

EPISODE #21 PART 2/LUCIE MORTON NORTON & CYNTHIANA

Fred Reno

So, jumping forward really quickly, because we'll go back and forth here in time. Dennis Horton, who was from Hermann, Missouri, decides to bring Norton great back to Virginia. Did he bring back Norton, or did he bring back a mix with Cynthiana in it?

Lucie Morton

Fred let's hold that question and ask me again. What happened to Norton in Virginia. What happened was tobacco became the cash crop the wine drunk by farmers and people who couldn't afford it. What alcohol that Virginians drank was whiskey, cider and beer. I know because I've looked at the records for communion wine in Episcopal churches in Virginia, they drank Madeira. Madeira was what Thomas Jefferson and George Washington drank. We had no wine industry, really in Virginia in colonial times. And it was only after Norton got going, there was a brief moment starting in the 1870s and 80s, that there even was much of an American heritage grape based Virginia industry. Well, yeah,

Fred Reno

Well yeah, the Monticello Wine Company, right?

Lucie Morton

I would bet that really was based on Norton, because Norton was from here and by then, Cynthiana was in the Prince catalog,

because Cynthiana went to, as I think we said earlier, Cynthiana came to Hermann, Missouri in 1858 Okay, so it was there, so coming back to Norton it was extinct in Virginia by about 1919. Don't forget, Virginia had prohibition before there was National Prohibition and ironically, Farmville, Virginia was home to a Southern Methodist who was rabidly anti-alcohol, we're talking about Cannon. Bishop Joseph Cannon. So here's poor old Cunningham grapes from Farmville that we can talk about later, but so Bishop Cannon saw to it relentlessly that county by county by county in Virginia went dry starting in the 1890s so don't think that just because national prohibition was 1919, we have Virginia State prohibition by 1909 but before that, all the churches and counties and everybody who believed it was immoral to drink were taking up the Christian Temperance movement. There was no hope. That killed Morton. If you can kill a grape, you can kill it by not giving it a job.

Fred Reno

Well, let me also say to the listeners pay attention. We have a NEO prohibitionist movement happening right now as we speak. If you do the research on the history of prohibition, there were three or four forces coming together at the same time. We've got this going on right now. Now, the forces are different. This is not a religious movement, but it's a health movement, as they say, ideologue, yeah. But the same thing is going on. And one thing that happened during Prohibition was the producers of wine didn't think it applied to them. They were taken by surprise. And also, there's a subtle subtext here, I want to put in, the whole prohibition movement in the US also was an anti-immigrant bill, because it was the Italians, the Germans, the French and the Irish

who drank wine and also made wine and produced wine, and they were the immigrants of their day, and that's was a sub text to the whole thing behind the scenes. They always like to throw the women under the bus and say it was the women keeping the men from going to the saloon.

Lucie Morton

Well, that was part of it. They could have just regulated the saloon.

Fred Reno

But they kept putting the women out there, so they had all these other agendas underneath it, and there was taxation.

Lucie Morton

There's a huge economic protectionism thing that happens with any alcoholic beverage, because it's so lucrative for the governments to tax.

Fred Reno

So long as you brought that up, I'm also going to say most people don't understand one of the collateral damages of prohibition, because what Lucie said earlier, a lot of the southern states went dry before the federal government. That's how we got the IRS folks, because the federal government had lost almost 40% of its tax revenue, and they needed to replace it. So today we have the IRS as a result of prohibition.

Lucie Morton

Yea, they lost the whiskey tax, but agreed to prohibition so that they could make it up with an income tax. Exactly. Yeah. And meantime, you know, grapes are going extinct and fleeing. So, let's get back to Norton and Cynthiana. There was no future for Norton in Virginia. Concord, you know, if you were a juice grape, it was okay. And one thing that's occurred to me is that if you think of a grape and grape juice, they're innocent. Right the minute they go through fermentation, they lose their innocence. And I like to say it's like when people grow up, you lose your innocence in a certain way, and that's what happens. So as long as you were a Concord or Niagara or a grape that could make grape juice, you maintained your innocence and you were above the law the minute you were a grape that needed to be transformed into wine. Now you're sinful.

Fred Reno

That's an interesting perspective.

