

EPISODE #19 TOM PAYETTE

SPEAKERS

Fred Reno, Tom Payette

Fred Reno

Tom, Good morning. How are you?

Tom Payette Good morning. Fred, I'm well, thank you.

Fred Reno So right from the top, as I always start, what's your story? How'd you get into this? I see you left Virginia Tech in 1985. Is that accurate?

Tom Payette

That is correct, I left Virginia Tech in 1985 after I obtained a degree in Food Science Technology from Virginia Tech. And when I applied to Virginia Tech, I really wanted to go into the veterinarian medical school. So that took a wild change. In fact, I was recruited into the Food Science Technology Department and took that path. I could have gone to med school that way, became intrigued with food science, and I would say about 1983 or `184 I was getting closer to graduating, so I didn't want to be in a lab jacket the rest of my life testing tomato juice or ice cream. I did get a job at Prince Michel vineyards and worked in the vineyards there.

Fred Reno When you were first getting started at Prince Michel was Rapidan River, part of that.

Tom Payette They weren't part of that yet. I believe Rapidan River was obtained in the "87/88 maybe '86-time frame.

Fred Reno

Okay. So, you just went right in the lab there. But I understand your career took you to the West Coast early on as well.

Tom Payette

Well, I went into the vineyards at Prince Michel. I graduated from Virginia Tech, and actually my first job was with Doug Flemmer at Ingleside winery. He was really the first person to hire me. So, you could say, fast forward from there. I worked at Accomack vineyards in Painter, Virginia in '86 there's a long story behind that as to why I moved on from Ingleside, but everything was good, and then even went to Virginia Tech for a bit of time to help Virginia set up their first wine lab under Bruce Zoecklein.

Fred Reno

I was going to ask you whether you were there? You had left, and had been brought in.

Tom Payette

Correct and in fact, he came in. I was unaware that he had been hired. Here I am down at Virginia Tech. I move on find out he's kind of moving in. So, it was really neat to help him set up the lab. Worked with that for a while, and I was still young and didn't understand, but he

didn't have funding to hire me permanently. So fast forward back to Ingleside, where Jacques Recht calls me and says, Hey, I've got a job opening in Painter Virginia at Accomack vineyards. Will you come and work there? And at first, when I was in Ingleside, and he's aware of this, there wasn't an open door, let's say, of training there. And this can be very what would you call that old school put your time in. And so, I said, Sure, I'd love to do that. You know, will you answer my questions and train me? And he said, absolutely. So that's really how he wanted to train me, I think, on his own terms, not under Inglesides terms, which makes perfect sense in hindsight.

Fred Reno

I see, yeah, well, then from there you went to.

Tom Payette

Let's see, from Ingleside, I moved to Accomack. From Accomack to my own home called Riverside. My mom and I set up a winery at Riverside and ran that from '87 to about 1990 and there's a local grower here. He's still a realtor, but Dennis Woodruff, you may know the name. He grew grapes at Somerset vineyards, so we leased, really, all of our production and made about 4200 gallons of wine. In fact, I worked with Lee Reeder at Burnley on some things. We would move equipment back and forth and made wine there for three years. It's not until after that that I end up at Prince Michel. And so, Alan Kenne, who you may have heard about, had moved on from Prince Michel. Joachim Hollerith called me back. He knew me back from when I was there working in the college days, and said, hey, just come and work in the lab for me, which was a great god send in terms of, I go into their lab and I'm opening up cabinets and seeing equipment that I've seen in pictures but never had a chance to work with, okay? And I'm a kid in a toy land,

you know, and so he gave me, I'm going to say, two or three months, and said, you know, hey, do you feel comfortable in the lab right now? I said, Yes, I do. And unbeknownst to me, he brought in two samples of wine, and he said, Hey, run this test, that test, and so on. And he didn't tell me, but he had sent it off to the lab in California. Two weeks later, three weeks later, he comes in, pats me on the back, and says, Good job. You know, here's some numbers. We're off a little bit here. Which science is that way we might get a little closer here, but you're dead on here. So that really spun into a nice relationship at Prince Michel. Prince Michel owned 30 acres at the time in Napa Valley, oh, I didn't know that. Alright, good so this is a neat story on the Ehlers property we made, do you mean Ehlers Lane? Uh, correct so if you know it, well I do know it. Oh, yeah, good. Okay. Well, that's still owned by Jean Leducq or his foundation. He has since passed on. But Mr. Leducq didn't have any children, as far as I know, very wealthy man who had merged with Norman Martin of Culpepper to create Prince Michel. But they own those 30 acres in Ehlers, and they currently still give 20 to \$30 million a year to the Mayo Clinic for Cardiovascular Research.

