

EPISODE # 12 TODD KLIMAN/AUTHOR OF THE WILD WINE.

SPEAKERS

Todd Kliman, Fred Reno

Fred Reno

Let's start here, Todd. Just real quickly, briefly, a bit of your background for the audience and why and how you ended up in the wine universe.

Todd Kliman

I've been a journalist, including an investigative journalist. I've written about sports culture, media, books, art, and politics. I've been embedded with gangs I've written about bullfighting. I traveled the country and the world. When I was in my late teens, I didn't go to college right away. I didn't take a gap year I didn't know if I was going to go. And I, I spent a couple of years writing for magazines, traveling the country chasing stories. And that was my life until I eventually did go to college and eventually to grad school. I ended up becoming a professor, I taught literature and writing for 10 years.

Fred Reno

Oh my God, I didn't know that. That's unbelievable.

Todd Kliman

Seven of those years were at Howard University. Also, at Howard I was the editorial director of a publication that was started the time

Chris Rock called the hilltop journal, which the effort was to kind of have something to rival the Harvard Lampoon, but a black version of it. So, I shepherded that was a magazine of satire for college students.

Fred Reno

How did you land a gig at the Washingtonian magazine as a food and wine editor.

Todd Kliman

I had been writing a little bit here and there about food and wine. I wrote a column and I've been doing a lot of freelance work, even as a professor, a lot of work on my own writing. You know, essays and book reviews and long feature pieces for magazines, including about people like Allen Iverson and his posse and, and Frank Rich at the New York Times, and all sorts of people, and always had a love of food and drink. And I've always been a person who would build a vacation around food and drink and travel, food and chasing food. And that was in my blood. It was really kind of a legacy of my parents. And I started to write this column, and then eventually did it full time. And did it for about two years. For the Washington City Paper, which was one of the country's great all weekly, so many amazing people came out of there, Jelani Cobb, was at The New Yorker, Tallahassee Coates, who's written a couple of terrific books, and is that the Atlantic, David Carr, who went on to the New York Times and became a star there, a lot of lot of really good people. And it was a really good gig. It was an interesting gig. And I did that column and loved it. They gave me the latitude to do what I wanted to do, which was to go out there and find the things that are interesting to me, and not just write about what is good, or what is great, which, for a lot of a lot of the industry, it changed a great bit. But the idea of writing about something that's

interesting, a lot of people have a problem with that. They want you to write about what's great. Tell me what is great. For me writing about what's interesting, is more important than writing about what is great. And so, if you find something that is at the intersection of good or great and interesting, then that's really wonderful. So, I had the latitude to write profiles, to write many essays, to write reviews and to write about the behind the scenes. So, it was really a great thing. And then that column won a James Beard Award the second year that I had done it, actually, I guess, technically the first because I had written a column, but the column didn't launch until about seven or eight months into my time there. I won the Beard Award and then the Washingtonian magazine came calling and said, Let's talk, and they were willing to double my salary and quadruple my eating out budget. And that eating out budget was, by the way, in excess of what I got paid to teach college. Shows you the priorities in this country.

Fred Reno

Let me ask you. What inspired you to write the book *The Wild Vine*? What was the inspiration?

Todd Kliman

I learned about the story through Jenni McCloud. I had not known about it then and I actually went out thinking I was going to write a column about Norton. And then I didn't, because the story was so complex, there were so many dimensions to what I had learned. And I was interested, but I held off because it seemed big. So, I didn't write it and I toyed with the idea of maybe doing a long piece about it. And then I did work on the side reading up on Dr. Norton, you know, trying to learn the finer points of the story, which is a grand story, a lot of different dimensions. That was how it went for a while. And then, you

know, I became closer to Jenni. And I knew an interesting piece of Jenni's story of her first, but when my knowledge of the Norton story started to increase my knowledge of Jenni started to increase, I thought, there's something here I can work with. A story for me, it has to be more than just something with a good beginning, middle and an end, a lot of people say, well, this is this is a great story. It seemingly comes out of nowhere; it reaches this incredible height. It's so much about the American story of wine and maybe the American story. And then it kind of disappears, and then it's reborn again, and that is interesting, but it wasn't really interesting enough to me, if I'm going to work on something for a time, I don't even really mean length, but it it's of any kind of length, beyond maybe a column or an article, it has a kind of capture my imagination. The story was interesting, especially as I learn more about Dr. Norton.

