

## **EPISODE #15 BURNLEY VINEYARDS/LEE REEDER**

### **SPEAKERS**

Fred Reno, Lee Reeder

#### **Fred Reno**

Welcome Lee and Dawn.

#### **Lee Reeder**

Privilege to be here.

#### **Fred Reno**

Well, it is my privilege. So, as I always do, let me start at the beginning. What's your story? Why did your parents decide they were going to plant a vineyard? What was the inspiration behind all that?

#### **Lee Reeder**

Well, in 1976 my Dad was in the military, and he picked Charlottesville for his last tour of duty. And he was thinking about lots of different things to do when he retired. We moved here, and he met people starting vineyards and wineries. And one of his colleagues says, "I know a great place to grow grapes. It's not for sale, but the old lady will sell it to you. And then we knew Gabriele Rausse from Barboursville Vineyards and he walked the place and said, Yeah, you could probably grow grapes here. So we bought it in 1977 and then started planting grapes.

#### **Fred Reno**

Wow, you were one of the early pioneers in Virginia then.

**Lee Reeder**

Yeah, there were a dozen wineries or so. And our handshake deal with Barboursville and Gabriele was, we buy your grape vines, and we'll buy your grapes. And that's sort of how we got started. Then we evolved to selling our grapes to Meredyth Vineyards and Naked Mountain. And then started our own place.

**Fred Reno**

What year was your first vintage?

**Lee Reeder**

1980 was our first grape vintage. The wine vintage was '84.

**Fred Reno**

Okay, and were you the winemaker then?

**Lee Reeder**

Yes, from the very beginning. I went to Virginia Tech and through my parents, I was introduced to Dr Bill Cooler in the Food Science Department, and he taught a wines and vines class, and he would bring students to our vineyard, and pick the leftover grapes that the pickers missed. His desire was to start the Enology program at VA Tech. And I did two years of undergraduate research under him, doing projects to help him gather support for the enology program.

**Fred Reno**

Oh, so that was pre Bruce Zoecklein and Tony Wolf.

**Lee Reeder**

Yeah, that would have been basically 1981/82 & 1982/83 those school years.

**Fred Reno**

Wow, fascinating. What's the total acreage at Burnley under a vine at this point currently?

**Lee Reeder**

It is 26 acres.

**Fred Reno**

Okay, 26 acres? Is that Max for your best sites?

**Lee Reeder**

No. I mean, we've had 32 acres. And, we took out six acres just to concentrate on what we have.

**Fred Reno**

So how did Norton come into the mix? Because you didn't have Norton obviously, to begin with,

**Lee Reeder**

Not when we first started. And of course, Barboursville wasn't selling Norton grapevines in 1977 so when we started, we planted, where the Norton is, Cabernet Sauvignon. The problem with Cabernet, where we planted it with the rootstock and the place, we planted it was too vigorous, and wouldn't harden off for the winter, and then it would die back for a couple years. My dad and I would bury the vines for the winter, which is very labor intensive. When we first started planning,

we planted on what we thought was the highest elevation. But, we really have, like, two hills. We discovered the other Hill was actually a little higher, and because of the layout of the land was actually like three or four degrees warmer in the wintertime. So, then we started Oplanting Cabernet on the other Hill, and took the Cabernet out, and tried Marechal Foch, because we were selling to Meredyth, and they grew a lot of it, and that didn't really do well. And then Dennis Horton was promoting the bulletproof Norton. That's what we planted there, and it's done well ever since.

**Fred Reno**

Well, you were kind enough to show Lucy Morton this first purchase order from Oost Familie nursery & winery in Arkansas. And I have a copy of it here. It's fascinating because it clearly says Cynthiana not Norton.

**Lee Reeder**

Right and at the time, you know, ATF said you could label it either way because they're so close. And that's the only source of vines I could get.

**Fred Reno**

And that was 1996 I see in this PO right?

**Lee Reeder**

So, we would have planted, that was in the fall of 1996, so we would have planted in the spring of 1997

**Fred Reno**

You probably didn't have your first vintage until 2001.

**Lee Reeder**

Yeah, 2000 2001

**Fred Reno**

You've been making wine for 20 some years. Yeah, 25 years. What do you see? What are the challenges you face with handling Norton vs vinifera or other grapes?