Fred Reno

Ehlers Lane, that is fascinating. Did you work at other properties in California?

Tom Payette

Not until later, but I did some custom crush at Laird as well. It was for a Texas client. So it's a long story there, yeah, if you'll notice too, with the Ehlers property, Mr. Leducq always wanted this to happen, but the E in Ehlers has a heart, yes, and so he always wanted to pull this together, and they've done a wonderful job recently, tying in, I guess the Ehlers name, which was the earlier owners, and the Leducq name, merging them together. Wonderful property. We still enjoy the wines

today, and I've still got a map of the property. It was replanted by Prince Michel back when I was there. So just has a spot in our hearts.

Fred Reno That's great history connecting the two coasts like that.

Tom Payette Yeah, and you know what a blessing for me to be able to work on both coasts now. We did custom Crush a few years in '87 & '88 and perhaps 89 they brought the grapes back to Virginia and made the wines in Virginia. In '87 it worked fantastically. '88 not so well. And so we started develop relationships with custom crush facilities. Rombauer became our custom crush facility under Greg Graham, and it was really great to work under him.

Fred Reno

Wow that is fascinating, yes. So, after Prince Michel, where did you go in Virginia.

Tom Payette

I worked there till about 2000 and immediately started my consulting. I had two paths you could say that I was exploring, working perhaps with Patricia Kluge, just up the road here, and thought, well, do I want to do something like that, or do full consulting and I had clients already lined up, and really the consulting path took the lead, which I'm grateful for. I think that was the better path. I enjoy it.

Fred Reno

I saw during my research that you had made a 2008 Meritage and 2009 reserve Chardonnay that received the Governor's Cup, that's correct. Where were you at that?

Tom Payette

I was doing consulting at both of those properties, which are New Kent vineyards and Fox Meadow. Both list me as their wine maker on their label.

Fred Reno

Which one was New Kent? The Meritage?

Tom Payette

No, the New Kent was the reserve Chardonnay, and the Meritage was Fox Meadow, which was, at the time, owned by the Morton's. It has since changed hands. Both properties have since that governor's, yeah.

Fred Reno

Where is Fox Meadow located?

Tom Payette

Near Linden, just on the other side of the mountain of Jim Law. You could say so Jim's on one side crossover.

Fred Reno

That this is really great Virginia history. I see your background says something about working under Jacques Boissenot.

Tom Payette

Boissenot. So that's the European connection through Mr. Leducq. So again, he was a man of means. But Mr. Boissenot and I would be brought in once or twice a year. We would do blending sessions, and

he would guide us both on our Virginia property, as well as our Napa property.

Fred Reno

This is not the Boissenot that was working with RDV was it?

Tom Payette

Eric Boissenot his son is working with RDV. right. Mr. Boissenot was just a wonderful man. And of course, when I first met him, I was as nervous as could be. Funny enough, it turned out he wanted to be a veterinarian. Didn't work out for him, or however, you know, he found wine, but just a very humble, likable guy. We really struck up a nice human relationship. You could say he took me under his wing. And it wasn't until maybe about five years ago that I stopped to think I worked under probably the top wine maker in the world. He made the final decisions at Chateau Margaux and of the top 10 wine properties in Bordeaux. And boy, what a blessing.

Fred Reno

Well, I can imagine. Let me back up here for a second, because I'm curious. Was wine part of your family growing up?

Tom Payette

No, other than when Rapidan River started, we probably lived about 20 to 30 minutes away, and somehow, we would find ourselves visiting Rapidan River vineyards. And I believe I did go to the second Virginia Wine Festival, not the first, but the second. So, I would have been 13,14, maybe 15 years old. I could have been older. They were touring. I'm pretty sure it was Meredith Vineyards, Piedmont, some of the early wineries at that time. It's funny how it was somewhere back

there. But no, my family was not. They weren't wine people right now but go back to about 1640 I think it is. And I do come back from the Aquitaine region, and the Aquitaine region does border Bordeaux. So somewhere back there, there's a little wine maker.

Fred Reno

I am just always curious, because wine was definitely not on our dinner table growing up as a kid, and it was just something I got captivated by at 26, 27 years old, and made a career out of it.

Tom Payette And definitely a split off path for me, and very unique, but it's definitely a gift. And I know a roommate of mine in college just started to identify that it's like, you got an embedded talent here and kind of roll with it.

Fred Reno

Let's jump into a little bit about Norton. When was the first time you had a bottle or a glass of Norton?

Tom Payette

That would have been probably in 1988 to 1989 oh, it's got to be Horton then. Well, Dennis Horton was exploring and looking at some properties. Clark's Mountain was a property not too far away. He came by in his big Bonneville, or whatever that was. We hopped in and took a ride around. He shared some Norton's and Condrieu. He was into Viognier and so I got the royal Dennis Horton treatment of what he planned to do in Virginia. I definitely credit him and Jenni McCloud for everything they've done for Norton.