Lucie Morton

Well, you know, Fred, I'm related to grape vines. I really am. I don't know if you guys know the work of Stephen Mancuso, but he's an Italian bio geneticist at the University of Florence, and he's done wonderful podcasts and books on plants as sentient beings that they can communicate. All of the things about plants are not inferior to human beings. And believe me, some days I think they're superior to human beings. He said, plants have been around for 20 million years. Humans only 300,000. Plants enhance the planet and humans are destroying it. So, there's this whole thing about that. Well, if you Love grape vines. Grape vines and trees, you know, for me, are just wonderful. But one of the things

he said that I loved is that Noah was not very smart to load the Ark with people and animals and not plants. He forgot, you know, plants are 97% or whatever, of our planet. Everybody's like, well, Lucie, you know, the first thing he did was when finally things dried up and the grape vines grew Noah got drunk. And, you know, that's the whole story with vines. And I'm like grape vines don't mind being flooded. It kills phylloxera, so they were ready to go. But anyway, I love that thing about the Noah's Ark and no plants. But then again, it is so how do people survive? They immigrate. They leave. My ancestors survived by leaving France, right? They were going to be killed if they stayed there. They had to leave. What about grape vines? Well, they hitched a lift with the Germans to Missouri. Or, through nurseries. They were disseminated. They find new places to live, where they can survive and thrive and be productive members. We know that Missouri had an industry, a thriving industry that was totally ruined by prohibition and anti-immigrant sentiment and all of that. Don't forget, World War One didn't endear people to the German culture, right? And back in Hermann, their schools were still teaching German, and so that they got all wrapped up in this whole culture wars stuff. People were told to pull out their wine grapes. Well, one guy who had a half-acre of Norton grapes outside of town that's now called the Rauch vineyard which is owned by Stone Hill wine company. One guy kept a half an acre of his quote, unquote, Norton. So that's what saved Norton. That saved Norton because it is not in Europe, right. Isabella's in Europe. Cunningham is in Europe. Other American grapes were saved by going to Europe, going to Brazil, going to South America, Asia, other heritage grapes literally left America, but because Cunningham is extinct in America, Norton and

Cynthiana. Let's just say Norton was saved by this half acre. How was Cynthiana saved? It was both saved and extinct at the same time. What happened was Norton and Cynthiana were mixed up from the get go, just like Husman and Munch warned. They said they look a lot alike, right? They're easily confused. They were mixed up just like Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay were mixed up in Burgundy. The grape variety was called Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay. And I remember Pierre Galet saying, Lucie, we can't have a variety called Pinot Blanc Chardonnay, because there should be no Blanc. That is the white fruiting variety of Pinot Noir. And there's Chardonnay that has nothing to do with Pinot. I mean, yeah, maybe they have some genetic relations, but they're different varieties. Well, that's what happened with Cynthiana, she got mixed up with Norton, and Norton just became the grape. So, I like to say Cynthiana went extinct through misidentification. Coming back to this half acre vineyard, the Rauch vineyard outside of Hermann, which saved Norton for the Missouri industry, but also for the Virginia industry, because, as we said, Dennis Horton was from Hermann. He has a winery in Virginia. He knew the history, of course, that was so brilliant of him. Bring Norton back to Virginia now that it has a purpose, now that we're legally allowed to grow and sell wine grapes in Virginia, which we weren't for the longest period of time. So, Dennis called Stonehill Wine Company, which owned the oldest we're going to call it civil war era Norton vineyard. We all just sort of think 1860ish, you know. But it was a Civil War era vineyard of this half acre of Norton. Well, it also contained a mix of Cynthiana. They were mixed up. From the get-go, we have the historical record. They were mixed up. So, when I was wanting to find well before I went to Missouri to look at that vineyard, to look for Cynthiana, I still

