

EPISODE # 17 LEXINGTON VALLEY VINEYARDS/RYAN HALE

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Ryan Hale

Fred Reno

in my studio today, I have Ryan Hale, who is the owner, and winemaker at Lexington Valley Vineyards, and we're going to learn all about it today. Ryan,

Ryan Hale

Hey Fred, thanks for having me here. Excited to be here and talk about Norton.

Fred Reno

Well, glad to have you here. So, as I always begin, right at the beginning, what was it that motivated your father to come to Virginia and plant Norton?

Ryan Hale

Yeah, it's an interesting story. My family is really from Pennsylvania, the Pittsburgh area. My parents moved around a lot when I was a kid, and we ended up in Missouri, where both of my parents worked for the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. While there my parents were exposed to the Norton grape. Of course, it was the state grape of Missouri. And at this time and in the 90s, wineries and really the palette for wine in in this country, we're kind of in their infancy, if you could say that. I think there were only a couple wineries that you could go to and sit and drink wine, sort of the model that we know now here in Virginia, where we all enjoy going to wineries and being out in the country and getting to experience the environment that the grapes are grown in. They really

liked a couple of wineries there. One, I don't know if it's still there or not. I haven't been to Missouri in a while, but it was called Les Bourgeois, and they had the concept of sitting outside at picnic tables here you brought your own picnic, and you'd go to sort of a little A- frame and buy the wine you wanted. Then you overlooked the Missouri River and could just sit there and enjoy that. And that was a new concept. Then, I really don't think that was very common, right?

Fred Reno

Well, what brought them to Virginia?

Ryan Hale

Yeah, so you know, in terms of they liked the Norton grape, and when they were looking to retire, they initially had some ideas. My parents were into horses, and they wanted to be able to ride on beach front property, and they looked around at places on the west coast. But ultimately, they decided to go a different route, which I found very shocking as a high school kid, which is that they wanted to plant a vineyard. And instead of taking the more obvious path toward the west coast, where, you know, it was much more of an established industry, they chose Virginia. And they chose that because it was closer to a lot of our family in Pennsylvania, especially in the western side of the state, easy to drive up north to Pittsburgh. But the bigger thing was that they loved the Norton grape, and they knew that this grape was indigenous to Virginia. And I think that they thought, if we're going to plant one grape, that's going to be it. So I guess it was a 1998 to 99 they started looking for property here, and they settled on a property just north of the town of Lexington in the Virginia Shenandoah Valley. And in 1999 we put our first grape vines in the ground.

Fred Reno

I was going to ask you, how did they find that location, and what was it about that location that they thought was good for growing grapes, did they have a consultant? Did they have advice from anybody or they just picked it out?

Ryan Hale

You know, honestly, I was younger then, so hard for me to remember, how they kind of came to that specific site selection, but they found a farm that was

available and largely used for cattle grazing at that time, about 81 acres, and it had some really nice slopes. So, the Norton actually is planted at the highest elevation on our property, which is 1350 feet, not incredibly high,

Fred Reno

But still for Virginia, that's still good elevation.

Ryan Hale

Yeah, absolutely. And, I think the more interesting thing about this property, here we kind of get into the terroir aspects, but it's surrounded by the Maury River, and I don't know that they thought about that as being sort of an advantage, or anything like that, but I think it's what makes our particular vineyard so unique. We are completely surrounded by that river, and in the morning, the fog rolls up the hill over the vineyards and it is solid fog outside, and then it recedes back around the 10:30 time.

Fred Reno

Man, it sounds like Russian River Valley to me.

Ryan Hale

I've never seen anything like it anywhere else in Virginia.

Fred Reno

Boy it does sound very unique. So, then my next question which relates to Norton? Do you know where they got their plant material from?

Ryan Hale

Yeah, that's a good question. You know, it goes back so far. I'm not exactly sure I know. I'm not sure what nursery they purchased those from. Probably they were following a lot of the wine makers in Missouri at that time and where they were getting those vines from. Now, I know in some recent footage that Lucie Morton had a look at she thought she recognized some Cynthiana plants in our vineyard as well. I actually would love to drill down on that a little further. I mean, now we have vines going on 25 years old.

