

## **EPISODE # 13 ROB COX DIRECTOR OF WINEMAKING/PARADISE SPRINGS**

### **SPEAKERS**

**Fred Reno, Rob Cox**

**Fred Reno**  
**Say Hi, Rob.**

**Rob Cox**  
**Hello.**

**Fred Reno**  
**So, as I always begin, what's your story? How did you get into this wine gig? Because I see you have a golf background.**

**Rob Cox**  
**Yeah, it's interesting as you get around meeting different producers, different winemakers in Virginia, everybody kind of comes about it a little bit differently. A lot of us aren't like the seventh generation born on at chateau or in a vineyard. A lot of us come from different varying backgrounds. I personally always had some agriculture in my background, my grandparents had a produce farm. We were the help during the summers when we weren't in school. But after things didn't pan out in my baseball career, I decided to go back to school at the University of Maryland, and enroll for a second degree in agronomy, specializing in golf course management. I had gone to work for a golf course management company based out of North Carolina. At that time, it was the mid 90s, late 90s, during what's known as the Tiger Woods effect, which brought a lot of people into golf who had never considered golf as a recreation or hobby. A lot of diversity came into golf in that period. And we were building golf courses along the Mid Atlantic. But in between those projects, I was traveling to different regions and started to get into wine and taste wine during my travels, decided as the golf industry started taking a little bit in decline around the year 2000 to go ahead and switch up my career and get**

**into working in vineyards in that I've always had a connection with soil. I basically just adapted from turf grass to vines.**

**Fred Reno**

**Was that in California?**

**Rob Cox**

**No, it was here on the East Coast, here in Virginia, actually, when that I came in during the harvest and helped out in the cellar and got exposed to that side of the industry. And that's what I really fell in love with. So, I had to talk my parents into letting me spend a bit more of their money and I took the online program from UC Davis on winemaking. That was great for the theory and background but, getting my hands on the grapes in the cellar and all that is really what kind of boosted me forward.**

**Fred Reno**

**What was your first winemaking job?**

**Rob Cox**

**It was just like vineyard management and then helping out on the crush pad at Pearmund Cellars.**

**Fred Reno**

**Oh, you worked for Chris.**

**Rob Cox**

**Yeah, I worked for Chris right after he had opened. I started in the cellar with Rick Tagg. He's currently the winemaker at Delaplane Cellars. I was helping out vineyard wise part time and all that. And then I was helping out in various positions within production. And then you know, the big step for me was in 2005, Chris had put together a group of investors to purchase property in Prince William County in Haymarket, which was the first winery in Prince William County, the winery, LaGrange, and he had set me up there to basically head that project with a group of investors and to make the wines there. We weren't making a lot of wine to open up with and**

**Potomac Point Winery was building their winery and they wanted to obviously have some wines when they were planning to open in 2006. So, the winemaker that they hired to help design and build the winery at the time was Mattieu Finot. Oh my god, so you were touching all the bases. We actually worked in the cellar, and I was making the wines at LaGrange, he was making the wines for Potomac Point. I was helping him, and he was helping me. He really took me from a fermenter of grapes to more in-depth winemaking and, he kind of really took me to another level and I helped him out with some varying projects in subsequent years after that, too, as he was consulting.**

**Fred Reno**

**I am curious. What did you think the first time you had a bottle of Norton. Do you recall the wine?**

**Rob Cox**

**I do, It was a Horton. We got Norton grapes from Horton to make it for Potomac Point. That was kind of my first exposure to the grape itself. I had tried the wine before as I was starting out in Virginia wine and visiting different wineries just trying to do some networking, get my feet into the industry, if you will, and it took me a while to kind of wrap my head around the grape and what it's about, it's chemistry and what's inherent to that variety was that I believe that was in 2005 the first one that I actually was involved in the actual production. I guess it was probably a 2002 Norton, the first one that I had. I had moved down to Virginia in 2000, and I hadn't had but a couple Virginia wines prior to that.**

**Fred Reno**

**So, what was your biggest challenge when you started working with Norton? What were you thinking, hey, what's up with this grape.**

**Rob Cox**

**Yeah, it's got a wild nature, wild side to it, unlike vinifera that we were mainly making, you know, Cab Franc, Merlot, Cab Sauv. Those grapes don't have that chemistry in it, the different ratio of Malic to Tartaric acid**

that, you know, is very different than what you're going to see with those different varieties. The grape itself is very different physically, when you get it in, it's very thick, under the skin yields very little juice than a lot of varieties. We weren't really crushing the grape, per se, we were just destemming, trying to keep some hole berries in the fermentation but with it, we had to crush it, put it through a crusher, just to be able to punch it down or pump it over to mix it up.