Fred Reno

How long did this take to research? How long were you working on this book?

Todd Kliman

This was this was probably about a year and a half in, and I wasn't at that time working on a book, I was gathering. In the writing life, there are a lot of projects that you work on, and nobody ever knows about them. You pursue them because they're interesting, and you hope that you can bring them into harbor. So, I was working on this and then I got to the point where I knew a great deal about Jenni, more than I would have, if I were just say interviewing her for a feature piece in a magazine over weeks and months and multiple times, I mean way beyond what you would do for, say, a profile. And when I realized that Jenni was a story in her own right, and the Norton was a story in its

own right. I thought, you know, there is something here, but then I was also kind of like, well, what do I do? Like, here's this one story. That's so amazing. And here's this other story. And I realized that at a certain point, not as quickly as I would have hoped, it took some time, but they that they did connect and the ways that they connected were interesting to me. That's the kind of thing I'm looking for, something with rootedness. In other words, where this the thing that you see on the top level, you know, you look out on the landscape, and you see trees, right? Then you go beneath the ground, you get into the soil, the subsoil, you see, the root systems are all connected. And that's really what it's like with some kinds of stories where you realize that things connect. There are elements that are echoing in one aspect that were there in another? And that's where it gets really exciting. I'm curious,

Fred Reno

So, I am curious because this leads me to my next question. What was it like when you first met Dennis Horton? What was he like?

Todd Kliman

Dennis was really interesting. One of the people I think was kind of emblematic of the Norton cast of characters, because Dennis is his own person. He seems lit by fire. He's very idiosyncratic, very much, he's going to drive for what he believes in. And I've always been drawn to people like that, and, you know, speaks his mind and really kind of a free spirit. The thing is, what I what I learned over time, is that there were a lot of Dennis in this story, almost everybody in a way was a kind of Dennis, Jenni is a kind of a Dennis, right? Most of the people in this cast of characters are a kind of a Dennis. That's also where it becomes kind of fun because you see that this grape is really one of the characters in the story. It's Dr. Norton. It's also Jenni McCloud.

Those two are kind of for me in thinking about the book structurally which I spent a lot of time on they are the tent poles, Jenni in the present day, Dr. Norton in the past, and the fact that they could not seem on the surface to be more dissimilar. But you go beneath the level of the surface, you go into the subsoil, and you realize there are actually a lot of affinities. And so, all along that continuum between Dr. Norton and Jenni, you see a lot of people who are very much alike.

Fred Reno

Well, so what was it like, the first time you had a bottle or a glass of Norton?

Todd Kliman

The very first time?

Fred Reno

Yeah, I am curious.

Todd Kliman

Well, I didn't love it. I didn't love it as a drinker. I didn't love it. But the fact that I didn't love it was interesting to me, because what struck me immediately was that it didn't taste like anything that I had a reference point for, yes, it's big, it's red, there's a certain kind of weight to it. It didn't fit in the categories. And so, I was interested in that, you and it was also kind of like, whoa, why is this so different? And why don't I know about it. And as I learned the story, I started to understand more and more but Fred the fact that he didn't love it was really of no importance to me. You know, there's a book out about Pinot Noir. I think it's titled something like the, you know, the noble grape. And, yeah, there are people who don't love Pinot Noir. But I do. But there

are people who don't, and there are a lot who do. And there are a lot who do love something. And Norton doesn't have that many people who do love it. And I don't always know if I love it, but I love what it is. I love what it embodies. I love its story. And you know, as a wine when it's made well, I enjoy it. And there's a lot in it, there's a lot of versatility. It's a really good wine in a lot of contexts. But it's also about so much more. It's this wine that links you up to American history, it links you up to this fascinating cast of characters. That it really is an American original.

Fred Reno

The first time I had a bottle of Norton was when I moved to Virginia, in 2019. I had been in the wine industry 40 years, and I had never had a bottle of Norton in my life. This bottle happened to be DuCard Vineyards. And I thought this is interesting. But I got really lucky. Because the second bottle of Norton I had was a 2002 Vintage when I was interviewing Shep Rouse at Rockbridge Winery for my Podcast. Now this is 2020. Now I'm tasting an 18-year-old Norton. And I'm like, wow, so this is what this wine can turn into if it's well made and aged correctly. That just opened my eyes.

