

EPISODE #16 SHEP ROUSE/ROCKBRIDGE VINEYARD

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Shep Rouse

Fred Reno

Excited to be here. Shep, welcome. Thank you for doing this.

Shep

Fred I'm excited to do it with you.

Fred Reno

Well, when I spoke to you recently and learned that you were actually going to start producing Norton again, I got excited, because I love your Norton and just a little bit of background for my audience. It was in October of 2020 that I first did an interview with Shep, and at the end of the interview, he pulled out a bottle of 2002 Rockbridge, Norton, which was his first vintage. Is that correct? Yes, When I had that wine, it changed my whole thought process on Norton. I was stunned how good that wine was. So that was your first vintage,

Shep

That's correct, and it was, it was the stupendous wine. We had a very hot fall that year. Bordeaux reds from that year were also spectacular.

Fred Reno

What led you to all of a sudden think, Okay, I'm going to produce some Norton?

Shep

Actually, it was Bruce Zoecklein who had turned me on to it. Bruce came to Virginia in 1985 to start the wine program at Virginia Tech, and he had sort of an introductory party at his house in Blacksburg for a lot of Virginia vintners. And at the party, he served a whole bunch of old Missouri Norton's. We were impressed. The wines just were spectacular. Also, it's growing requirements were also really desired. It's tough. It can take rain. It doesn't require as much hand work as, say, Petit Verdot or some of the other vinifera grapes, right? It's winter tolerant. It makes beautiful wine. What nobody told us, however, was it is a very shy yielder in the vineyard. I think if you grow it on GDC, you can get a decent yield per acre, but in the cellar, the juice yield per ton is abysmal.

Fred Reno

That's what they tell me. They say it's berries are small enough to begin with, but they say it's a seed pocket too.

Shep

Lots of seeds and very thick skin. But the thick skin is a big part of the secret of Norton. I think we get flavor from the thick skin. We also get incredible resistance to splitting and rot from too much rain. We're picking Norton for the first time that I will have made Norton since 2017 on Friday that has now gone through like eight days of rain.

Fred Reno

Well, I'm excited about that one, because I've been to that vineyard. It's at Lexington Valley Vineyard. And those vines have got to be what, 25 years old?

Shep

I think 2002 was the second year. So, 20 plus years old. Cal Hale came out here from Missouri. He taught biochemistry at the University of Missouri, and was attracted to Norton and Vignoles, which is also successful in Missouri. It's not very good to grow and well, I grow it here, but I'm at 2000 feet elevation. It's still a pain, because it rots really a lot. They pulled all theirs out at Lexington Valley because it rotted too much, because they're 600 feet lower in elevation and too warm in August to grow it.

Fred Reno

Stepping back a second, I'm curious about your thoughts about why do you believe, even to this day, there's so much mystery surrounding this grape and its origins.

Shep

Well, there's still controversy about, is it Cynthiana or is it Norton? All we know is, Dr Norton selected the hybrid from a seedling trial that he did. This is a very tedious process to create the hybrids, select the seedling, grow them up, and then make wine and taste the wine, you know. I mean, heck, great. Norton needs 10 years in a bottle. So, you figure 10 years in a bottle a couple years after you've selected the seedling and grown it before you get grapes. You're talking a time frame that for us humans, in our ever more rapid pace society, have a hard time, right?

Fred Reno

What kind of oak I'm curious, do you favor?

Shep I don't like a lot of oak in it. I think the flavor of the grape is the key. I might use 10% new French oak to give it more structure. The French Oak has larger tannins than American oak, which imparts a little spicier oak character.

Fred Reno In the past, when you were producing Norton a bit more regularly. Was it 100% Norton? Or have you experimented with blending a little of another varietal.

Shep

I always use other varietals. And one of the reasons because it's such a meager yielder. Your gallons per ton of grapes is 130 liters, sometimes Merlot is 175, Petit Verdot is lower because it's tiny berries like Norton.

Fred Reno

What was your favorite varietal to blend with Norton?