**Lee Reeder**

Well, Norton is a completely different animal. It's an American hybrid. When the grapes first bud out, you don't see little grape clusters like in vinifera. It's not until the third leaf that you see the grapes. So when you see them budding out, you look and say, there's no grapes. What happened to them? And then they grow, and when they first start budding out, the vineyard is like rust color. It's like red, and the vinifera, it's all green, and it's just a different animal to, it's so vigorous. I mean, we have to do massive pruning, cut like three or four feet off every summer, you know, to maintain the growth and just make it so it's not a nightmare, but you don't have to spray it much, which is good, And it's the last thing that we pick. From that standpoint, it's really nice, because you can pick everything else, concentrate on that and get back to the picking the Norton.

**Fred Reno**

With Lucie Morton's latest, I don't want to call it discovery, but she's certainly on the trail to prove that Cynthiana is a different grape than the Norton itself. They tell me, Norton is a seed pocket. Let's talk about Cynthiana, which is what you bought your grapes as. Is it a seed pocket? You get three, four or five seeds per berry?

**Lee Reeder**

That's an interesting question. I don't really, yeah, we don't really eat the grapes.

**Fred Reno**

I understand what you're saying. I mean, for pressing and all that.

**Lee Reeder**

Well, it's so inky red when you destem it and put it in a tank. I call it my bloody mess to clean up, because it looks like you just put a human through the Destemmer. But I really never noticed that it was either more or less seeds than other grapes. Okay, I never really thought of that.

**Fred Reno**

Have you ever done any comparative, either intentionally or accidentally, tasting of your Norton with other Norton's from the different areas here in Virginia to see what the differences may or may not be between Cynthiana and Norton.

**Lee Reeder** No, I and I never really thought of the differences of Cynthiana and Norton. And talking to Lucy Morton, Cynthiana is from Ohio, where Norton's from Virginia, so whether they're cousins or whatever, I just try to concentrate on making the wine the best that it can be. Experimenting with different yeast, different barrels, temperatures and stuff like that.

**Fred Reno**

What is the idea, I in your 20 plus years' experience growing a grapes, what would you call kind an ideal climatic condition vintage for Norton.

### **Lee Reeder**

Well, in '06 we had the severe drought, where we had water rations in Orange County. And by the time we got to pick the Norton, it had started shriveling on the vine. The grapes were like starting to become raisins. And when we picked it, we got 26 bricks, which was really high for Virginia, right? You know, maybe not for California or Sicily, but for Virginia, that's really high, and that made a really great wine. And that's when I started thinking about doing Norton as a port style red. But in general, we want dry. I mean, all grapes want dry, semi-arid conditions, so you have high bricks and low disease pressure.

### **Fred Reno**

I will tell you the '08 Burnley Norton, which has been my last, just to back up a second, the last glass red wine I have every night before I go to bed for two years now, is a glass of Norton. I open a bottle and pour 4 or 5 ounces. Put it back in refrigerator and that 2008 Burnley right there, that empty bottle you see right over their shoulder there. It was my last glass of red wine last week. And it was fun to watch the evolution of this wine over four or five nights and how it in fact changed and evolved but it held up beautifully even by the fifth day just sitting in the closet, not in the refrigerator, right? With all that air in it. There was an elegance in the wine after five days.

### **Lee Reeder**

I don't consider Norton an elegant wine, right? I mean, I describe it to Lucie Morton as the brash American wine that will never become refined and gentle.

**Fred Reno**

I'm going to give you a little top off of this Chablis Dawn because it looks like you're enjoying your orange juicer this morning. It's lovely. It is pretty good, isn't it? Yeah, it was very nice. It's hard to replace White Burgundy, folks. It's the standard by which I judge all chardonnays. If I could divert from the Norton for a second, I do want to put a plug in for your Riesling. Okay, I think it's a really terrific bottle of wine. It's always surprised me. How old are those vines?

**Lee Reeder**

Well, in the spring break of '82 my girlfriend, who is now my wife, we started planting Riesling, and she still stuck with me after planting a acre or so of Riesling. I've always liked Riesling. I've always liked the really fruitiness, the German Mosel style, not that we have their climate, but I try to make it more to that style, and I've gone through a bunch of different yeast to achieve that.

**Fred Reno**

Well, I was impressed with it. It's got a unique character to it, especially for Virginia Riesling.

**Lee Reeder**

A lot of people have given up on Riesling in Virginia, right? Used to be a pretty common grape here. I guess I'm just too stubborn to take it out.

**Fred Reno**

Back to Norton or Cynthiana in your case. What type of trellising system do you have?