had not had somebody show me a vine that I believed was Cynthiana, next to one that was, I believe was Norton. I have to see a living vine. When I was doing my movie Odyssey, I called up Sharon Horton, and said, Sharon, do you by any chance have Cynthiana? Did you ever plant something that somebody told you with Cynthiana, and it may well have come from the Post family in Arkansas, because Arkansas kind of fancy itself as the Cynthiana capital, even though they would put Cynthiana in parentheses, with Norton on the label. It was kind of a marketing thing, but other people really did believe they were different, and there were a few nurseries in Arkansas that believed they had Cynthiana and that it wasn't Norton. I just had never seen them. Don't forget Fred. I worked in the Virginia industry. My clients are 95% vinifera and so I never worked with other than Casanel vineyard, but that's my only client that even had Norton. In doing the movie I thought, I need to figure this out, because I'm talking about Heritage American grapes and Cynthiana deserve to be a part of that story. So, Sharon said, Well, you know, Lucie, I'm going to say, 10 years ago, I did plant eight rows of Cynthiana that I bought from a nursery that said it was Cynthiana. And I said, I'll be right there. Remember, I live in Charlottesville, and she's in Orange. I said, Sharon, I got to see those because I've learned I can't believe what people tell me.

Fred Reno

That was the first time you actually were able to see a Cynthiana vine?

Lucie Morton

It was the first time I had an opportunity. And I remember saying to Stephan Balay, he's doing drone pictures of the vineyard and all. And I said, Stephan, remember that if this were easy, I wouldn't be the last ampelographer standing. This is a skill set that I have. I have experience. I have training. I translated Galet's book into English, which, you know, was an advantage to me, that he didn't write in English. But anyway, it's a discipline like any other discipline, like botany, some people can tell 10,15 different kinds of maple trees apart. You have to know. So, They do look alike at first, but I went back and forth between rows eight and nine. I know them well, and I am in the vineyard probably, I don't know, 45 minutes an hour, but I went back and forth, looking, looking, in what I call empello vision. You're just looking at a vine in a disciplined way. Fred, I think it's like when you taste wine. I've tasted wine with you. You go through the qualities of a wine when you're trying to see, is it a Macon is it, you know, where's it from? You have certain experience memories. Yeah. Markers, you have markers, salinity, acidity, minerality, everything. This is very much like that, except for, instead of using your palate, you're using your eyes. I look at a vine and I see a multiplicity of things, but I'm trained, just like a trained wine maker is, to pick out what's important and what's distinctive. It's really very similar. It is analogous. So, I did that, and I because I didn't know whether Sharon really did have different vines. I don't ever believe anybody you know. I trust and verify kind of thing. But, after a while, I thought I could see that, yes, they had differences, but the key is, what are the differences and are they consistent? And the only way I'll know is if, once I figure it out, if I then go back to my car, go sit under a tree and say, Sharon, bring me 10 branches, 10 shoots of Cynthiana and 10 shoots of Norton. Don't tell me what

they are like in tasting blind. I said, if I can tell you what they are and why we're on to something, I will have cracked the code. I'll know what to look for. I'll be able to go anywhere and find it. And guess what? She did. I did I got it, I figured it out, and Stephan and I happened to be going to Hermann, Missouri three weeks later for the movie. So, the timing was perfect. I think it was 2022 so we go to Hermann. I meet up with Dean Volenberg, who's the director of the grape and wine Institute there. I said, Dean, let's go to Rauch vineyard. Let's go to the 1860s block because I also had gone around it at Sharon's Norton, I said, Sharon, you have a mix up now that I know how to tell him apart what you and I went looking, because looking at your other plantings of Norton that you've done over the years, Cynthiana has crept in there. I didn't have time to mark every vine, but I could see that that this Rauch vineyard had given them a mix also. So we went to the vineyard, and I said, you know, most of this is Norton, in my opinion. I said, Dean, while I'm getting myself calibrated to here, could you go find me a vine with bigger berries. That's all I'm asking. Because Cynthiana has bigger berries than Norton. Berry size, like I said, for ampelography, it can depend a little bit on the flowering, on the crop load but in general, and they say this, the berries are slightly bigger for Cynthiana grapes. I just said, that's the one thing you find and when you find one, I want you to take leaves from that grape and bring them to me but also bring me leaves from the smaller Berry. Don't tell me what they are, and I'm going to tell you which is which. And I did.

Fred Reno

Well, you've made me leap to a thought process here. I've always wondered why, when I taste Virginia Norton wines, and now that I

know certain vineyards have Cynthiana interspersed in their vineyard, I can pick that out in the wine, especially if it's one of my wines I drink a glass of and then put it in a refrigerator, go back over three, four nights, and I just started thinking, well, maybe that's why there's been this sort of love hate relationship with Norton and the consumer, because they don't know what they're getting. It's not just probably but most probable that Cynthiana, in order for it to express itself at its best expression, needs to be vinified, not just separately, but differently than Norton. And when you're doing them together, you're getting possibly the worst of both worlds instead of the best of both worlds.