Fred Reno

What has been your professional experience with growing and being involved in the production of Norton?

Tom Payette

The growing is, I would say the easier part. Now, maybe that's also from where I sit, that's easy to say, you know, every time you look in someone else's department, it's got to be easier there. But it is, I think, you know, very easy to grow. The clusters are very small that becomes very hard to harvest. So that's, you could say, a struggle, but not something that can't be overcome. The tonnage should be high enough to help overcome, say, the increased cost of the harvest. So, I like to work with it. It's a different animal. If you haven't heard it is kind of like a peanut butter after you crush it. Very, very how color heavy, anthocyanins and tannins and but it's a wonderful, great to work with,

Fred Reno

yeah, and then in the cellar becomes the work, right?

Tom Payette

Yes. And making wines is not that difficult, as long as things were done well in the vineyard. It's only when, of course, there not that you've got challenges which can happen that you really have to step up and change things. So, a lot of times, the best thing a wine maker can do is get out of the way and allow things to happen as they should and not ignore things if they are going wrong.

Fred Reno

Well, what I have found Tom going through these podcast interviews about Norton, it really occurred to me early on that in Virginia, we still,

for the most part, talk about Norton as a varietal. There's not a terroir story generally associated with it. And every terrific wine in the world has some level of terroir story associated with it. And by terroir, I'm not talking about just soil, I considered it like the three-legged stool. There's basically climate, which affects all agriculture, no matter what you have climate. Second is not just soil, but site selection, elevation, all the things that go into that aspect. And then the third is probably even more important than anything, the hand of man, and what you do with that resource once you get it in the cellar, right? But what I discovered here is a lot of people have put Norton in not the choices spot in their vineyard. And I credit Dennis Horton to some degree from the stories I've heard, because he would tell them, hey, you could just put it down there. It's bulletproof. It's just going to survive, no matter what type of site in your vineyard type of philosophy. But you don't put your Nobles grape in the worst part of your vineyard. And I see a shift going on right now in Virginia, where people are starting to take the grape as serious as they should. It's a noble grape. It's got a lot of mysteries surrounding it in its history, but it is a noble grape. And I'm wondering what the next 10, 15, or 20 years can look like if people start to treat Norton like they treat their Cabernet Franc like they treat their Petit Verdot. What's your thoughts about that?

Tom Payette

I think you are spot on and well put. And even we did that with Cabernet Franc. I remember Lucie Morton saying at a business meeting or a vineyard meeting. You know, some people might have been complaining about their performance of Cabernet Franc. Why are we planting it? Well, if you put it in your worst spot, you expect the worst performance. So, the same thing. Yes, I think if someone could

take Norton, give it the white glove treatment, and really focus on it, that could pay off nicely.

Fred Reno

Well, I kid Jenni McCloud at Chrysalis a little bit. I said, Jenni, you've kind of stumbled into this. You have the largest Norton vineyard reputedly in the world. You make five different types of Nortons, and you and your staff and your wine making team over the years, have started to identify what's the best type of wine you can make from the fruit that comes from this part of your vineyard, and that is terroir, really, because you're now starting to take what you have, the material, and you're shaping it into its best expression. And I say, you confuse people, because you have all these different Nortons, and they think, when they buy their Norton that it is one expression. Well, it's not just one type of Norton, because you have these different expressions. But I think people are starting to take cues from that and realize, hmm, what should I be producing with my Norton based on the growing conditions I have in my vineyard?

Tom Payette

Good, and we're still exploring, you know, we're only, say 20/25 years into Norton, much less, we're still a young state growing grapes and making wine. We're still discovering what grows best. Where will Norton take the lead and become our flagship, or will some other variety? We're definitely still trying to discover that. But again, if we put it on a better site and give it some real attention, maybe it could be a leader.

Fred Reno

If you think about the history of Norton going back to the late 1800s, in 1873 when that wine from Stone Hill in Missouri got this recognition at the International Vienna Expedition as the best red wine of all nations, they were probably taking it more seriously in those days, if it wasn't for prohibition that wiped out the entire East Coast wine growing. What if, right. What if, right? You know, Todd Kliman framed that best in my interview with him, when he said we lost all that institutional knowledge, right? We lost all that expertise. We lost all these years of wine growing that we're now catching up to.

Tom Payette

Continuity Correct.

Fred Reno

Yeah, you know, so we understand what we have here, and we don't have to be vinifera centric as an industry. And I think with climate change, people are starting to see that. And let me ask you, because you've been here for years, what do you see in the vineyards as it relates to climate change?