**Lee Reeder**

Well, when we started, you know, we were relying on Gabriele Rausse. He came out, walked the place. And then when we planted Barboursville vines, you know, he came out once a week to tell us what to do, and he said, the Casar Sas system, I can even teach you dumb Americans how to use it. And that's what we've always done. And it might not be the best for Cynthiana, but it works. And we've never concentrated on the highest quantity of grapes. We've always tried to get around three tons an acre.

**Fred Reno**

They say that Norton, not Cynthiana, but Norton itself, can be fluctuate from vintage to vintage,

**Lee Reeder**

Yes, as far as volume, yeah, definitely. I see the same thing. Some years we see a little bit of winter damage, which will reduce the crop unfortunately, some years where there's more spring frost pressure, and some years, it's perfect, but it's still not as much as the previous year.

**Fred Reno**

What's it like in a tasting room, when your customers, and this goes back a ways, come in, and they never had Norton before, and then all of a sudden they're tasting Norton. What is their reaction?

**Lee Reeder**

Norton, because it's a unique vine to grow, it's a unique wine to sell, and people either really love Norton or really dislike it, and it's the last of the dry reds that we taste.

**Fred Reno**

This polarization I keep hearing about Norton is prevalent in almost every situation I've talked to about in the Virginia tasting room that has Norton to taste.

**Lee Reeder**

I tell people, you know, we do four dry reds and age them all in French oak. And I tell customers that I would have each of the Reds with a different meal, Norton with something that's demanding on your taste buds, Cajun, Jamaican, blackened South African that has really a lot of flavor components to it, to stand up to the wine.

**Fred Reno**

Well, the thing about Norton that I've always said that really dawned on me was Norton is a serious wine. And by then, I mean, people quaff wine these days, right? And there's nothing wrong with quaffing wine, but people quaff wine. You don't quaff Norton. You sip it, you ponder it. You just kind of wonder, wow, what is this?

**Lee Reeder**

Because there's so many layers to it. It's a complicated wine.

**Fred Reno** I think that's why I enjoy it, as my last glass of red wine at night, is because I sip it and ponder it and go into sort of these intellectual corridors where I wouldn't normally go.

**Lee Reeder**

I agree and that is why I like the Norton as a port style, because it's even more intense. It's even more depth of characters. And it's like you can get lost in the glass.

**Fred Reno**

I keep challenging every vintner during this series of my Norton podcast. So, who's going to be the first to put Norton in an outsized bottle, a Magnum, a three liter bottle, or say, a nine liter bottle? Would we live long enough for that to mature, to try that?

**Lee Reeder**

Well, if that. For me, I'll tell you that I'm sort of stuck with the 750s.

**Fred Reno**

No, I understand, but boy, I'm just curious what a larger volume Norton would taste like after five or 10 years. Bottle age, comparatively speaking, because most people haven't had the advantage like you have of being able to sell older vintages, which is what I really like. But most consumers haven't tasted a 10- or 15-year-old Norton and understand what the transformation is, right?

**Lee Reeder**

That's why we started doing the vertical tastings of Norton. This year I guess the oldest was the '09. Last year we had the '08. But Norton ages very, very well, at least 20 years in the bottle.

**Fred Reno**

Well, that's what opened my eyes. In my 40 years in the wine industry I'd never had a bottle of Norton before until I moved to Virginia, and it

was just by coincidence, my wife was at a farmer's market and came home one day, and hey, she had a bottle of DuCard Norton. I had been wanting to try Norton for a long time, and we opened it and tried it., I said, this is really quite good. Now, at the time, I didn't realize that the small amount of 1 ½ acre in his vineyard is a mix between Norton and Cynthiana. Then the second bottle of Norton I had was a 2002 from Rockbridge Shep Rause first vintage when I was interviewing him for my podcast, and he unsolicited pulled it out and opened it for me. And after tasting that, I thought that's what this wine turns into, amazing. And this would have been in 2020 Yeah, 2020 so 18, going on 19 years age. And I was like, it reminded me of an old BV Private Reserve that I used to get from the 70s out of California. I thought, this is pretty remarkable, that this wine can turn into this and that's how my fascination for Norton began, after having that experience of tasting a well-aged, well-made Norton. And it was just hard to describe to people, especially when all you may have had was young Norton,

### **Lee Reeder**

Yeah, we just tasted our '21 and it's like, it's amazing how young that is.

### **Fred Reno**

I tasted that. I just was looking at my notes earlier when I visited you a couple of weeks ago, and there is a lot of promise in that wine.