Lucie Morton

Fred, I never thought about it from that perspective, absolutely. Well, that's the thing. So, then Dean and I went to 10 Norton vineyards in Missouri while we were there, and we found one place that, like Sharon Horton, had found a nursery that really did sell Cynthiana. This is in Augusta, Missouri. There was an acre of Cynthiana and an acre of Norton, side by side. So there, I could really look at them and look at how their growth was different. And they had had a drought that summer, followed by a rain about two weeks before we got there, and the Cynthiana block was about a foot taller. It had clearly responded very quickly to the water, and the Norton was still struggling. And there was another thing. They had had a two, 4d herbicide drift over that vineyard, and the Norton responded with deformed leaves to a much greater degree than the Cynthiana.

Fred Reno

Lucie, we go on all day about this, but what I would like to touch on at this point is your film. Talk about your film that you've been working on and folks, the film is called, correct me if I'm wrong. Lucie, the Odyssey of the Forbidden wine.

Lucie Morton

Odyssey of forbidden wines, exile in return of American grapes.

Fred Reno

What was the inspiration for doing this film?

Lucie Morton

The inspiration was when Stephan Balay, who produced the award-winning film Vitis Prohibita, came and interviewed me in Charlottesville for that film. That film was all about what happened to the exiled American grapes in Europe, because they were very popular in the early 20th century, American hybrid Grapes, grapes with American genetics in them were popular because of the economic depression and all from World Wars. Think about the 20s in Europe as it was a very difficult Time, and American heritage grapes don't need to be grafted. They don't need to be sprayed much. They'll give you a crop, whether you spray them or not. So, by the end of 1950 there was a million acres of American hybrid grapes in France. Nobody realizes that 400,000 hectares. Which this did not please the powers that be, because they wanted to have pure vinifera, Appellation Controlee. I get that their traditional wines were threatened, but as usual, rather than accommodating the hybrids and having strict labeling, they banned them. Six American hybrid grapes, Herbemont, Isabella, Jacquez, etc, were banned in 1935 before and it's kind of

like, how do you forbid a grape? What did the grape ever do? That means it's forbidden. And so that is the title of his documentary film, *Vitis Prohibita*. Stephan makes this movie. I saw it on the big screen in 2019 in France. And I said, you know, it just came over me. I said, Well, I know what happened to the American hybrids when they went to Europe. They were very popular. Their root stock saved the vineyard. The French bred some of the best hybrids. We have, Seyval Blanc, Vidal Blanc. Don't forget, French American hybrids are just that. They're born in France. They were discriminated against also because they had American blood. So, there's this situation where I was very clear on exactly what happened to those grapes in Europe and why they were banned and all that. But then I said, "Well, what happened to them in America? Right? I'm like, Lucie, you're American. Norton's a Virginia grape, and you have no idea what happened to it. And Fred, I decided that we needed to do what you might call a prequel to *Vitis Prohibita*.

Fred Reno

And you also had your own personal reason, and that ties into the Cunningham grape. Talk about the Cunningham grape and its heritage, right?

Lucie Morton

So I had never really heard of Cunningham, the Cunningham grape, you know, you could say, well, Lucie, it's in your book, *Wine Growing in Eastern America* that remember, came out in 1985 Fred, I actually looked up Cunningham myself in my own book, because it was an early American wine grape bred in Virginia by my relatives, found in Virginia by my relative Samuel