Tom Payette

It could be a benefit really. We're not really getting these awful cold winters to where it does damage to our vines. And I was around in what year was this? The freeze of '96 21 below zero. Wow, 21 so we're hopefully, knock on wood, not going to see that anymore. But also from the history, there were times back in the 80s and 90s where we would be in meetings, and there would almost be this turbulence of if you plant vinifera, you'll win. If you plant hybrids, you'll win. So, it was a big struggle. What will Virginia survive on? Really, a lot of that's gone away, you know, a lot of nice Vidals and Chambourcin and other

hybrids. And we do well with Petit Verdot and Chardonnay. I think there's a door that's open for Norton to also sit in there and say, hey, I can play in this game as well and have people focus on it.

Fred Reno

What I see in the market, the market challenges that I say for Norton are, it reminds me an awful lot of the same type of market challenges that Zinfandel had in the late 70s and early 80s, when I introduced Zinfandel to my customers. I started at retail wine in Washington, DC in 1979 and I was buying direct from California wineries by 1980 because I couldn't get it on the East Coast. And I sold Joel Peterson's first vintage of 1976 Dry Creek Benchland Zinfandel from Ravenswood in the store, and I couldn't give it away. And if you think about the history of the Zinfandel producers, when they started ZAP in 1991 and got together collectively and started doing very large Trade and Consumer events, Zinfandel took off, and now the consumer thinks of Zinfandel. Is that quality red wine you buy from California if you like that flavor profile, right? But there was a lot of mystery about Zinfandel. Is it Primitivo? Is it from Croatia? Well, Norton has that same mystery story that we're trying to solve. It has a flavor profile unlike Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, or anything else. So, it's a different flavor profile. It has a lot of the characteristics of what I'm saying. Norton has the same market challenges. Let me tell you my aha moment that I always like to share with people, the Homestead was my biggest client for the last three years, and I was doing the Virginia Wine Experience there, and we would have a different vintner and vineyard every month. When we had DuCard Vineyards it was the first producer we had who made Norton, and we served their Norton at the end of the dinner with the last course. And I remember watching the table, and it was the one wine that all the consumers wanted more of at the end of the dinner.

Now, nobody in that room, other than Scott Elliff, the owner of DuCard and his wife, my wife, and Mark Spadoni the managing director of the Homestead had really ever had a bottle or glass of Norton. So, I'm watching this, and I look at Scott, and I said, Scott, I got it. I say, If you serve Norton in the right atmosphere. I had this wine decanted about an hour plus before we served it, and I had the service put it back in the bottle so the guest could see the brand, because young Norton needs decanting. And if you serve it in the right atmosphere, there's no preconceived notion in the consumer's mind about why they shouldn't like this. They love it. And I thought, Ah, it's not the consumer. It's the Trade and the Press that are the problem. They're the ones who have created this atmosphere of you either love it or hate it, type of attitude that you hear about and read about. I always like to ask the producers when I go to the winery, okay, so how do people react when they have your Norton for the first time? And the majority of them say they really like it a lot, because they've never had this flavor profile before, and they're not biased against it to start with, right?

Tom Payette

Absolutely. And I think the marketing challenges are a good place to start. I worked at a winery years ago, and they said marketing should pull production. In other words, don't just make a lot of wine and then try to go out and sell it, but make sure that the sales are pulling us along. So, there's not, say, a backlog and so changing the perception. If there is a perception about Norton or creating one, that's like you said, the Zinfandel. I mean, you think about it, Zinfandel. We came from White Zinfandel. A lot of people think, hey, it should be white versus no, it's this big, thick, rich monster, for a lack of a better word, yes, I tend to like those styles of wines. And think about it, Zinfandel has almost led that high alcohol trend. When you look at it, it just

occurred to me as you're speaking about that, but that it was expected, and that was ripeness for Zinfandel.

Fred Reno

Yeah, exactly, the physiological ripeness. And that's what I really like about Virginia wine in general. What attracted me to Virginia and moving here in 2019 I'm quoted in a newspaper article that says that Virginia wine "still has soul". And by that, I mean in California, on the West Coast now they can't get physiological ripeness any longer at say 24-degree sugar brix. They can get sugar ripeness. But as you know, the seeds are still green and they're not physiologically ripe. So, they let it hang to 25, 26, 27 degrees of sugar and now suddenly you got this really high alcohol wine. So, what do they do? They de-alc it. Well, when you de-alc wine, you strip the soul right out of the wine, right? So you can line up 10 Russian River Pinot Noirs or 10 Napa Valley Cabernet and they all taste the same.

Tom Payette

And why are they having that trouble? You know, climate change? Yeah, so I would expect it to accelerate.