Fred Reno

I would say that outside of several wineries like Horton and Chrysalis, you may have the oldest Norton vineyard in the state of Virginia.

Ryan Hale

Which is hard to believe. I think I've repeated this, and I can't say this is gospel here, but I was told when we planted those vines and started that vineyard, that there were about 130 wineries in the state of Virginia. I've been told today it's, it's over 400 right? I don't know if that's true, but that's what I've heard.

Fred Reno

So, when your Dad planted the farm, did he have it initially with the intention that he was going to make wine as well, or was he selling grapes? What happened in the early days of the vineyard?

Ryan Hale

That's a great question. Actually, they did intend to make wine. My parents were Janet and Calvin Hill, and they were making wine basically in the garage in Missouri. They were experimenting with it. It was really for home wine making, but it's kind of where they honed their craft. Now, my dad, of course, was a professor in molecular biology in his undergrad studies. He had some botany as well. So, he really is the brain behind the wine making. At that time, he passed away in 2020, so the last vintage, which is what we've been currently serving, that he was alive for, was our 2019, Norton, and I think that's the one you've tried right, Fred. I've just pulled it off the market now because being very special, as it is the last vintage my Dad might have had a hand in. I'm also working to create a library so that we can do more vertical tastings, because it's so much fun.

Fred Reno

No question about it. Were you involved at all when you first planted this vineyard?

Ryan Hale

Oh Yeah, I always tell people, everyone else got to go to Panama City or what have you for spring break. I spent my first two spring breaks in college out here planting vines on my hands and knees, okay, with a few friends, but, and at that time my parents hadn't built their house on the property. We had an old farmhouse that's a couple 100 years old, and we were scrappy. They hadn't moved here yet, so they were going back and forth between Missouri and Rockbridge County, where the vineyard is. So those were really fun times when I look back on it, but it was, certainly wasn't the regular Spring Break most people had.

Fred Reno

So, you're the one making the wine today?

Ryan Hale

Yeah. You know, everybody talks about that epiphany moment with a certain wine. When I was in high school in Missouri, I wouldn't say this when I was younger, but now that enough time has passed, I had a friend who was my best friend at that time, whose younger sister was friends with the owners of the daughter of owners of a winery. And they had a Norton, I think it was St James winery, if I remember correctly, and they had a reserve Norton. And I remember trying that, and I thought this is so great. And we felt like so excited to sneak away a bottle of wine, and we had access to it because of that person, being a daughter of the of the winery owners. So I didn't have any preconceived notion of Norton, other than I knew it was the state grape in Missouri and I liked it. But after we planted that, my parents got started, I moved on, and I lived in New York City, and I had a chance to really explore all different kinds of wine. I'll admit, I got a little, well I stopped caring for those hybrid varietals and things that I had as I was younger, and developed a palette for more European varietals, etc. So, when I ended up moving back to Virginia to be closer to my parents, it was 2011 and that was the first year I made my own wine. And, to be honest, I still had that kind of thought like, Okay, well, I'm not interested in these grapes. I'm going to buy some Chardonnay grapes. And that was the first wine I made in 2011 was a Chardonnay, and it was really good. I was really impressed how easily I pulled that off. But in 2012 I tried to do it again, and it didn't go as well. I think I lucked out that first year, but I will say, working alongside my dad and my sister who had

come in and helped him. She's gone to the Wine School in the Seattle area, and then she moved to Virginia too. So, by 2014 we were helping to make all the wines. And I'd say by 2016, 2017, then I was just making the wine.

Fred Reno

Well, this is amazing, because this is the old-world way of people learning how to make wine. It's not about having consultants and all kinds of instruction. It's just like, Okay, here's our farm, here's what we do, and we learn every vintage what we're supposed to do.

Ryan Hale

100% and I'll tell you we've done a program now for several years. We've had three interns from France, all of whom go to a school called Pur Pan, It's in Toulouse, and everyone who goes to that school is majoring in agriculture of some sort. So, the interns that we've had over the years, and we just had the most recent one in 2022 all have large, very large vineyards in France, one from Chablis and two from Provence. And I think their parents were grateful that they got to come see how it's made by hand. Like how their grandfathers made wine, and they thought that was a very useful part of their education to come here and see how it's done without big machinery. I mean, we're talking very, very large wineries. But, yeah, it's true, and you learn a lot that way. And now 20 years of doing this we've got lots of notes going back, and that we can look back to and lots of experience in trial and error.