### **Lee Reeder**

Yeah, it's just like, three years old, but it looks like it's freshly bottled. Needs another five or six years definitely. Norton needs patience. You need to have a lot of patience with Norton. Well,

**Fred Reno**

I would think that sustainability becoming a big buzzword in the wine industry, farming and agriculture, given that you don't have to spray Norton like you do other varietals, there's going to be more and more interest in Norton. In the planting of Norton going on, not just in Virginia, but I think other growing areas around the country actually.

**Lee Reeder**

I mean we're Norton fans and, the winery to the north of me, hired a new winemaker, and they took all their Norton out.

**Fred Reno**

Oh my god.

**Lee Reeder**

So, you have both sides. It's this love-hate relationship.,

**Fred Reno**

Well, I agree with you, Lee. I've seen that in winemakers I've talked to, there's winemakers who just hate to produce Norton. They are like oh, it's just so much work.

**Lee Reeder**

The summer pruning is a lot of work. My wife would agree with that, but once you get Summer pruning done, it's pretty much takes care of itself. As far as growing the grapes.

**Fred Reno**

I am referring to what they say about in the cellar. They're talking about how much work it is.

**Lee Reeder**

To me, it's about the same work as making anything else. It's just that it's a bigger cleanup, but it's about the same amount of work. You don't get as much juice. It's more solids. But it's basically the same. And, you know, you put it in barrels and come back six months later and see what you have.

**Fred Reno**

Well, I'm curious. On that note, a ton of grapes. What would be the average case goods you would get out of that.

**Lee Reeder**

We try to get 150 gallons per ton. Okay, that's our goal, which is not on the high side, not at all, yeah. But, you know with three tons an acre, 150 gallons, we're trying to get the best quality, the best foot forward that we can do, right?

**Fred Reno**

Well, that's not a lot of wine. right?

**Lee Reeder**

And we don't do a really hard pressing, so we don't try to extract the bitterness from the from the skins and the seeds.

**Fred Reno**

It seemed like a lot of winemakers that I've talked to about Norton all do something different in the cellar. But now it appears everybody's getting back to saying, hey, it's really more about what's going on in

the vineyard, and then I just got to let the wine make itself and shepherd it correctly.

**Lee Reeder**

That's why they have the term wine growing. Is that we're not magicians. We can't turn nasty grapes into fine wine, garbage in, its garbage out. And as a winemaker, you just try to preserve the quality that you have and that's our goal.

**Fred Reno**

Your mother's still active in the winery.

**Lee Reeder**

Yeah, she still comes down to the winery. She's pretty amazing. She turned 91 in January.

**Fred Reno**

I think I saw her when I was there the last time. So, your customers that come in there must know her and look forward to seeing everybody. It's like a family and a real family winery.

**Lee Reeder**

If she's not there, people ask, How's your mother doing? I hope she's okay. They ask about our kids too. So, it is truly a family winery.

**Fred Reno**

Well, that's what Virginia is about. \

**Lee Reeder**

That's what it started out to be. Before the big money starting coming in.

### **Fred Reno**

I have been quoted as saying that Virginia Wine has soul. The wines have soul, right? Yeah, and they really do. There's a sense of place. When I started tasting Virginia wine, and Norton really exemplifies that, I had this feeling of a sense of place that you don't get anywhere else? I mean, we know all the reasons agriculturally and physiologically, why California can't get physiological ripeness of the vine at 24-degree brix anymore. Then get sugar ripeness. But the seeds are still green. And so, they got to let it hang to 25/26 sometimes 27 degree of brix now. Now you have this big alcoholic wine so they de alc and once you take the alcohol out of the wine, to get the alcohol down you're stripping the soul out of the wine.

### **Lee Reeder**

Well, you are stripping, yeah, definitely.

### **Fred Reno**

Alcohol is the driver behind the expression of the any grape, I think, in any wine, and when you neutralize that, you're taking a soul out of that wine. That's why you can line up 10 Russian River Pinot Noirs or 10 Napa Valley Cabernets, and they all taste the same. They just don't have soul. And I'm hoping Virginia can maintain its soul, because we still have a natural level of alcohol and acidity here that is in such good balance. Let me ask you another question. Climate Change, what have you seen in your 25 years of growing grapes?

### **Lee Reeder**

That's an interesting question. When we started in the 80s, we were picking everything in September, and then by 2000 we started picking everything in October, and now we've sort of gone back to picking everything in September. So, it's almost like a mini shift back. I mean, from what I hear about this harvest, people are starting to pick early.

**Fred Reno**

Oh yeah. I've heard people beginning harvest last week.

**Lee Reeder**

But generally, you know, I've been told that the grapes have a thermostat built into them, that if it's over 87 degrees, it shuts down photosynthesis. So, this heat should actually slow harvest down and not speed it up.