Shep

Well, I prefer cabernet sauvignon, but Virginia cabernet sauvignon is a problematic grape. Many people who have planted it stopped growing it. It's hard to ripen it. It has some winter issues that, although it's not super cold sensitive, it seems to be affected by our winters. I may yet get some cabernet sauvignon this year, and I may end up blending it with the Norton, but I am not sure on that. We got to sort of see how things shake out. Now that we're as of today entering probably a two week period of sun.

Fred Reno

Oh, finally, early October. Here comes the sun. Right?

Shep

Sounds like a song by George Harrison.

Fred Reno

Well, we've had what, a third of a year's worth of rain in the last two weeks here in Virginia.

Shep

If you look out at the solid bins in my courtyard, they have four and a half inches of water in them. But Virginia's had wet before, haven't

they? Oh, yeah, you know, we had it in 2018 we had nine straight days of rain from the hurricane that stuck over North Carolina, 2013, I think was the year of Hurricane Isabel.

Fred Reno

Have you ever grown Norton yourself?

Shep

No, I considered Raphine where I am located at 1950 feet elevation, far too cold to grow it. I feel that it needs to be grown at no higher than Well, Lexington Valley Vineyards is 1350 and I used to get Norton from a vineyard over near Farmville, Virginia, which might only be about 300 feet elevation, and it's further into Tidewater, where it's hotter.

Fred Reno

Do you think Norton should be grown in warmer temperature? Then, what does it do physiologically to the grape?

Shep

Oh, I think it just matures quicker. I want harvest to be over by the first of November, even before that, the 15th of October. It doesn't suit me to want to be having grapes in the fermenter at the end of October, early November. I have other things I like to do, and that's not to be sticking around here, tending fermentations and pressing grapes.

Fred Reno

Well, I didn't touch on this earlier, but it's worth noting that outside of Gabriele Rausse and Jim law, you've been producing and making wine in Virginia longer than anyone. What was your first vintage again here in Virginia?

Shep 1986 at Montdomaine. That was a very sad year. Everything looked great, and we got a hurricane around the 25th of August, and five days of rain.

Fred Reno

I mean, this is your 38th harvest. That's correct, my God Almighty, that is an alumni, isn't it? Wow,

Shep

It is. And I've been here making wine from these grapes since 1990/91, so that's a long time.

Fred Reno

You've got to know this vineyard very well.

Shep

33 years and interestingly, being in one place for this long a time, you see the climate, you see the weather, you see the changes in the weather. And I also am wearing a hat from a duck hunting club that I belong to, where I had hunted since 1987 we see when we when we're in one place for a long time, we see changes that occur over time. And you know, to me, climate change is a very real thing. Some people don't believe it, but a lot of people move around so much that they don't have a standard that they can look at to see that it has indeed changed.

Fred Reno

For me this was the hottest summer I've ever experienced anywhere in my entire life.

Shep

You're in Charlottesville. Boy it's hot there.

Fred Reno

It was just hotter than anything. I mean, climate change is real. There's really not much we can do about it. It looks like the mitigation efforts just haven't even begun fast enough.

Shep

Well, it's hard when people, a lot of people with power, don't believe it, right?

Fred Reno

Yeah, exactly. You know, you brought up the Cynthiana/ Norton thing. As you may have heard Lucie Morton is on this trail to prove empirically that they're separate grapes, and she has broken the code. I told her one day, oh, not too long ago, I said, Hey, Lucie, have you been out to Burnley Vineyard recently? She says, God, it's been years.

Shep

I was thinking about Burnley just the other day.

Fred Reno

I said, you know, I've been going out there because it's close to my home. I like Lee Reeder. I get along with him, but I've been tasting his Nortons, and he's got all these older Nortons for sale, and there is just something different about his wine. I think it is Cynthiana. So, she went out to the vineyard, and he let her take cuttings and everything. And then he pulled out of his file that his father kept and it had the original PO that they gave Post Familie Vineyards & Winery in Arkansas, and it