Todd Kliman

I had this very much the same experience when I tasted the older Norton's because it's dramatically different. And I think a lot of people who dismiss it haven't had that experience.

Fred Reno

That is true. That's exactly true. I would love your take on something that I've concluded doing these interviews for my Norton Podcast. Especially after I interviewed Bruce Zoecklein. We talk about Norton

here in Virginia still as a grape varietal but there's no terroir story associated with it. And every terrific wine in the world has a terroir story of some kind associated with it. My definition of terroir is it's a three-legged stool. You have the one leg which is really climate, because climate dominates all agricultural products no matter what. The second is course is not just soil, but site selection, elevation, all the things that go into that. But equally if not more important, is the hand of man and what you do with that resource. And I think one of the reasons there's no terroir story, for the most part, here in Virginia, is simply because people were told it's a bulletproof grape, you can plant it anywhere. So, a lot of people just planted it in the worst sites in their vineyard, knowing it was going to survive. I kid Jenni and I say, Well, you kind of stumbled into this Jenni. After 25 years you have the largest Norton vineyard in the world. You have been able to identify within your vineyard what are the best sites for producing the type of wine that will reflect that. Therefore, she makes four or five different Norton's. And that confuses people because they think Norton is just singular. Right? Right. We have to get to that space where we're starting to talk about Norton in terms of terroir and starting to plant it in better sites, and what it can do, that would be fascinating.

Todd Kliman

I really agree with that. And I think if you want to talk about American wine, its terroir story is the ultimate, right? I mean, if you want to broaden terroir, you know, your three-legged stool, we can add a few legs to that. That's where our story becomes larger. But I think if you look at where Norton has thrived, Virginia, Missouri. Both, on the same latitude. And these are not places that most people, even most wine drinkers think of as wine coming from. And, I think people have a greater awareness that wine is made all around the country, but it's not

to say most of them believe in and I think the industry in in these states, isn't really that keen on getting behind certain of these varieties or certain of these expressions, because they're limited in their mass appeal. As you know, Norton is divisive. So, for me, that's interesting. Norton, to me is a wine that people love it. if they drink it, and they get behind, they love it. They love something about it, or they hate it. I know a lot of people in the wine world and a lot of critics hate it. very little in between.

Fred Reno

Well, the thing is, for almost two years now, unfailing every night, the last glass of red wine I have before I go to bed, it's a glass with Norton, for almost two years. And what I've come to realize is, you do not quaff Norton, and people quaff wine these days. I'm not saying it's bad, but people quaff wine. For me Norton is a wine you sip and pondered it. I call it an intellectual wine that makes you think, makes you step back and think. And that's quite fascinating.

Todd Kliman

That's a great point. It very much is, particularly when you know the larger story, you can reflect on how we got to this point, who are these people? And what has this meant over the centuries? But I do think even without that, it is a very much is a cerebral experience in addition to an essential one,

Fred Reno

Are you aware? And have you heard about the research and what Lucie Morton has been working on, where she believes that Cynthiana and Norton are separate grapes and not the same grape. She's been working with the head of the extension service, University of Missouri.

And they've been doing this DNA sequencing, and they're about ready to release their findings. She's traveled all over the world recently, too and she came back from Brazil, on her quest to reclaim the Cunningham grape which is another Virginia grape. And she said what they have down there is mostly Cynthiana. If she proves this, this will be interesting. And you may not have heard about this, but Shannon and Sharon Horton a year ago, listened to Lucie. In 2023, Lucie identified certain rows of vines in their vineyard that she said were Norton, and certain rows that were Cynthiana. They picked them separately, kept them separate and vinified them separately. And they're about to bottle them separately. And I was lucky enough to be given a half bottle of each right out of the tank last November by Shannon, and I took them home right away. They hadn't been sulphured or anything, and I put them in the refrigerator. Tasted them that night. It was really interesting the Cynthiana was slightly lighter in color, but not a lot. It was definitely more elegant, even in that youthful stage, where the Norton was this big brute that just jumped out of the glass and smacked you in the face. I put them back what was left in the refrigerator, came back the next night. Tasted them individually first, and then blended them together. And man, that Cynthiana just calmed that Norton right down and turned into sort of an elegant, youthful wine. I was stunned. I thought there's something here.