**Fred Reno**

Well, interesting, because that's one thing I picked up through this process was that Norton, although it's a healthy grape doesn't give you a lot of juice.

**Rob Cox**

Not at all. It's really mind blowing. You get like some of the older Cabernet Franc clones that are bigger berried and real juicy, or, like some Malbec, which can be big juicy clusters and then you process Norton and you realize, can I even get any juice to even run chemistry on, or even to get the yeast to start the fermentation process?

**Fred Reno**

Where were you making Norton when you were at Philip Carter?

**Rob Cox**

I did not make any. We tried to grow Noire another variety there. We really were trying to get behind that and we didn't do any Norton at that time. When I was at Philip Carter, I was helping him out, as he had hired Matthieu Finot, as a consultant. It used to be Stillhouse winery for those who don't know, those owners wanted out of the business. Philip Strother, who is a lawyer here in Virginia, we were transitioning over to his style.

**Fred Reno**

There is a connection there to Paradise Springs isn't there.

**Rob Cox**

**Yes, for those who are unfamiliar with the evolution of Paradise Springs, there's was quite a legal battle for the Wiles and Kincheloe family to be able to open the winery. In Fairfax County, there was a lot of opposition in our neighborhood, if you will, to the winery. A lot of people just didn't realize what we were going to do there and they just kind of jumped to conclusions. So, Philip Strother, who owns Philip Carter Winery, that's kind of his wheelhouse, he specializes in land use and all that. So, Kirk Wiles the co-founder of Paradise Springs hired Philips brother to guide him through the process and in essentially win against Fairfax County to allow us to get our ABC license.**

**Fred Reno**

**Is it accurate you first vintage at Paradise Springs was in 2011.**

**Rob Cox**

**To point yes, as the direct winemaker but they had hired Chris Pearman as their consultant. Once they hatched the idea of turning that property in Fairfax, which Kirk's mom Jane who is the other founder the winery, they were worried about losing it to inheritance taxes and property taxes and not being able to hold on to it financially, that she came with the idea of wanting to do a vineyard winery there and Kirk decided when he had the government jobs at the time that he was on board helping her realize this dream. They put things together and hired Chris Pearman, and they hired Philip Strothers to help them in the legal process. So, as you know, like most wineries do in Virginia, they do a custom crush somewhere and start making wines. So once their facilities done, because at times the vineyard goes in first and that gets established so they can start using the fruit then do a custom crush, and then it moves into where you they have the investment to do the facility and obviously, they want their own wines when they open their doors. I was making Paradise Springs wines for Chris Pearmund at his facilities for them with the legal battle. I made a couple of vintages of their wines, because of the delay in getting their ABC license and being able to open to the public.**

**Fred Reno**

**When you got their full time at Paradise Springs were they producing Norton at that time?**

**Rob Cox**

**I had made Norton for them starting in 2008.**

**Fred Reno**

**I believe I had that wine about two years ago when I came to meet you for the first time. And it was unbelievable how good that wine was. That would have been several years ago. So yeah, I mean, that was a 14-year-old, 15-year-old Norton and was terrific.**

**Rob Cox**

**Norton's, at least the style that I'm make, the reductive winemaking style, are wines meant for aging. Some of the winemakers that I learned a lot from, a lot of times their ultimate goal was to make a wine that is approachable in its youth but also has the wherewithal, if you will, to have some age ability to it so you can hit a broader range of drinkers if you want that. That's the more tannins and acid that style is in your face more, you're going to get that in a wine. And it's used a little bit more, if you want some of that to mellow out and soften in the wine. And then some of their secondary bottle aromatics bouquet and flavors develop, the wine is made well enough to allow that to happen in the process.**

**Fred Reno**

**I know that Paradise Springs did not have any Norton planted. And so what is the source of the grapes?**

**Rob Cox**

**The source for us has always been since we've been making wine on site in 2011 is from Chrysalis Vineyards. We've had a long-term relationship with them for Norton and a few other varieties over the years. But yeah, they've been the source. They have the largest planting of Norton so obviously, people are familiar with them, they know what they're about, and they do a great job with their Norton. They really have put a lot of time and effort into**

understanding the vineyard and growing it well, and it's a good source for Norton grapes.