says under varietal Cynthiana. I mean and seeing because Lucie well maybe the only ampelographer left anywhere in this world. She has the training to tell the difference, and it's subtle. I mean, it's really close, but I noticed the difference in the wine and tasting the wines, especially without fail, for the last two years going on, well, almost three now, the last glass of red wine I have every night before I go to bed is a glass of Norton. I'll put the bottle in the refrigerator, go back to it the next night. I see the progression over four or five nights in this particular bottle, and I see differences in wine that I believe, that I've been told maybe has some Cynthiana in it, and the wine tends to thin out a bit by the third or fourth day, whereas the Norton never thins out. And I'm seeing it and experiencing it and thinking there's something different here when you do it that often, yeah, regularly, right? It was that palette thing that made me call Lucie and say, Go, take a look at their vineyard and see what you think. So, this will be fascinating. They're doing this sequencing right now, and the genome and everything to try to prove it. But back to the mystery part of this. I always call them out on my podcast, Wine Searcher, which is a good platform, they can tell you where you can buy almost any wine in the world, in this country. They also have an educational platform that's very good online. But they, to this day, say that Norton was discovered in Missouri, which is 100% false

Shep

We know that Dr Norton lived in Richmond, yeah,

Fred Reno

Exactly. And I keep thinking they're going to change it. The more I call them out on my podcast, maybe they'll change this inaccuracy that they have. But it's a Virginian native grape of some kind.

Shep As you know Montdomaine where I first started working they took the logo from the original Monticello Wine Company, which was

owned by the Russo family in the 19th century. And their claim to fame was, in fact, their Extra Virginia Claret, which was made from Norton.

Fred Reno

Which you call your wine. How did you manage to get that?

Shep

Well, I bought the name at the auction of Montdomaine, Oh, you did. I did. I paid 500 bucks for it.

Fred Reno

That's fantastic.

Shep

It's classic. Because people back then, varietal naming didn't exist. People didn't look at purebred, they didn't have purebred dogs, or they hardly did. I mean, all of this eugenic stuff is 20th century. Pretty much in France, they still, in many areas, don't name their grapes, the wines by the varietal. They name them by the Appellation or the place.

Fred Reno

In the original Monticello Wine Company in Charlottesville, if I was accurately reading it, at one point in the Charlottesville area there was like 3000 acres of vineyard land.

Shep

I don't know, I don't know the history that well.

Fred Reno

in Albemarle County in Charlottesville, the surrounding area.

Shep

You got to acknowledge one thing, Fred, humans have liked alcohol for a long time, right? And you know, grape wine ages better. It's got more kick until you distill whatever it is you're making alcohol with. But it was just one of the things that people did, and it was so traditional, because Russo, you know, that's an Italian name. Italians came over here. They wanted wine. They were used to wine,

Fred Reno

Well, exactly. And you know, when I was interviewing Todd Kliman for my podcast series, he made some statements at the end of the interview that were fascinating. His whole premise was, if not for prohibition, what would Norton be today? He said we lost all that institutional knowledge. We lost all that history of growing. Actually, we are in the startup phase again. We are growing Norton in the last what some 40 years in Virginia, and just starting to learn. And that led me to another conclusion. I would love your comment on this. We still talk about Norton here in Virginia as a varietal. There's no terroir story associated with it. And every terrific wine in the world has some level of a terroir story associated with it, right? I believe that's somewhat due to when Dennis Horton brought it back here. He told folks, well, you could just put it in your worst site in your vineyard, because it's bulletproof, it's going to last. But that's not necessarily as you know, as a vineyard, owner and wine grower. That's not what you do with your best grapes. You put them in the best sites in the vineyard.

Shep

Yea, the worst sites are going to get frosted, that's the why they're the worst sites,

Fred Reno

And that's why you put the Norton there.

Shep

Because you want something that comes out late. But the worst frost I ever had was on one May 24th. And I have a friend who used to be in the wine business. He's since left us. But he told me once he had to replant his corn in June because he got frosted out in June. And I believe there's a term in the southeast for very cold weather in June. It's called a Blackberry winter. We have that and the bad sites for

grapes, the low areas where the frost, the cold air drains to, you know, whatever you plant there, you better make sure it comes out late.

Fred Reno

Well, you are here at 2000 feet right. So, you have a different type of soil, but Lexington Valley Vineyard, where this Norton is at you're harvesting this year.