Fred Reno

But Virginia, I like your opinion on this. But from what I tasted now, five, almost six years here, there just seems to be a natural level of acidity still. There seems to be, generally, hardly ever over 14% alcohol wines on their own. And there's just this beautiful harmony as Virginia started to figure out, what are the grapes that do best here.

Tom Payette

And that happened, but I would say, in the early days when we were ordering Cabernet Sauvignon, we didn't know about clones. We didn't know how to grow grapes. We were picking grapes at, say, 20 to 22, brix and less. They were green, and they were hard and green wines because of the fruit. So, as we came forward, largely through Bruce Zoecklein and Tony Wolf from Virginia Tech, helping us understand what we're doing, leaf pulling, hedging, keeping the balance in the vineyard, is when we were able to bring that along, so that that really helped us in our ability to make better wines.

Fred Reno

I have a question for you about Bruce Zoecklein, because he tells a story that I really enjoyed when he finally came here to Virginia, and I want to know if you were at this tasting. He had a group of wine makers together in 1986 at his home, a little hospitality where they were tasting Norton's. But it was blind, and he didn't tell them they were Norton. Were you possibly at this tasting?

Tom Payette

I don't know if I was or not. I know he hosted us. I wouldn't have said that was an '86 but I remember being at his home, but I think it was for another event.

Fred Reno

He said they were mostly all Stone Hill wines from Missouri, and they were from the '70s. Again, he didn't tell people they were Norton. He did the brown bag thing, and they were doing the left bank, right bank thing with him. And he tells this funny story. And I said, that's what I'm talking about, Bruce, if you give it to people blind, and they don't have this preconceived notion. These were all wine makers in Virginia, and

he said it was just fascinating to watch, because these wines had 10 years bottle age.

Tom Payette

And you may have heard this story. It's a Barboursville story, Adrianna Rausse. And I believe he was one of the early wine makers and leaders at Barboursville. Well, he would try to go out and sell the Barboursville wines and wouldn't really get a warm reception. He would Brown Bag them. Of course. He came in. He was Italian. He had an accent, and taste my wine, you know, and people loved it. And how much can I get for you all? Give me a case of this.

Fred Reno That was Gabriele,

Tom Payette no, it wasn't Gabriele. There was an Adrianna Rausse, and he might have been after Gabriele, yeah, he had to have been right. But he would pull it out and then show it was a Virginia wine. And then, so getting over that label and that perception is huge, no doubt about it.

Fred Reno

Well, it was fascinating to me, because when I came back to California after my trip in 2017 and I decided we, my wife and I, we were going to move to Virginia I started talking about Virginia wine to all these quote, unquote influencers and people I've done business with for over 40 years in California and around the country, and they say, What are you talking about? They can't make good wine in Virginia. And then if they were out our way, we were living in Santa Rosa, I would take them to lunch, and I'd always bring a bottle of Virginia wine. Now this would be 2018 and halfway through lunch, Tom inevitably, they'd go, that's from

Virginia, right? And I go, Yeah, that's from Virginia. And they go, I had no idea. I thought, yeah, you know everything about wine and give them a rib. And you had no idea. It's like they were stunned, right? And now I thought Virginia had the potential to be the next Oregon. And by that, I mean the hottest wine growing region in America today. So, I came here in 19 Well, it is now.

Tom Payette

Right, maybe you've heard it, but I heard someone say Virginia is like the Napa Valley of the East. I

Fred Reno

I just heard that exactly it's like everything I thought was going to happen is now happening, right? Is blows my mind. I mean, it's fantastic to see.

Tom Payette

It really is and unpredicted. I know when I got in the business, there were probably 30 wineries and, you know, to watch it evolve as I've even had during my career, and no one could have predicted that. I just kind of follow the passion and everything else bloomed underneath if you will.

Fred Reno

To me, I felt like the consumers around the country just needed to look at Virginia wine as part of the cycle of what they drink. You know, just like they have an Italian wine one night or Spanish wine one night, it should be in their cycle. I see that as the future, really, where all of a sudden people are seeking it out and looking for it. So what do you think about this 2020 Chablis?

Tom Payette

Oh, very nice. I've always loved a nice Chablis. And again, I often say, we can in Virginia still do a wonderful Chardonnay. I agree, yeah, similar to something like this.

Fred Reno

I wouldn't disagree. Jim Law founder of Linden makes wine quite similar to this, I agree, yeah, there's a, you know, that word minerality, but that encompasses so many flavors but the fact that you have wine with this length.

Tom Payette

There's glycerin in here, yes, a nice, broad palette.