**Fred Reno**

You have touched on something that has become an observation on my end, it has to do with the way we talk about Norton. When we talk about Norton in Virginia, we talk about it as a variety. There's no terroir story associated with it. And every terrific wine in the world has some terroir story associated with it. Now, I've come to believe that partially that is because a lot of people have planted Norton in what is considered the more marginal, lesser sites in their vineyard, because they've been told it's bulletproof, it's going to survive no matter what. Right? And to some degree, I guess that's true. But I think we have to get back to looking at Norton or get to the point where we're looking at Norton, what is the best site, where we should plant it. I kid Jenni McCloud the founder of Chrysalis: I said, Well, you know, Jenni, you kind of stumbled into this, because you have the largest Norton vineyard in the world. And so you make numerous types of Norton, that represent the best Norton you can make from that site within your vineyard, because you've been able to identify over 25 plus years of growing Norton in your vineyard what is the best wine from that site that you can produce. And it kind of confuses people, because you have four or five different Nortons. And they're like, Well, what's this one? But what do you think about that, from what I just said, You think we're going to get to a place where Norton will be recognized and appreciated, and we should treat this like every other noble grape we have.

**Rob Cox**

Yeah, I mean, I totally agree with that. Fred, the better the site, the no matter what variety it is, you know, certain sites like a little bit more rock, some sites can deal with clay a little bit better, you know, it depends on rootstock and clones of the different varieties. But why is Norton any different? You know, granted a lot of people thought, like, hey, I want to maximize my agricultural potential, this site stays wet, you know, longer, whatever. And there was definitely that mindset to go ahead. We want to make smart decisions so let's just plant it down there where other varieties

will probably struggle. But, if you're going to put it on a better site, it's going to do better as far as how it translates to once you are ripening it, harvesting it and turning it into wine. I do think that's kind of the next step in the evolution. I've actually talked to Lucie Morton about this and that's the one thing that is lost with Norton is like, how are you going to develop it about the terroir and the site that it's grown on. When are people going to start looking into that a little bit more.

**Fred Reno**

I'll go on a limb here and say, I don't think there's been anybody that's tasted more different Norton's than I have over the past two years, because I've sought them out, bought them and tried them. And the differences I see so far to what we're talking about is really more winemaking style, as opposed to site specific terroir. But I do see a little bit of that happening now.

**Rob Cox**

Yeah, a lot of us are getting grapes from Chrysalis. So, we are not going to be able to really differentiate our wines by terroir. A winemaking style is going to be how we can separate ourselves or distinguish our wines differently from the other wineries that are purchasing grapes from Chrysalis. We have a new site in Charlottesville that we are going to develop over the next couple of years and there is always potential you know, we inherently as Paradise Springs has been established and grown. We've had some sites, but we want to be less dependent on other people for our grapes and more dependent on having direct control over a lot of our grapes that some of the varieties, like Norton, because it's always been in our portfolio. And I don't see us not doing Norton as we have varied it up and down as far as a production each year just to balance inventory. But it's something that's going to be part of our portfolio moving forward. So that might be something that we're going to look into on a portion of that site. None of that has been finalized though.

**Fred Reno**



**You probably don't get as much exposure as other people would if they were in a tasting room. What do the consumers think, what has been your experience when they come to Paradise Springs and they have your Norton, what's the feedback you've received?**

**Rob Cox**

**The ones that are into Norton and try the Norton's, it's been very well, they have made comments about this being one of their favorite Norton's because of the style that I do and my approach to it in the cellar. And for people who aren't into Norton, we always encourage our wine educators in our tasting room to kind of help people like, give things a chance. Because not every Norton tastes exactly the same, or Chardonnay or whatever variety. And there's different ways to approach these wines, that they'll at least talk them into giving us a chance and trying ours, you know, it still might not be for them. But it might be something that they're you know, we've heard we've actually heard this in the Tasting Room, I typically don't like Norton, but I can drink this Norton. I like the way it's done. It's softened. It's not as rambunctious and all that.**

**Fred Reno**

**You told me when I first met you in your production method that you ferment this at hotter temperatures than any other grape you do. Why is that.**

**Rob Cox**

**For one just physically it helps break down the intercellular pulp with the grape to help juice this up. I think aromatically some of the aromas that people will clarify as maybe foxy, gamey, or Nortony that can be off putting to some consumers, that hotter fermentation can help blow some off. You're still going to get that inherent Norton nose, like that sweet tart nose, those like real sinewy red fruit noses on it, but these are just some of my approaches having made it for almost 20 years now. We're always looking at our process, you know, as winemakers and trying to strive to do better every year. And we've kind of monitored things over the years in making**

**Norton and figured out that fermenting on the higher end for what we're looking to do with ours just suits well, for those reasons.**

**Fred Reno**

**So, I've challenged every vintner that I've talked to about this. Who's going to be the first to put a Norton in an outside his Bottle?**