Fred Reno

What in growing Norton specifically, because you have other varieties, I'm going to ask you about that in a minute here. What's the challenge in the vineyard? If there's a challenge.

Ryan Hale

Well, you know, I think what's great about Norton is that it doesn't need the kind of spray program that you need for the vinifera wines that are commonly planted in Virginia. And let's think about that. These are grape vines that in some cases, can be hundreds or 1000 years old, right? And the climate changes, the insects and disease pressure, they're planted in new places. Everything changes around

them, but they don't change, and that makes them very, very susceptible to all kinds of problems unlike the Norton vine. As I like to say in the tasting room, this is a Virginia heirloom grape. It's comfortable here. It's happy. We're in this continental climate. We get a lot of rain. Norton is very resistant to disease, so the spray program is a lot less. Your listeners probably are familiar with the grape and other wine varietals, but you know, if you want to lessen the amount of chemicals and things you ingest, start to look for these types of grape vines, right. Start to think outside of the box a little bit, because those Chardonnays and those Merlot while they're wonderful, it takes a lot of spraying to make them viable in Virginia.

Fred Reno

Well, that I can understand, so Climate Change is real. It sure is, because I say, Talk to any farmer, they'll tell you.

Ryan Hale

Look, I'm not here to get into the causes of climate change. But no doubt, we've seen a shortened growing cycle whereby it's getting hotter, it's starting sooner. I mean, you see things budding out in February and March, right? And, and that's that presents some challenges, because it'll probably keep going in that direction where you you're going to have warm weather enticing these vines to start budding out, but then you're going to get a quick freeze, and then you lose that growth.

Fred Reno

Well, you made me think of something here, Ryan, when you're talking about your vineyard, and the temperature from the river, and what you get from this. What I've discovered, and I've really learned doing these interviews is one of the issues I see with Norton is we still talk about it in Virginia in varietal terms. We don't talk about it in terms of terroir. And every terrific wine in the world has a terroir story associated with it. I think we have to switch our mindset when it comes to Norton, to start talking about terroir. And why is this Norton different that's grown over here from this Norton that's grown over here. Now, partially, I think this is because Dennis Horton started Norton here, and got a lot of people thinking, hey, this is bulletproof. You can put it in the worst part of your vineyard

and it's not going to die. But that's not how you treat noble grapes. You need to put it in the best sites. And it sounds like what your father did was found the site where Norton can thrive and do really well in this environment.

Ryan Hale

Oh, yeah, it's when I said to you that my parents came to Virginia with the intention to plant that grape. It got the best site on our property. It is the site where the sun is the last place to go in the shade. It is the site that is high, so it's got really great drainage. And the really other unique thing about this site is below it is a sink hole that formed maybe 150 170 years ago, and it's at the bottom of the hill where the vineyard is planted. So, what happens is the cold air pools down toward that sinkhole. Very unique. You can actually feel it as you walk down the gradient there. You can actually feel the temperature dropping until you're at the bottom of where that that sinkhole is. And so that really has an effect also, pulling that cool air away. My dad always said this is the windiest place we've ever lived, and the airflow there is also wonderful. Just the combination of being up on that highest part of a property surrounded by this river with this cold air pooling below it. It's really unique. And we're in Rockbridge County, and I can see why they named it that, because you can't put a post in the ground without hitting a rock. We have got some very rocky loam soil, which also, you know, is a very good place to grow grapes.

Fred Reno

I haven't had the opportunity as much as I'd like to try your wines. But of course, I stopped by there a couple years ago and bought some wine, and I was very impressed by the quality of the Norton I had. I'm looking forward to discovering that more often here in the future, as we go forward, because now that I'm on this Norton trail, and the last glass of red wine I have every night before I go to bed for two years now is a glass of Norton it's just as fun to watch the progression of a bottle over 3-4-5, nights. And sometimes I take the bottle, and I don't even put it back in the refrigerator, I put it in the pantry and see how it'll hold up. And boy, Norton, I've had wine in there that's been a half a bottle of full for two weeks, and it's been beautiful. And two weeks later, when I poured in the glass, yeah, just blew my mind.