Fred Reno

And it's, it's not overworked, right? You can just tell that there's an authenticity to the wine. And that's kind of what I feel about Virginia wine as well. There's an authenticity to the wine, absolutely a sense of place. So back to Norton for a second. What's the oldest bottle of Norton you have had?

Tom Payette

Well, of course, that would have been given to me by Dennis Horton, say an in 1989 so I don't know. So, you know, I don't know.

Fred Reno

Let me ask you an easier question because we all have it in our career. What was that aha moment, that one bottle of wine you had at

one time where you went, Oh, now I get it. Yeah, that's it. What was that bottle of wine?

Tom Payette

Varietally, I don't know, but we used to get together when I was at Ingleside and chip in and go into a restaurant and order off of the wine list. There must have been eight or 10 of us, but we could then try some very high-end wines. I do remember a Chateau d'Yquem that we all chipped in. I'm sure we had to reach deeper in our pockets,

Fred Reno

Not as deep as you'd have to today about

Tom Payette

True but even then, it was proportionately very deep. But that was a bit of a neat aha moment of, oh, that's what it can be. And to learn more about it, not that I'm over the top on Sauernes, but that that moment does stick out to me? Yeah, Lafayette restaurant, I believe if it's still available, still in Fredericksburg,

Fred Reno

That's fascinating. Well, you've seen quite a bit here in Virginia in 40 years, haven't you?

Tom Payette

I have, and it's, it's been a pleasure and a blessing, really, again, either the industry came to me, I just got in front of it, or something happened. So, you know, and all by mistake you could say, well, yeah. My first job with a college degree was minimum wage. Okay, so my kids, I always lecture them on, follow your passion, you know, and

don't follow the money. And definitely, I didn't do that. And, you know, just work your way up. I've had to change jobs every three years, which was kind of unheard of. I'm sure my dad was looking at me and going, What is he doing? But that was the way to move up in the industry, or to get a phone call from someone you worked for, hey, come back and be our head wine maker. That's really what was happening because I would go back and forth a little bit between Ingleside and Prince Michel, but some of that was Joachim Hollerith too. He moved around.

Fred Reno

It's going to be fascinating to see what happens in Virginia in the next 10 to 15 years, if we're going to have the talent pool to help accelerate the quality progression that we're seeing in the wine.

Tom Payette

I agree, the talent pool is interesting, and it was identified some years back that we were lacking people that understood how to make wine. I'm not sure if the bottom didn't fall out on that a little bit again, just from what I see with potential new entries, the people that might put on a winemaker hat. And know some of the lingo, but you get them in the cellar and whoa, wait a minute. We need to refine some things.

Fred Reno

Well, the farming part of this is not easy, and there's not a lot of people moving into farming.

Tom Payette

The farming part is brutal. I respect them 100%. There are some pretty days in March and pretty days in September. But you get out there in

June, July, and August, you've got to be in that vineyard, and that's where it's made. That raw material is the key to what we do. And take labor. I worked with machine harvested fruit for the first time in, say, 20 some years, Prince Michel, we did machine harvest fruit back in the 80s and 90s. Well, this year, I was able to make wine for machine harvested fruit that's coming. Is that good or bad? I don't know. It's necessary, Perhaps.

Fred Reno

A lot of times machine harvesting doesn't lend itself to that in Virginia. Isn't that correct?

Tom Payette

So, you know, then you start to think, well, Texas, might you know they're flatter, and would they overtake us in terms of being the next California?

Fred Reno

Well, I'm curious. I had a winemaker say to me early on, something that stuck with me. He said, Fred, it's entirely possible some of the best vineyard sites in Virginia have not even been planted yet.

Tom Payette

I would agree. When you really look at how we started in Virginia, and this is an okay way to start. I'm not saying it's wrong, but it's in regions where the means was there to do that. And most people looked outside their window and said, Well, we have an open field here. Let's plant grapes, right? And thank God they did, you know, to say, hey, we can do this now. Let's go out and explore. I always look at a mountain close to our home. It used to be an orchard Clark's mountain, and

Dennis Horton was tuning in on that as well. That would be a wonderful site. And its high elevation, as you know, it's 10 degrees warmer at the base and when you're up high 10 degrees cooler, so 10 degrees warmer in the winter, cooler in the summer. And so that would be helpful for that inversion, to protect those vineyard sites.

Fred Reno

Let's just say, for the sake of argument, 50 years of the modern Virginia wine industry, right, and so 50 years is nothing, right?

Tom Payette

It is. And so much to learn. And we've learned an awful lot. And now keep building on that.

Fred Reno

The farming costs here in Virginia are so much higher than they are on the West Coast.

Tom Payette

Land costs are not, that's true. There's an offset. And of course, I you know what's Napa \$300,000 an acre that's 8000 10,000 a ton fruit that makes a wine maker scared, shut them down with fear, right?