Venable and his neighbor Jacob Cunningham's backyard and so I kind of knew about it, you know, I had this thought about finding out more about what happened to the American grapes in America, all these wonderful American wine grapes that disappeared and found other lives in Europe and Brazil and the Azores and all over the place. It wasn't until Stephan brought me a bottle of wine made by forbidden and forgotten grapes in France, it is illegal to sell that wine, but a group of people, the Society of forgotten and forbidden fruit, got together, and they started their own organization. And if you join the organization, and they make wine, they will go all around, because these grapes that nobody pulled them all out, but they're in the fringes. Or people's pergolas in their backyard. They're these little, teeny plantings in this Cévennes Mountains in France. Anyway, somebody got together and they all making wine out of it. And you can't buy it, but if you join the club, you get six bottles of their wine, okay, for free. You join for \$100, and you get six bottles. Well, Stephan thought as a thank you to me for being in the interview. He brought me a bottle of wine from there, from the Cévennes Mountains, from our Ardèche, that was made with 12 different forbidden and forgotten grapes. And there was a little Grenache in there too. It's just a very small-scale wine, and on the back of it was a list of all the grapes on there. And it's like Baco Noir, Concord, Isabella, Lenoir, and he had the percentages. Well, there was 1% Cunningham, and I didn't think anything of it until Cliff Ambers, who had Chateau Z in Virginia. He was a grape breeder in Virginia. He loved Aestivalis Grapes. He loved Norton. I have some of his Virginia breed grapes in my backyard now. Cliff came to dinner, and Cliff is the one who has written, if you look up Amber's Norton on the internet. He's written two very definitive

articles on the history of the Norton grape and the parentage with Bland, it's just great. I knew that Cliff knew all about that, but what I didn't know about him and Norton, he comes to dinner. I have this bottle of wine. And with that label just in the dining room. And he goes, Lucie, when are you going to France? This is 2019 I'm like, I didn't like how he asked me that, what do you mean? Well, he said, "When are you going? I said, in two months. And he goes, because this is like, March of February, March of 2019, I said, Yeah, I'm going to be in a documentary about Pierre Galet. He says, Lucie, you have to repatriate Cunningham to Virginia. Oh, I'm like, I do. And you know how you're like, Uh oh, you get that feeling like he's right. I do, darn it alright. He said, if there's 1% Cunningham in there, there's a Cunningham that's alive in France, and whoever put it in that bottle knows where that vine is. You have to go get cuttings, and you have to bring them back to the United States and I did. But may I say, it's not as easy as I'm sure that you folks out there may believe, you don't. It is illegal. Let me just tell anyone listening this podcast, although many, many people brag about bringing grape cuttings back to the United States in their suitcase or barbecue wood or whatever, I will not do that. It's illegal. I'm a professional. I understand why you don't do it, and you don't make a movie about something that's illegal. There was just no way I could tell Cunningham's story that it really did disappear and then make up how I found it. So I called Dr Mark Fuchs at Cornell, and said, Mark, would you help me get the paperwork together to be able to send these materials through the USDA quarantine system, where they go to Beltsville, Virginia, first, to be checked for bugs and other stuff, and then if they pass that, they're sent back to, in this case, there are only two places it can go, Cornell or California. In this case,

they went to Cornell. There's a really long process to be able to bring Cunningham back here. But Meantime, never mind that. So, while that's going on, on the one hand, but on the other hand, I'm like, well, I need to taste Cunningham wine, right? And let me come back to ampelography too. How if I didn't know how to identify Cunningham by their leaves, which I did, because it's in the French Ampelographies, it's quite a distinctive grape, but I knew that as soon as I saw one, matched it up with Galet's description and the 19th century description, all I need is see one vine. I'll find it anywhere. So sure enough, Stephan and I, when we went to the Cévennes this guy had one vine. That's why there's 1% in this collection of all the forbidden and forgotten fruit. I was able to go right up to us and say, well, there's your Cunningham. When we were driving up to that vineyard, I was able to see the Cunningham growing on the side of the road. And so later, when we commit to doing the movie, and we went to Pico Island, where Cunningham and some Isabella and a number of the other Native American grapes have found a home. I went to the Azores. I went to Madeira. But I could tell just driving from the airport to our hotel, I'm like, stop. There's a Cunningham, wait a minute, there's Isabella. Is this a red or white grape? It's a Gris, a white wine grape with green color?

Fred Reno

I understand what you are saying. Folks just think, like Pinot Gris.