Ryan Hale

Doesn't surprise me. You know, so many wines, the really fine wines we make here in Virginia, you know, nice Cabernet Franc or something like that. Try it. Try to get it to 10 years and see how it is. You might be disappointed. You probably want to drink those wines a little earlier than the Norton. The Norton just has an ability to age. I think part of that's the acidity that it has. It's a very unique grape in that sense.

Fred Reno

Let me top your White Burgundy. It's now opening up, isn't it?

Ryan Hale

It is beautiful.

Fred Reno

Yes, we're having a little Mercury Blanc here. That's beautiful today. Kind of hard to duplicate white burgundy anywhere other than wine from Burgundy in France.

Ryan Hale

Yeah, you got that, right? This is really nice. Thank you.

Fred Reno

As I mentioned earlier in the interview, you grow other varietals, and I bought some, and I was very impressed with your Marechal Foch. So, what else do you have planted in the vineyard?

Ryan Hale

We have, as you mentioned, the Marechal Foch. That's a red grape for anyone who's never heard of it, and I would suspect many people haven't. It was developed in France. It's named after the World War One general Marshall Ferdinand Foch. My understanding is Marechal is kind of the word for Marshall. And okay, it would be like us developing a grape and naming it General Washington. So the grape is named after this person, and if you make it right as

a single varietal, it really is similar to the Gamay grape like you would have in a Cru Beaujolais.

Fred Reno

Agreed. That's exactly what I thought about it.

Ryan Hale

It is a perfect wine for your Thanksgiving dinner, that kind of thing. You need certain wines that can pair well with white meat and stuff that people might have. And, yeah, that one is really, really spectacular, very earthy nose. And this sort of, this dark cherry palette. You know, a lot of the other varietals we have are common in Virginia, and you see them a lot with the Vidal Blanc and the Traminette, of course, the cousin of Gewurztraminer. And we have another Native American grape, which is Catawba.

Fred Reno

yeah, you're one of the rare winegrowers growing Catawba here, which was a dominant grape years ago in this country here on the East Coast.

Ryan Hale

I think a lot of people who remember even drinking wines, maybe in the 1960s Of course, I wasn't alive, but they remember. Catawba is a sweet blush. And you know, you might commonly find that on the East Coast, we do some fun things with it. We actually make a white wine from it, and we press the juice off the skin right away and don't allow any of that color transfer. And it really can make a really fun wine. It's got this really bright acidity and almost flavors like lychee fruit. It's very popular, and when people have never had it before, I always just love watching people try it and I usually get very, very positive responses on those wines just because it's something people have never had.

Fred Reno

Interesting. So, how many acres is actually planted today at your vineyard? What's the size?

Ryan Hale

Overall, we're about five acres of vines.

Fred Reno

You're that small?

Ryan Hale

Oh Yeah, we are small. And you know, all of us at Lexington Valley vineyard with the exception of my mother, who, of course, is retired. We all have full-time jobs.

Fred Reno

I was going to say, you don't make more than 1000 cases of wine.

Ryan Hale

We make less than 500 cases exactly, and we're often sold out. So, look, that's just how it is. We make as much as we feel we can. And then, you know, as those vintages sell out, that's fine for us, and we move on to the next vintage, but I always try to hold some back, and I am, like I said earlier, holding some of the Norton vintages back so that we can do more tastings of verticals.

Fred Reno

So recently, you were involved in a documentary about Norton, which I've seen. It's really well done. How did that come to be that you met Christopher Conti, the documentarian, and then how'd you end up in this film? Because you did a really good job in this film.

Ryan Hale

I appreciate it. I guess I found another calling, right? But no, Chris is a friend. He's an interesting person. He makes documentaries about some of the lesser-known Virginia historic stories, if you will. And I don't think Chris is particularly a wine aficionado, and much less a fan of Norton. Not that, you know, he doesn't like it, but it's just not his thing particularly. But he found the story of Norton so interesting and compelling that he decided to focus on it for one of his documentaries. And, yeah, as a result, he asked if he could interview me for that. And I accepted that, but I actually didn't know I'd be featured in it as much as I was.