Fred Reno

I can totally understand, Oh, that would be absolutely scary,

Tom Payette

It does put a little pressure on me to say, Yeah, I can't mess this up. Or I do like it when, when really nice fruit comes in on the crush pad, it's more of a joke than anything, but, well, I better not mess this up,

because it's on me, because the fruit was really nice, you know. And I think that's a good approach. I always thank the growers when they bring it in. And it can be brutal sometimes out there, but they're doing a lot of the hard work.

Fred Reno

I see where in 1999 you were given the honor of the wine maker of the Year by Vineyard and Winery management. Where were you making wine at them?

Tom Payette

I was at Prince Michel at the time, so that was really a part of my Prince Michel and Leducq efforts. In fact, I was engaged at the time to who is my wife now? But she wasn't complaining, but she had said that I had worked 70 days in a row, but I loved it and still do.

Fred Reno

You also received a really nice award and honor here from the Wine Business Monthly as one of the 2020 Winery Industry Leaders, right?

Tom Payette

Yes, So if you do what you love, you know, those things come and your kind of do them without thinking about it. And people recognize when you work hard, that's true. And in the industry, you know.

Fred Reno

It is true. The wine business is so fragmented, though, when I've talked to businesspeople over the years during my career. And they say, Man, the wine industry looks really interesting and fascinating and all this. And I say, you know, at the end of the day, it's just farming, and

the only way a winery owner makes money is like the farmer when he sells the farm. But if you can tie a brand to the land, that's combustible, and that's what happened on the West Coast, and that's what happened at RDD just now, right? Good point, yes, you can tie a brand to the land now, all of a sudden, that is expandable, right? You know, beyond the whole pure farming aspect of this.

Tom Payette

Hopefully, winery owners are involved. If I meet with a client that's going to be a new winery owner, I said, if you run this thing out of a checkbook and not be involved, you are less likely to make any money. If you're in there and you can walk through a cellar and smell that there may be a fermentation that's not going right or walk through the vineyard and see certain diseases, you'll be more involved and have better success.

Fred Reno

So, what's the danger here? Now, looking forward, I know that we're dealing with Pierce's disease, but what about this Spotted Lantern?

Tom Payette

That's a great unknown. I don't know, and nobody does. It's going to be hard on the grape vines, for sure. And what can we do about it?

Fred Reno

Are you talking about Pierces Disease, or the Spotted Lantern fly?

Tom Payette

Pierces, of course, is, I guess they're dealing with it on the West Coast. They're the glassy wing sharpshooter, or the Green Wing

sharpshooter. But it is kind of butting up against us, I believe, definitely in the southern parts of the state.

Fred Reno

What is the spotted lantern fly? What does it do? Does it attack the vine, the bark of the vine? What does it do?

Tom Payette

I wish I knew better and could, and Lucie Morton could definitely educate us on this, but I don't know if it's all like a sharpshooter, whether it's a bacterial disease, it does get into the beyond the bark, I believe. Okay, it gets into the what would you call that, the xylem and phloem. I think it'll kill the vine for sure. Yeah. So that isn't good, of course, and then you have to reestablish a vine. But let's look at California. What happened to them? They had to replant due to phylloxera, and they had learned a lot. Their clones were better. That was a springboard. It was a little bit of a blessing in disguise for them. Not easy financially, but they really got deeper, more, richer wines.

Fred Reno

Well, first of all, Lucie Morton was part of this, at one point, I believe, helping to figure out what they actually had in their vineyard, as opposed to what they were sold from the nursery, right.

Tom Payette

Absolutely yes. And I know when we were replanting Leducq property or the Elhers Lane property, we sat with Mr. Leducq and we were, you know, should it be clone 15, 16, 9, these are Cabernet clones, and we struggled. Merlot was hot at the time, and we struggled, and we'd meet over it. And finally, he kind of distilled it down, as he always did, as this

land is really perfect for Cabernet. So, we're going to plant more Cabernet than Merlot. We were reacting to the Merlot rage, if you will, or the expansion of Merlot. And we've got to catch that wave. He was good enough to look at the land and say, this land is really the best for Cabernet Sauvignon. Let's go dominant on Cabernet Sauvignon. And that paid off handsomely.

Fred Reno

Well. That's the one grape that has befuddled the Virginia wine grower, hasn't it? Cabernet Sauvignon has not done well here.