Todd Kliman

If I recall, and you know, my memory may be faulty because this research was a long time ago, but I remember doing a lot of reading. I read too much to do this book. But it became kind of interesting to me to explore all this, but I do remember people we're talking about that Cynthiana and Norton in the 19th century. And how they were different. That doesn't really surprise me. But I think that's interesting work.

Fred Reno

She says that there are a number of vineyards in Virginia, which are interdispersed with Cynthiana that were sold as Norton. And that would not surprise me. I mean, the nurseries, not just Norton or Cynthiana, but the nurseries have mis-marked vines for decades here in this country that they're selling. So, half the time you don't even know what you have. Until somebody like Lucie comes along and can identify because of her skills in ampelography can say No, that's what that is. What was the response to the book? You released this book in 2010. That's relatively uncharted territory to some degree about Norton. What was the response to the book early on?

Todd Kliman

I mean, it depends on kind of what precinct we're talking about in the wine world. Well, let me just say, I think in general, you know, the book is a hybrid, just like the grape is. And hybrids in whatever form, in any realm tend to befuddle people, you know, like, what is this? I'm drawn to hybrids; I'm drawn to hybridity to crossing lines like that. But a lot of people aren't. And so there was some kind of, you know, befuddlement there. That is because we're talking about the main character and beyond the main character, but the frame of the story, of this entire book is a transgender woman when this was just not talked about in this culture, I remember going to Crown my publisher a division of Random House. And as I said listen, I know you might think the story is kind of like, sexy, but please, don't push that aspect of it in order to try to, you know, get over with the book. So, they listened; good for them, but they stayed away from it entirely. I didn't love that. I think that it's, you know, it's a kind of a coyness, we don't need to run from that. I wouldn't have written the book without it. In a way this book is this

person's story, shining a certain kind of light on the Norton story, and the Norton story, the Dr. Norton story, but also the grape story, and also the way they amplify certain aspects within her journey. That to me was, was really interesting to me, this book is a trans book, in that it's about crossings of different kinds. The Norton is a crossing, it's a hybrid, Jenni, her story, the way that story weaves with Dr. Norton, the various ways that these characters are kind of twining around each other all the time. But that that was not something that people knew really what to do with that, in 2010, in the US, and in the south, and in the Midwest, in particular. Nobody wanted to talk about that aspect of the book. In fact, I had one person say, who was interviewing me? Why did you think to include that woman's story?

Fred Reno

Oh, Jesus?

Todd Kliman

Well, I would more than include it. It's the flesh of this story. So that was interesting. Unfortunate because I think it hurt, you know, some of the interest. In the wine world, I think, you know, the thing that's mystifying is people know, Cabernet Sauvignon, they know Merlot. They know Pinot Noir. They know Washington, Oregon, and California, and they know the European countries, maybe they know Chile, and maybe Argentina, they don't know this part of the wine story, and it's in their own country. And if they are interested, it doesn't seem like something that they should really care about it. So that's a risk if you're talking about commercially, I don't really care about that I was trying to write about something that was interesting to me, and also a way for me to write about things that that throughout my career, which is

culture, which is the outsider, which is how does the individual or individuals, how do they function against a broad canvas?

Fred Reno

Well, the book the book is brilliant. I tell everybody when I send it to and I'm pretty close to about 100 copies of the Wild Vine that I bought with my own dime and send it to people in the industry. And almost uniformly Todd, they come back and go, I had no idea. This is brilliant. I said, Listen, this is not a dry read. This is not a textbook about Norton. This is a novel. And it reads like a novel. But it's real. It's true. And that's what makes it so genuine and authentic, and so much fun to read. I'm actually rereading it this week, I started rereading at night, over my glass of Norton. And there's so many layers you've put in here that if you read it, 2,3,4 or five times, you get something else out of it, I find rewarding.