**Rob Cox**

**I don't know, Chrysalis I would imagine is the safe bet.**

**Fred Reno**

**I said to Scott Elliff at DuCard can you imagine what a nine-liter bottle of Norton would be like?**

**Rob Cox**

**I've actually bottled a nine litre Norton for a private customer. We bottled them and a Meritage and a Norton nine liter before.**

**Fred Reno**

**Oh my god I can't imagine that I could live long enough to where it would mature.**

**Rob Cox**

**So, it was one of our initial core customers at Paradise Springs. He was in the military, and he had retired from the military. He had his retirement party at the winery and brought the nine liter just share with everybody at the party.**

**Fred Reno**

**Did you get a chance to taste it? Yeah, I did. What was that?**

**Rob Cox**

**I mean, it just held up so well. Obviously, larger bottles in general just age better, but it still had lots of life. I believe that was in 2018 or 2019. So, it was 10 years old at that point.**

**Fred Reno**

**Well, that is very cool that you got to taste it.**

**Rob Cox**

**Yeah, I forgot about that until you brought it up. But yeah, we just did a one off for him. We had a couple of nine litre bottles that we got in with a bottle shipment. We weren't sure what to do with them. We put it out to some of our best customers that there was the possibility of this, and he signed on to have a 9-litre Norton.**

**Fred Reno**

**Every winemaker I've talked to about producing Norton has its challenges and what they don't like. What is it about Norton that you do like?**

**Rob Cox**

**I like the age worthiness of it. I think it has some food versatility to it too. You can't just pigeonhole it with certain foods. I think it has some range to work well with a number of different foods whether you know it's grilled meats, barbeque or whatever they usually recommend it with. But I think there's some room for expansion on Norton with different foods too, that that can help me make the Norton taste better and the Norton makes the food taste better.**

**Fred Reno**

**Have you ever tried or produced any, even limited amounts of Norton with carbonic maceration?**

**Rob Cox**

**I have not done carbonic maceration on Norton. I think just in general, some varieties, because we're not crushing it, most other varieties like vinifera you'll get that naturally happening but because we are physically**

breaking down the Norton just so he can work with it that we're not getting into that naturally. But I've done it with Chambourcin, but not Norton. So, I think there's a definite place for it. I've had the one that Chrysalis has done on the carbonic side.

**Fred Reno**

Was the one you brought up Chambourcin? I'm a big fan of the one I had that you produced, it was terrific. You call it CHILL? Yeah. that wine was really good.

**Rob Cox**

That was just brought on by just consumer feedback from people in the tasting room just to give them something a little bit easier drinking during the summer months that they could put in in the fridge and put a little chill if you will on it. With my assistant winemakers every year, I like to challenge them with a project.

A lot of times the project is over one of their own ideas and I try and keep hands off as much as possible and let them just head it up because I feel like it helps them take a next step to make all the decisions on this wine and what comes out of that. A former assistant winemaker of mine wanted to make a carbonic macerated wine, we got some Chambourcin off of our property in the Shenandoah, Brown Bear vineyards and we went ahead and used it for that wine. It has stuck in our portfolio ever sense.

**Fred Reno**

What do you think of this 2019 Mercury Blanc, we're trying give me your observations.

**Rob Cox**

I mean, it's delicious. There is just so much depth and like sap to this wine. There is so much layer after layer, and as this wine sits here. I like to drink this wine a little not super chilled and warmer as it drinks better and opens up that way.

**Fred Reno**

**It's really getting a savory note to it right now. It's been open here for 30/40 minutes now and it is just really savory.**

**Rob Cox**

**The acid is really good on it and really makes you salivate. It's not bracing acidity but there's loads of acid in this wine and its very thirst quenching; really makes you salivate as you're drinking it.**

**Fred Reno**

**With the push towards sustainable farming. I think we're going to see more interest in Norton going into the vineyards along with other hybrids.**

**Rob Cox**

**Yeah, I would imagine as we're trying to get away from spraying so much in the vineyard. It's a variety that is, you know, it's adapted to our climate. It's indigenous to here. So, it's survived all these years, dealing with a lot of heat and humidity that we have here in Virginia. I can see maybe some variation in it and hybrid too, there's like Crimson Cabernet, I guess it has some Cabernet Sauvignon in it. I don't know, there was a Wall Street Journal article that just came out. There are some quotes in there about hybrids being the future of Virginia. I don't think they're the future of Virginia. I think they will be a part of the future of Virginia.**

**Fred Reno**

**Well, the one thing I always like to do is when I talk to people and they have this sort of negative attitude about hybrid, almost sounds like bad or something. Yeah. And I say, Well, you know, Cabernet Sauvignon is a hybrid. They go what are you talking about? I tell them it's a Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc cross. And that's how you get Cabernet Sauvignon. There are so many hybrids that are mainstream now. Because vineyards have just been cross pollinating for how long.**