Tom Payette

I've seen the transition of again, we used to just order Cabernet Sauvignon, and we didn't know what root stock where it was definitely So 4. Now we have different root stocks and clones, and we know how to leaf pull. We can do well with Cabernet Sauvignon, if we can let it hang long enough, don't over crop it and again, it should ripen in time with climate change. Hopefully, we don't get a big frost or freeze. I do remember a frost or freeze in November, early November, once we had Cabernet in gondolas, it was machine harvested fruit, and it froze. We had to shut it down and come back the next morning, which I think was a Saturday. But I think it's not to say put all your eggs in Cabernet, for sure, but we're doing a much better job with it. We're away from those green, herbaceous underwrite pickings that we used to do, and we can get it right now. Should be able to if you grow it well.

Fred Reno

Speaking of New Kent, for a second, your client and whose wines we're going to taste shortly, when Lucie gets here, they had made what they called a white Norton. I'm assuming that's just they didn't have

skin contact, pretty much, correct, right? What was the impetus for that? Were you around them when they decided to do that?

Tom Payette

I was and I've been there since the inception, in fact, the designing of the building, working with the architect, and so on. But Pete Johns, which New Kent was actually owned by Body Knoll Corporation, which is really a Hardee's chain on the East Coast, so it's their land division. So, Pete Johns headed that up, and he always wanted to make a white Norton. And I remember asking, you know, how white? And he didn't have a whole lot of wine background, but it really turned out when the early years we made one, it looked like their heart pie. It was almost that little bit of bronzing salmon color, which, of course, the Beringer Blush days. I'm always looking for that pink hue and color, which is pH related. So, when we made that and people loved it, that was a neat transition. It was really his vision. And I always like that from a client, you know, what do you want to make? And as long as it's fits into the something not wild and crazy, I'll help them with that.

Fred Reno

How much Norton acreage do they have?

Tom Payette

I don't specifically know but at least there's a one-acre block that might be Cynthiana or Norton, okay, and then there's another maybe four to five acre block, perhaps that would be one of the two different vineyards, and one, supposedly, is Cynthiana, the others, Norton.

Fred Reno

You wouldn't happen to know what their source was for the Scion for the beginning.

Tom Payette

I wouldn't but those records would probably still be there, though, I believe Lucie Morton has met with them. They might have been able to dig back on those records. Yeah, because that'll be fascinating. Pete had planted both of those before I was on board. In fact, we did two or three years of custom crush off site while the building was being built.

Fred Reno

I see.

Tom Payette

Well, there is another Norton. There was Mike over by Cooper vineyards. I don't know if he's still growing Norton or not. I forgot his last name.

Fred Reno

Across the street from what is actually the 53rd winery today, correct? Yeah, there is a Norton vineyard across the street which Dave Drillock, the owner of 53rd does get some fruit.

Tom Payette

So, we worked with that fruit at New Kent as well. Oh,

Fred Reno

Oh, okay. I don't know what the name of that vineyard is, but I know there's a vineyard across the street from 53rd winery, and vineyard that

has Norton and that Dave Drillock at the owner now of 53rd formerly the Cooper Vineyard has been getting.

Tom Payette

Good. Well, it's still in existence.

Fred Reno

Well, Dave is replanting Norton in his vineyard as well, because they had some Norton. But he took it out because it wasn't doing that well. Now he's replanting some Norton because of what he sees from what he's been able to do with Norton and Chelsey Blevins, his talented young wine maker. She's I believe is one of the rising stars here in Virginia. From what I've tasted it is just exciting stuff to see young talent like that, right?

Tom Payette

Absolutely. And neat to see them looking at Norton and reinforcing it.

Fred Reno

Right. Well, we have the Norton Network now and it surprised me how many producers have joined on. This is the beginning of something that I didn't start. But in the back of my mind, I've always had an idea of an organization similar to ZAP. Zinfandel Advocates and Producers to start this. And so, this, to me, is the groundwork for something like that to begin to get a consumer awareness about and trade awareness about what Norton is, what it can be. And, boy, if you ever have the opportunity to have a 10- or 15-year-old bottle of Norton, it just changes your mind dramatically, right? It's mind blowing.

Tom Payette

Well, thanks for helping to lead that cause. I mean, I think, to have that ZAP mentality and reinforcing that someone needs to carry the torch, and that marketing side is so important, and it's a wonderful wine.

Fred Reno

One thing I can say is, when I get on to something I just go all in. Yeah, excellent. Well, that's what we need. I go all in no matter what because it just, it takes me over intellectually. And I just think I have got to do this.

Tom Payette

Starts to consume you even at night, you know. And how can I do this? And how can I help and get people interested? Because it's a wonderful wine, and so people should be interested, yes, a little bit hidden, and so Let's expose it and show people how nice it is. Totally.

Fred Reno

All right. Tom, well, I really appreciate you coming down to my studio today. Thank you. We'll stop this, and finish here. Lucie Morton is coming shortly so we can taste the Norton wines you brought from New Kent.