Lucie Morton

Yeah, and it was very popular as Jancis Robinson talks about how after phylloxera, the mildew crisis of the late 19th century, a lot of the Portuguese Madeira Island, people were not able to

replant their vineyard. They did not have the money for all the sprays and things that they needed to do. But guess what? The Cunningham had been used as a root stock, and it grew up and has these great, big, beautiful red grapes. They're super high in sugar and acid. They're tailor made for Madeira style dessert wines with high acid, high sugar. And when we went to Pico Island, their beloved people said, "We love these because we didn't even need to add sugar, and you could go to a bar. Now, again, they're illegal because Portugal is part of the European Union, and they're not allowed to sell the Cunningham or the Jacquez which is a red American grape. You're not allowed to sell it by the bottle, but they can sell it by the glass. So, I was able, you know, to go to the bars and they said Lucie ask for vin Seco, and you'll get Cunningham ask for Vin Caro, and you'll get either Isabella or Lenoir. And so, what happens is, these little producers would bring their wine, just like I had gotten the original Cunningham in France. They bring it to you in car boys or whatever, and gallon jugs to the bar, and you buy it by the glass. That's crazy. So

Fred Reno

That's crazy. So, unfortunately, I have to bring this to a close, but I'm going to put you on the spot. Cut first you should have a little sip of that Montagny, because that wine is just terrific.

Lucie Morton

WOW. It's almost as good as the Cunningham that I have.

Fred Reno

So alright, for the folks out there, when's this film going to be finished? Because it's a fascinating film. The trailers, folks, you can go online and see the trailers. You know, go to www.vitisprohibita.com and that website, and there's a teaser for Lucie's film. It's really good.

Lucie Morton

Yeah, the website that has both the trailers or the actually it's a trailer of vitis prohibita and a teaser for my film, because we haven't finished Odyssey yet. It is the forbidden wines.com Fred. We have about 134 or five interviews, films in three continents, and, you know, multiple states. Okay, we have so much wonderful material.

Fred Reno

Putting you back on the spot here your film, when is it going to be finished?

Lucie Morton

The short answer is, I don't know.

Fred Reno

As a sponsor of the film as well I get asked this.

Lucie Morton

We've had some wonderful sponsorship, including Fred. I will be able to answer that better in a month or so, because, as time has gone by, exactly what we want this film to say has evolved quite a bit. I thought it was just a simple matter of, oh, this is fun. I'm looking for Cunningham. I found it in Brazil, where they use it to

make vermouth, or, you know, I found it in the Pico Island or and that my nephew, who bought back our family farm Moreland, wants to plant it. I thought, Well, that makes a good story. But then I realized that it's way more than that. We need to ask ourselves, What reasons are there to forbid a grape that can lead to it being driven to extinction, driven to immigration? Why did that happen? I need to figure out how to tell the story so the audience comes away with how beautiful grapes are, how resilient they are, and how wine is such a celebrated well, such a part of celebration of family life. I need to include the interview with Sandra on Pico Island, who makes a wine called Tradition out of American hybrid grapes that she puts in a bottle with a label and sells in America. It's illegal for her to sell it in France, but it is legal here. And I said, Well, Sandra, who's going to buy a Portuguese wine made with American hybrid grapes in California? Who's your audience? She said, Oh, it's the Portuguese immigrants to America for them, just like for us. These were our grandfather's grapes. These are our heritage grapes. And I thought, I need to tell that story about how these grapes are American, but they're not American.

Fred Reno

Oh, boy, this is really good stuff, because this is a broader, bigger cultural story, as much as that it's about a grape.

Lucie Morton

And the other thing, Fred, coming back, I found myself saying, Listen, I don't understand why other people don't do ampelography. How am I the last one? What is this about this? Why don't more? Why are so many people, wine knowledgeable

and Vine ignorant? And I can get, you know, a little on my high horse. Then when I sat down, thought about it I said, Well, Lucie, you like cheese, right? I love cheese. You love the diversity. You love the internationalness of it. You know, it has its own issues too, of sense of place. Lucie, how much do you know about Cheese, Bovine husbandry. Do you know anything about it except that milk is fermented and it makes cheese. So, for ampelography is bovine husbandry for wine people. So, I'm not on my high horse about it, but I think that when people see the movie and see me identifying a Marchel Foch being in the backyard of a French artist in Montmartre. They'll at least appreciate that. It's a fun skill that I have, even if they don't do it. I appreciate figure skating, but I don't skate well.

Fred Reno

On that note, I'm going to end this interview, and we're going to have a little bit more of this White Burgundy, but Lucie, thank you. This has been great.

Lucie Morton

Well. Thank you, Fred.