**Rob Cox**

For hundreds of years, forever. Yeah. So yeah, you know schools like Cornell and University of Minnesota and some other schools have really great programs for the hybridization of grapes in developing, trying to put some qualities of the hybrid into the vinifera. There's a small program starting here in Virginia, that Ben Jordan is kind of heading to look into some hybridization of certain varieties and all that. Like I said, they definitely have a place at Paradise Springs. We have done Seyval Blanc for a long time. Vidal Blanc, which I do off dry, dry Chambourcin, as we've just talked about. So, I definitely think there's a place for it. And as some of these newer hybrids get developed, I think you're going to see some more of those getting incorporated into vineyards in Virginia also.

**Fred Reno**

Am I accurate in saying that you also have a consulting business?

**Rob Cox**

I do. I have worked with some different people over the years. My main client right now is Williams Gap Vineyards up in Loudoun County they opened about three years ago. I've worked with their fruit since 2011. He kept on expanding his vineyard and then at the end of 2018, he decided he wanted to make the move over into the production side. We have a good relationship because I've worked with his fruit for so long that he asked me if I would take him on board as a client and help him with his production

**Fred Reno**

How do you juggle all this because Paradise Springs also has a California winery. I know you're involved in that.

**Rob Cox**

It's a lot of, you know, it's funny, especially when I get a new assistant who hasn't worked for me before. We'll get things rolling in Virginia, obviously California is three hours behind. And as we get kind of in our sweet spot in Virginia, I'm getting emails or calls from the California because I am the executive winemaker over those wines there. I do have a lot of the decision-making power on things over there as far as the wines we're

making, yeast selection, barrels and all that. I do blend those wines and taste those wines and have a lot of decision-making power over what we're doing on the West Coast.

**Fred Reno**

Have they ever sold any of the Paradise Springs Norton at the tasting room in Santa Barbara,

**Rob Cox**

They have. When I go out and do a wine club member event for the West Coast I would say and I'm not exaggerating, 50% of my time is spent talking to our customers about Norton. It's foreign to them now, especially the ones that are lifelong west coasters, obviously. And it's been well received actually. They don't have any preconceived notion like a lot of people do here in Virginia. That's one of the great things as we've been talking about hybrids, and Norton, because like, especially the younger generation getting into wine, they don't necessarily want to be pigeonholed into what their parents are drinking, they're much more open to trying different stuff and experimenting. And that's kind of helped with another group of people getting into hybrids. or mowing and all that.

**Fred Reno**

Well, my aha moment was several years ago, DuCard Vineyard Norton was our first we served at the Homestead as part of the program with the Virginia Wine Experience, where we have a dinner every month with guest vintners, and we served the DuCard Norton at the end of the dinner. Now, none of these guests at this dinner, other than Scott, his wife, myself and wife, had ever had a bottle of Norton, I had the staff decant the wine about an hour before the dinner, put it back in the bottle so the guests could see the brand. And I watched the reaction around the table, and uniformly by the end of the dinner that was the wine everybody wanted more of. And I thought to myself, Oh, I get it when Norton is served to people who don't have any preconceived notions as you mentioned, had never had it before, in the right environment, they love it. And I thought it's the trade and the press. They're the problem right now. How do we get past the trade and the

**press and their obvious bias against Norton? That's, that was my aha moment.**

**Rob Cox**

**Yeah, I agree. I mean, there's a definite rhetoric, if you will put out there on certain varieties like Norton or hybrids our less quality. If you like it, drink it, you know, and have an appreciation for it. Don't tell anybody that your palate is less than theirs is because you prefer Norton over Merlo, or Petit Verdot. That's one of the things that attracted me to the wine industry is I love the diversity about it. Norton produced at Chrysalis is different than Norton produced at Paradise Springs or different than Norton at Ducard. Just like we make Cabernet Franc as a single varietal in California from Happy Canyon Vineyard, and we have it here in Virginia. And we have done an event where we poured Cabernet Franc side by side and there are certain properties of Cabernet Franc that are inherent to wherever you grow it or whatever you're doing in the cellar, but then they diverge because of terroir. If you like what we are doing on the West Coast drink it, if you prefer what we're doing on the East Coast, drink it. Make your own judgments on a lot of this stuff.**

**Fred Reno**

**I couldn't agree more. Rob, on that note, I'm going to say Thank You, and I appreciate you coming here and enjoy some White Burgundy and talking Norton.**

**Rob Cox**

**Cheers. Thanks for having me, Fred.**