Shep

It's also a residual limestone soil. Their vineyard is fascinating, because there's so much Karst, which is subterranean dissolution of the limestone with caves and springs. There's an incredible cave about four miles from their vineyard, you can walk back half a mile, and it's not a public, open cave. You have got to wade the river to get to it. That whole area is loaded with sinkholes, and it's all limestone. You know, maybe that Norton is so special because of that. I think terroir is a combination of microclimate, which is, well, it's so complicated because it has to do with elevation, Hillside orientation, Hillside angle, soil composition, grapes that are grown there and how they're cultivated. And then on top of that, the winemaking,

Fred Reno

Well, you're absolutely right. This is how I break it down. When I tell people, I say climate is number one, because that has an effect on all agricultural products. So that's part of any terroir. Then to the point you just made about soil, elevation, slope, all that. Then the hand of Man. That's terroir. What you do with that resource once you have it in the cellar.

Shep

But the problem with it is there's so many variables that you know.

Fred Reno well, you've seen enough harvest to understand, I definitely know you won't do it because you don't grow but I've

challenged a lot of the vintners I've interviewed for this Norton podcast. So, who's is going to be the first one to put Norton in an outsized bottle, you know, like a Magnum or a three-liter bottle? Are we going to live long enough to let that mature and drink that. (Shep comments; Jenni will do it). Well, actually, when I challenged Scott Elliff and his winemaker, Julien Durantie at DuCard, he looked at Julien and said, alright, we accept the challenge. We're going to put some Magnums up this year. I said, great, because can you imagine what that would taste like, and with the proper bottle age, a large bottle of Norton.

Shep

But you think about the fact that even a 750ml bottle ages great, so maybe, maybe it's like American business planning. We don't think in more than the span of one person's lifetime ahead the Asians do because, well, they've got so much more history and culture, right? You know, it's beyond conception for American businesses to think the next generation or two generations down the road. Uh, maybe that's why we don't do double magnums and magnums of Norton, because you'll never live to taste them if you make it well.

Fred Reno

That's probably true. I'm trying. I have been collecting as many Nortons as I can and put it in my own cellar to try to get some bottle age. And every now and then, I'll get somebody like yourself who will sell me or gift me an older bottle. I just put it in the cellar. I can't wait for the day or the time or the moment to try that and see what the wine tastes like.

Shep

You weren't there, but they did that Norton thing at Symposium for the Virginia Vineyards Association at the Omni in February, right? And I, served my 2004 Norton which was also from Lexington Valley vineyard. But I think I had started getting grapes from the vineyard I mentioned to you over in Farmville. It was still wonderful. I actually

preferred one of the younger ones that was poured. It was great. Certainly, my wine didn't show, you know, any degree of being tired.

Fred Reno

Yeah, I have yet to experience an older bottle of Norton that shows just what you said. Any degree of being tired, there's a certain mellowness that's hard to describe until you've actually experienced it yourself. In fact, that 2002 we had here some years ago, it reminded me of the old BV Private Reserves I used to get from the '70 vintages. It was that sort of silky, mellow, balanced wine.

Shep

Yeah, I remember the '73 was pretty good, but it wasn't great. And we all were waiting for the release of the '74 which was the highly touted vintage in Napa, and they kept holding back because they had a lot of the '73 and they finally released it. But yeah, a classmate of mine at Davis, Joel Aiken, ended up going there and becoming their sort of main winemaker. Oh, that's right. That 2002 Norton also turned Jeanette Smith onto Norton. I don't know if you know Jeanette. I know who she is. She is the number one viticulturist in Virginia, I think. But hands on, working in vineyards and consulting for vineyards, Jeanette is. And she had not liked Norton before she had tasted that bottle.

Fred Reno

I always love running into the people who say I can't stand Norton, and then taste them on an older Norton. They go, well, that's really good. what is that? And just like Bruce Zoecklein did at that party you were talking about, he told me he brown bagged all of you, and everybody was playing the right bank, left bank game. That inevitable discussion of which bank is it from in Bordeaux? Well, I think Virginia's coming of age. Shep, this thing with RDV is a big game changer. I think this is a because all of a sudden people are looking at Virginia and then going

home. Maybe I should be looking at Virginia for my future for expansion. What do you think?