Todd Kliman

Also, I've been working on it for a really long time. I'm telling you this, this is just for you. You know anybody listening in, maybe it's not so much for them. But it's for you since you you've been such a champion. And you've read the book so many times, and you're continuing to read it as you have your nightly glass. I had been working on it for a while, the research for close to four years. I spent years interviewing Jenni McCloud, without a notebook around, without a tape recorder. Because I felt that this is about peeling the onion, you know, it's trying to pull layers, trying to make somebody comfortable. So that, it doesn't feel like interviewer and subject. And that's a very intimate thing. I talk to writers and journalists about this, it requires being vulnerable in the process. Because that person has to feel that you're going to give up parts of yourself to write, I wanted that. And I think that

shows to some degree in the book, I would like it to show more. But I don't know if I got there. But the other thing is that while I was writing it, you know, really the end part of my research, my father had become ill, and it was a very bitter end, my father and I were extraordinarily close. My father was my mentor, my teacher, my friend. So, he died in this process. And I had, I had a big writing stint. I had been writing and writing and writing. But most of the books got finished after he died. And it was a big rush. And when I last went back and looked, and this is the thing that I'm going to tell you; I knew that so much of the Norton story is about death and rebirth. Dr. Norton's almost death, and then his rebirth, the wine the vine, it's almost lost, forgotten and then reborn, Jenni's kind of death as a man and her rebirth as a woman, you know, that image of the hardback copy of the butterfly, emerging out of the caterpillar. I knew all of this. But what's really funny is death really was in my mind, and it's in the deep tissue of every single page. And when I went back, and I looked, I was just kind of stunned. Even though I drove the engine, I was just stunned to see that in so much of the book, page after page, images of death, images of rebirth, lost redemption, whatever.

Fred Reno

Thank you for sharing that. I mean, the book again, folks, if you haven't read the Wild Vine, go get a copy. Because it's not just a wine book. And you've really articulated that really well, in this interview Todd. It's a book about a lot of different dimensions about people, about death, and rebirth. And it's everything. I mean, it's American history.

Todd Kliman

Yeah, it is definitely American history. To me, the Norton story, and American history is an area that's always been a fascination for me.

And there are things about the Norton story that I think using the small little thing can get you to understand certain interesting aspects of this history. I'll give you one. So, there was a moment in this country's emergence. Let's talk about culturally, late 1860s, that period 1860s 70s 80s. Coming out of the Civil War, you have in that period of incredible ferment, which lays the foundation for what we see in the 20th century. In literature. You have Walt Whitman; you have Mark Twain really these titans and they're trying to break free from The European influence and they do. They create a new sound; they create a new language for American writing. You see it happening in music. Jazz isn't Jazz yet, but you can see what Jazz is going to become. It's this fusion of these different elements. English balladry, you know, a certain kind of Irish here and there, African rhythms coming together this new sound that you're seeing in the late 1880s, 1890s, you have Norton in this time, and Norton is the wine is putting the US on the wine map, right? And what happens is prohibition comes and that evolution, that journey is just stopped. It doesn't get to continue on its path, the way American literature does the way the novel does.

Fred Reno

Todd that is a fascinating sort of analysis.

Todd Kliman

So, this thing is stunted. What would have happened had it continued along that path. And I think that just as we saw with American music, sounding nothing like its forebears, American poetry and American art, American drama, and fiction, sounding nothing like its forebears. Norton was that same kind of break. But Norton didn't get a chance to finish on its journey. So, when it's back up, after Prohibition, what happens? I mean, that is 40, 50 years later. And all that knowledge is

lost, all the continuity is lost, the people who know what to do, they're not there, right? To start over. Imagine that had not happened. If that happened, I think it's really easy to think that Virginia and Missouri would be the most venerated wine regions in the country. That's not to say that they would make individual bottles as good as what's coming out of California. That's not to say that, but they would be venerated; people would say, this is where it began, you could probably make a case that these old vine states, you know, Missouri still has some of the pre prohibition vines, that they would be producing some of the best wine in the country. But the other thing that fascinates me. And this goes back to Twain, Whitman, and Jazz and that whole period, they all sounded like something different. They all have an American sound and American way. The wines that we drink now, which are made in this country, they don't have an American sound or way they sound, so to speak. Like Europe.

Fred Reno

That's a really great point.

Todd Kliman

We would have had wines, like you're talking about Cunningham, Cynthiana, Norton, and a whole host of others, Clinton all these wines that have been lost to time, right? That would have been what Americans would have thought of as wine. On the palate people would have said, this is what wine is supposed to be. And that's what was lost.

Fred Reno

Well, man, on that note, I'm going to say thank you for taking the time because that's such a brilliant analysis of everything Todd. It gives me

a lot more to think about that I hadn't even thought about; that aspect of what could have been, and because now I'm living in the moment of what it. All I'm trying to do with Norton is to get people to learn like I'm learning all this history, but also drinking Norton, Norton, Norton and aging it, you know. Thanks Todd.