Fred Reno

But, well, no. Really good job. So that I get it right. What was the name of the documentary again?

Ryan Hale

It's Norton, the Grape that changed everything.

Fred Reno

That's what I thought. What a great title, too. Well, folks, you should go out and find this documentary, because it's really well done, and it will fill in the gaps on some of the history about Norton that there's so much mystery about this grape. It still blows my mind. I don't want to call it a controversy, but Lucie Morton is on this trail right now to prove that Cynthiana is not Norton, but is a bit of a cousin, grape. And I think she will. She's got somebody working on the genomics of it, and also the DNA, and it will prove it. But if anybody can tell in the field what varietal it is, it's Lucie.

Ryan Hale

Oh, for sure, she is the authority. Listen, I've heard that my entire life. And again, unusually, I was drinking Norton when I was in high school, but I heard that even then in Missouri. And, I've heard people dismiss it saying, oh, you know, it's been studied, and they're genetically identical. And I've heard other people just insist that now they're absolutely two different varietals, just very similar.

Fred Reno

My experience tasting the wines that Lucie says the vineyard is interspersed with Cynthiana, I can see the difference in the wines, especially in their youth, because they tend to be a bit more elegant in their youth and tend to have a little bit almost a softer mouth feel. And then Cynthiana on its own, which I've had because Horton has Cynthiana and Norton in their vineyard and have segmented it for Lucie who has been over there. In fact, after listening to Lucie in 2023 they made them separately, a small batch of Cynthiana and a small batch of Norton. They gave me a half bottle of each right out of the tank in November of '23. It hadn't finished malolactic either. I took it home, put it in the refrigerator, tasted

the wine that night, side by side. The Norton, of course, was this big brute coming out of the bottle, and Cynthiana was slightly lighter in color, not a lot, but was a bit more elegant. And then I put them back in the refrigerator and the next night came back to them and tasted them again, and then I blended them, and the Cynthiana just toned that Norton right down. It was really an interesting experience. And I'm working with Lucie on this from this standpoint, she is the viticulturist/ampelographer. She's the technician, if you will. I'm just doing it from my palette, what I taste and what I can feel in the mouth feel. And I'll go out on a limb and say, probably nobody's tasted more Norton in the last few years than me.

Ryan Hale

It could be Fred,

Fred Reno

Because I have Norton every night. And you touched on this earlier in the interview, if folks have a chance to have a 10- or 15-year-old Norton, it will change their mind dramatically.

Ryan Hale

Oh it's, it's, it's amazing. It really is an incredible transformation. Recently, I kind of mentioned to you that during that documentary screening at our vineyard, we at our winery, we opened a 2004 and a 2005 vintage. I mean, it was almost like having an old European wine. I just don't know how else to describe it, but the transformation from, you know, sort of this grapey kind of profile, to sort of a fine old wine is really something that is hard to describe.

Fred Reno

Well, as it turns out, I didn't know at the time, but it was grapes from your vineyard that turned my head on Norton, because I was interviewing Shep Rouse up at Rockbridge Vineyard. And this would have been in Boy, that was COVID time. So, this would have been the fall of 2020, he was one of my early podcast interviews and unsolicited at the end of the interview, he went out and brought back a bottle of his first vintage of Norton, which was 2002 and opened it for me. And I was like, Oh, is this what happens to Norton when it gets to the proper

bottle age? It reminded me, to your point, it reminded me of the old BV Private Reserves I would get from the 70s, or, dare I say, like a well-aged Chateau Latour. And I was just stunned by how good it was. And that really got my curiosity up. Well, turns out that came from your vineyard, and think that those were young vines.

Ryan Hale

2002 they were young. I think that was probably our first real harvest where we had, you know, tonnage, which makes sense, takes a few years to kind of get there. Yeah, and you know, these 25-year-old vines are still, they're still rocking. We have probably about two acres of vines of Norton and about six tons this year.