Shep

I think I would not go there. Okay, I think climate change, to me, has made grape growing in Virginia a serious challenge. I think to grow high quality, at least although maybe not Norton. I won't make a statement about Norton, but to grow high quality vineyard requires extensive canopy modification in the vineyard, which either has to be done with hand labor, like six times a season, or mechanically if you're big enough to justify the expense of a \$60,000 leaf pulling machine and a technician to operate it, who's competent. So, what that means is the cost of growing grapes in Virginia is very high.

Fred Reno

That's what was an eye opener for me when I came here, when I realized what the farming costs were vis a vis California, let's say, for example, right? They were just significantly higher, because everything is pretty much hand done.

Shep

Has to be because of the moisture during the growing season. If you don't have it open around the fruit, after it gets wet, you'll get fungal infection, and you'll get rot, or you'll get overly vegetative growth too many leaves that shade it and don't allow it to ripen. Ideally, no, we are not in a Mediterranean climate. We can all agree to that's true. Things changed for me. You know, I grew Vidal from 1991 until 2017 and never missed a beat. Had a great crop every year, and never had any problem with rot. 2018 with that hurricane that sat on us for nine days, I lost my entire crop. It was so green when that came that I wasn't willing to pick because, you know, what are you going to do with 16 brick Vidal which has acidity of 1.3 gram, 13 grams per liter. And I just said I'm not picking it, you know, even if that's what it takes to save it,

Fred Reno

That was the basis for your dessert wine. Was it not?

Shep

Yeah, and actually in 2018 didn't use any Vidal in the dessert wine, which was in the Governor's case, by the way, but a lot of it, mostly Traminette. However, we did pick one bin of the Vidal in mid-October. And that went into it, just to keep the Vidal. I mean, the first year I made it, in '94 it was 100% Vidal, And then in '95 was about 20% Riesling, which was the best one we ever made. The powers that be were starting to grouse about dessert wines winning the big prize in the Governor's Cup. So, there were a lot of, well shenanigans. Let's call it.

Fred Reno

It is amazing to me to see how Riesling in general sort is out of favor here in Virginia. And yet I think your Riesling is one of my favorites I've had. And there's other producers.

Shep

It was a big success, Riesling and Chambourin were my big successes of the 2024. The Riesling cropped well. It wasn't high bricks when we picked it, but it was right enough to make a nice, varietal Riesling.

Fred Reno

Well, you brought up Chambourin and I'm a big fan of Chambourcin. The folks up at 53rd winery and vineyard did an experiment a few years ago, and they made a wine they call Arrowhead, which is 80% Chambourcin and 20% Norton. And it must be the juiciest red wine I ever had from Virginia.

Shep

And this is Chelsey, yeah,

Fred Reno It's really good. And they're making it every year and they only make about 100 cases. This wine is fantastic.

Shep

That's an interesting combination.

Fred Reno

When I mentioned it to Todd Kliman, you know, the author of Wild Vine a couple years ago, he said, Fred, those two grapes were made to go together.

Shep

Well, that's for sure, because Norton is such a shy yielder and Chamboucin, it yields hugely. We have to cluster thin it religiously. Or, you know, the clusters will be this big, and if you get more than one like that on a cane, you can't get enough sugar from the leaves to ripen them. So, we thin it to one cluster per shoot. And we did a good job with it this year. We picked it and got, I think it was 22.8 brix when we picked it, which is the second highest that's ever been here. And that's despite, we didn't. We had a nice break in the weather before we got, you know, a good bit of rain, and we finished picking our Vidal the day before the rain.

Fred Reno

It's always a relief once the horses are back in the barn, it's always a relief, right? That's right, all right. Shep, well, listen, I appreciate you taking a few minutes with me. I'm going to close this down and then buy some of your wonderful wine.

Shep

Great Fred, I hope I didn't digress too much.

Not at all Shep.