeople. They do have an opinion that should matter. And what they were telling me was that, especially because we had about 1700 wine club members. The consensus was that they were, you know, a lot of them we're saying we really don't like Norton. But then someone said, we really liked Norton. So, there's that divisive attitude. I haven't met too many people, that are like take it or leave it. It's usually, I don't like Norton, or I really like Norton.

## **Fred Reno**

That's interesting, because what I've taken from that from my experience now is when they tell me that I think they don't understand Norton. And what I mean by that is the anecdotal story I always tell about in my own house a couple of years ago, Mother's Day, I was serving a older bottle of Chrysalis Norton. And my wife goes, What are we having for dinner? And I said, Well, we're going to have this Norton, and she goes, Well, what are you doing? You know, I don't like Norton.

## **Fred Reno**

And I said, trust me. It was a 2008 Chrysalis Locksley Reserve, and I decanted it. And about halfway through the decanter during dinner, she looks at me and goes, do we have more of this. This is really good. Yeah. And ever since then, she loves Norton.

## **Matthew Meyer**

I think that's part of what is our fault. And now that I've learned a little bit more at Gauthier we're going to age, we've already discussed that we are going to be age our Norton for five years. I think you're doing a



disservice to your guests, consumers and Norton if you think you're going to make a Norton, age it for 12 months in a barrel, bottle it and sell it. I think this is a grape that needs time.

**Fred Reno**

Isn't that what they used to do with classified Bordeaux Growths?

**Matthew Meyer**

You would never think about it otherwise, you know, if you're having a Bordeaux Premier wine if it was 10 years old, you'd be like, Oh, you're kind of robbing the cradle its young. But times are changing. To have a grape like Norton we could go back to that idea of like, it's fun, and to see it age and to watch it develop. I think more wineries need to start looking at that saying, hey, let's not just put out a Norton for the sake of our Norton being out there, let's hold it for three years, four years, five years. And really see what happens. I believe 53<sup>rd</sup> Winery is doing that.

**Fred Reno**

Yes. They age their Norton's for much longer. They sometimes they purposely leave it in the barrel, at least for 24 months, sometimes 36 before they bottle it.

**Matthew Meyer**

And then do it for another two years, then when people have it they would say WOW. But then the problem would be that they would have a Norton and then they wouldn't be like this is great. And then go somewhere else a winery who just did it for a year. They'd be like, Oh, I don't like this. So, that's a story that needs to be told and more broadcast out as we've got to age Norton a little bit longer, unless, you know, you're making it a particular style. Gauthier one time they didn't

press the grapes; it was just free run juice. They didn't get a whole lot. But it's a lighter style, which I thought was very good. I want to show it to some people. Because it's unique in the sense that it doesn't look like a Norton, it looks like a California Pinot Noir. You know, those ones that are not Burgundian they're not Cabernet, they're just to kind of that still a dark color though.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, you know, Chrysalis makes something called Barrel Select, which is carbonic. And it's like your Beaujolais technique. And it softens that Malic Acid really early on. And it's very generous on the palate early on. So, there are things to do. But to your point earlier, if you've got a serious Norton, in a serious spot on your site, and you give it the serious attention, including long bottler age, you're going to be rewarded with something really remarkable that is unique unto itself. Not like, every other Cabernet Sauvignon or every other this or that, right?

### **Matthew Meyer**

Yeah, it then has its own identity. And it should sit on the mantle with all the other ones.

### **Fred Reno**

Oh, I agree. Well, fortunately, back to Virginia. Frank Morgan who runs the Governor's Cup now, told me that at the judging this year they had more Norton entrees than they had well over the past decade. So, people are starting to come back to it and realize hold on here this is a very noteworthy grape, and we can make really interesting bottles of wine out of it. It'll

**Matthew Meyer**

It will be continued to grow. Not just in Virginia, but I think as the climate continues to evolve and change, I think other areas will pick it up, or at least experiment with it and say, well, let's look at this Norton. The idea that's what it would be. I think really just fascinating to see. We see what Norton does in Virginia, in Missouri. But you know, Oregon, California, Argentina, Australia. You know, at one time it was going to be what replaced Bordeaux when phylloxera was rampaging through Bordeaux. One of the ideas was that well, we could replant with Norton. That didn't come to fruition, but it was at least batted around as an idea because of its heartiness, the small grapes, the complexities and the strength.

**Fred Reno**

I would love to see Norton grown in Australia. What they did with Syrah. It would be really interested to see what they do with Norton.

**Matthew Meyer**

Yeah, somehow, they'd make it even bigger I'm sure.

**Fred Reno**

Matthew, I want to just say again, thank you for taking the time we're going to finish a bit more of this Meursault here but thank you for coming and talking Norton.

**Matthew Meyer**

Oh, anytime Fred, anytime. Thank you so much.