Fred Reno

What's the trellis system

Ryan Hale

We use GDC. So, Geneva, double curtain, for anyone who's not familiar with that, it's really a trellising system that is not common, and honestly, you don't see it very often anymore, but for something like the Norton vine, it does very well. I'm a fan of VSP, I think that's great. I think Norton though, is just a different beast, if you will. And it can be very vigorous. So, you know, it really wants to send long, long shoots out and being up high on the Geneva Double Curtain. So, what that looks like is a post with sort of two rabbit ears and then the high wire running from each rabbit ear, so that you have vines on either side, which is unusual. It's really like every row is almost like two rows and that puts the fruit zone sort of right at your face level. And so, it actually can be tough to manage. It's a lot of work, as we were talking about earlier, especially in the middle of the summer, when you need to go in there and pull leaves and do some hedging and that kind of thing. And boy, it feels like you're going into the jungle. And it also makes it hard for some people to pick, you know, shorter pickers have to reach up. Do that for a couple hours with your arms in the air. You start to feel it.,

Fred Reno

Well, I'll tell you when I came to visit you, it was a bit difficult to find. I mean, your website advises people do not use GPS to try to find us. It's kind of interesting. But how did you manage it? You call your driveway Norton Way.

Ryan Hale

Yeah, at that time we were putting in that access road, and there's, a few buildings on it, so we got to name it. And again, Norton was the idea that we came in there with. So, they named it that. And yeah, now we have Norton Way in Virginia, but we are off the beaten path, no doubt about it. But if you do make it out there and find us, and that's part of our mystique. We're not a giant wedding venue. We're not a big event venue. I know that's very popular in the Virginia wine industry these days. We're just about our wine. And so, you got to find us. But when you get out there, it's a beautiful setting. To have a nice deck where you can sit and enjoy the wines. And we do flights, with eight different wines you can try. You know, there's a little something for everybody, but I'll tell you, the Norton is by far our bestselling wine. Once people try it, they really understand, wow, I see why you call that your flagship grape.

Fred Reno

I've been there, folks, and everything Ryan just described is true, but once you find it, it's a find. It's a find, all right. Well, Ryan, I appreciate you taking the time to come to the studio today. I will say thank you, and we'll drink the rest of this White Burgundy.

Ryan Hale

Sounds good. Thanks, Fred.

Fred Reno *Well I thought that was the end of the interview but once we were off Audio Ryan told me a story of why he got Passionate about producing Norton again. I thought it was too important not to capture it so here is the transcript of that conversation.*

Fred Reno

All right, we were starting to talk off audio folks. And Ryan had a story he wanted to share. So Ryan, go ahead and say what you wanted to say about being stimulated to get back into growing and producing Norton.

Ryan Hale

Yeah. So, when I came back, moved to Virginia and started making my first wines, of course, I was excited to do Chardonnay and other varietals like that. I still liked the Norton. I never disliked it. But what got me excited about it again was in 2016 I went on a trip sponsored by the Virginia Vineyard Association and with lots of notable people there from all over the state, and we traveled down to Chile and Argentina. And in Argentina, I learned a lot about what was going on there. And it just so happened to be around that time there was an issue of Wine Enthusiast magazine that was talking about the new generation of young wine makers in Argentina, and of course, they're making Malbec, which, of course, is the most famous grape there. But the other grape that they were working with was one I had never heard of and never tried until I was there, called Bonarda. It is a red wine grape that it's so hard to find, so it's hard for me to remember all the kind of tasting notes from it, but I enjoyed it quite a bit. So, in that issue of Wine Enthusiast, the young wine makers were saying that this was the grape of their grandfathers. This Grape was almost made into wine, but it was never exported, really, outside of Argentina. It's something that they just drank. They're kind of like, the way people, you know, didn't know about the Douro red wines until recently, as they weren't really exported outside of Portugal. So similarly, with the Bonarda grape, these young wine makers were saying, look, I've got these vineyards of this, and I'm going to take that grape and make the wine of my grandfather's. And so, I came back from that trip so inspired to say, You know what, I've got something just as unique, the Virginia grape, right, Norton. That really got me excited to start making Norton again. I was really influenced by that, and today I just love it. I'm so glad that I had that sort of epiphany and turn around, because I've got these very old vines, and, boy, the wine they're making is really special.

Fred Reno

Well, that's a fantastic story. Thank you for sharing. That's great.