**Fred Reno**

Well, you know what you just said Lee is really interesting, because I learned that a long time ago, when I was in California, in the growing side, and it just seemed like, when it got 90 degrees, the vines just shut down. It's a self-preservation so they don't burn up, yeah? And so that they just don't take that. They stop, right? Yeah, you know. But we're in Virginia, most people don't have any irrigation. Do you have irrigation?

**Lee Reeder**

No, we've never irrigated. We could have benefited from that in the '06 vintage, that's the only year we would have benefited from irrigation. But you need a lot of water to irrigate.

**Fred Reno**

Yeah, ask California.

**Lee Reeder**

An acre of one inch of water is 27,000 gallons. For us, we'd need a half a million gallons to have one inch of rain for the whole vineyard.

**Fred Reno**

That will dry your well up pretty quickly, wouldn't it,

**Lee Reeder**

Well, that's why they have drip irrigation that uses a lot less, yeah, but I mean, but it's a lot of water.

**Fred Reno**

One of the things that I have come to realize while doing this podcast about Norton is that, for the longest time in Virginia, we still talk about Norton as a varietal, and every terrific wine being produced anywhere. In the world there's a terroir story that goes with it, and we need to get to that in Virginia. It's talking about it in the terms of terroir. Why is this Norton, and this expression in this vineyard, different than that Norton in that vineyard, in its expression. And I think once we get there, people will start to, my opinion, get away from this sort of love hate relationship, and start to try to understand Norton and which Norton they like best.

**Lee Reeder**

Well, Norton is not a very good scavenger for water or nutrients. I call it sort of the lazy American that just wants to be fed and watered, but it shows the first drought stress than any other grape. So, the Norton vertical tasting is interesting, because you really can taste the

differences in every growing season. And I would say it would be the same with the soil. You could really be able to taste the difference in the soil from vineyard to vineyard.

### **Fred Reno**

Well, yeah, and I always look at terroir as in my definition what I call the three-legged stool. The first leg, of course, is climate, right? Climatic conditions have an effect on every agricultural product anywhere in the world. So that's a given. Second is site selection, that's soil, that's elevation, it's everything that goes with that. And the third is probably as is important, if not more important, and that's the hand of man, and what you do with that resource once you get it in the cellar.

### **Lee Reeder**

Yeah, and that's what I mean. That's why you can have the same grapes and five winemakers, and you have totally different products, yeah, that's true, with yeast, temperatures, and everything else in the winemaking process.

### **Fred Reno**

Norton is a pretty good example there, because I won't name them off here, but there's any number of producers who are producing Norton, and all the grapes are coming from Chrysalis, but each wine is different. Every expression is different.

### **Lee Reeder**

We've gone from American oak to French oak, and that's a huge difference in the wine, believe it or not, the French oak seems to soften Norton up.

**Fred Reno**

Well, the Norton probably absorbs that oak, in that French oak. You know, it's thriving on it.

**Lee Reeder**

I mean, even with our four different reds that we do, you can really see the difference in each variety of what oak does to it. Where Chambourcin doesn't seem to absorb it, it just sort of throws it back in your face. So, it's just really interesting.

**Fred Reno**

You said something to me when we first met a few years ago that I was curious about. You said that if you were to do it all over again, where you put that Cabernet, where you took your Cabernet out, you might have put in some Crimson Cabernet, which is the cross between Norton and Cabernet Sauvignon. What made you think that? Or have you changed your thoughts on it.

**Lee Reeder**

Well, Lucie Morton helped me change my thought on that, that they're not as hardy as Norton. But it is interesting that Norton and Cabernet Sauvignon have a red and a white gene to them.

**Fred Reno**

Is there anybody in Virginia you aware of that actually has any in the ground because it was crossed in Illinois, right?

**Lee Reeder**

Yeah, that was done in Illinois. I don't know of anybody growing it here. I haven't heard of anybody else. I get emails from the people that grow it all the time but I don't agree with their recommendations for winemaking, but that's typical for winemaker to winemaker, but I just don't know much about it, but it seems like a great idea.

**Fred Reno**

It's like telling an artist what to paint, right? Yeah, it's the same thing isn't it.

**Lee Reeder**

Hiring an artist to say, this is what you have to paint. No creativity.

**Fred Reno**

Well, listen, this has been a delight. Thank you for taking the time to come here. Really appreciate it. My pleasure, and we'll close this down and finish this Chablis.

**Lee Reeder**

Okay. Thank You.