

Graham Rennie

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SPEAKERS

Pat Bolland, Graham Rennie

Pat Bolland 00:00

Graham, great to see you again.

Graham Rennie 00:02

It's been too long. You look great!

Pat Bolland 00:04

Thank You ... and you too! And I Understand that that is your vineyard that we see behind you ...

Graham Rennie 00:10

That is a original painting by local artists of our vineyard. Correct.

Pat Bolland 00:14

Unbelievable. Okay, when did you first get interested in wine and becoming a wine person?

Graham Rennie 00:23

Well, I think I first became interested in wine when I was at university or sorry, at high school to skiing and I needed something fill up the old goatskin. I was buying Czesardi Red in those days or something really cheap. And I kind of moved up the food chain. And when I was working in Banff, Alberta as a lifeguard, I was drinking a lot of Baby Duck on the Bow River.

Pat Bolland 00:50

Both of those sounds like bad ideas.

Graham Rennie 00:51

I know but you know, I kind of I prefer drinking I just found out that I prefer drinking wine to beer. So I was a bit of an outlier compared to most of our peers right at the time, but I almost had an affiliation. I'm more of an interest in wine than then beer so but I really got interested in wine. I guess once we bought this vineyard. Back in '97. We were kind of reallocating part of our, our asset allocation and I wanted

some real estate. We were my wife and I both interested in wine and traveled pretty extensively and visited visited many wineries and vineyards in Europe and in California, Oregon. And we just said, you know, it'd be kind of a cool thing to do one day to have a vineyard site. And so we were down for a weekend in October of '97 Staying in the lovely town of Jordan and met Len Penachetti, Len's, you know, as one of the founders of our industry here on the bench. And after a conversation with him got the bug. And ...

Pat Bolland 01:58

You buy this farm. It was an existing vineyard then?

Graham Rennie 02:01

It had been a vineyard in the 60s. It was it's probably one of the oldest vineyards on the Bienville bench had been planted to labrusca type grapes, Vitis labrusca, you know, Concords and Niagara grapes for jam and had gone into a state of disrepair and we so we bought it replanted the entire vineyard and in '99, and now without much of a plan other than we knew we had an amazing site and a 50 acre site planted 44 acres and began the journey of our the next stage of our of our life here in wine country.

Pat Bolland 02:39

Did you know anything about growing grapes?

Graham Rennie 02:43

No, I did. But there's a ton of resources in this area. Lots of expertise, and a very sharing community. So I was very quickly put in touch with all the key movers and shakers and of course we have Niagara College which has a school of winemaking and hospitality at Brock University with its Covey program. So there is a lot of people in the in the area here who are very knowledgeable and are helpful.

Pat Bolland 03:12

Okay, but even when you plant grapes, my understanding it takes many years before you're going to have something that's harvestable nevermind tasting any good. Am I correct in saying that?

Graham Rennie 03:23

Yeah, it's about you know, from that from the season that you plant, the spring you plant it's usually three years before you get fruit that you can use for wine. It's usually not amazing fruit, it's you can make wine from it. It takes about 567 years to get into that sweet spot and then from then on, it just keeps getting better.

Pat Bolland 03:45

But why Niagara? Because I've heard it said in the past the Niagara is too cold, Canada is too cold for that matter, to make decent wines. What are your thoughts on that?

Graham Rennie 03:55

Well, I think that you know, I didn't have pressing foresight on global warming but you know, in retrospect, sitting here today, what's and having on this vineyard now for 25 years what's truly amazing is the impact. A small you know what one degree increase over time and temperature has done for our

region. It has been a huge benefit for growers here to ripen their Bordeaux varietals in particular, you could always do a grow Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in a cool climate. That's what you're looking for with this kind of environment. The Bordeaux varietals Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cab Franc little harder to ripen in a traditional summer. But with global warming, it's been a huge vastly improved opportunity for winemakers to end for growers to produce fruit that can that can meet the kind of taste requirements of the average consumer. And then of course you move to if you can't get what you want. In any one season you always have the option of moving to an appassimento approach which which we may want to talk about if we have time

Pat Bolland 05:03

As a matter of fact, I do want to talk about that but, you know, you came out of the financial industry and I knew you from back in the Integra Capital days. How did you learn about ... you actually make your own wine don't ya?

Graham Rennie 05:16

Well, I have I have people, I very much involved in the process but you know, if I was hired as a winemaker to kind of really oversee it, because there's so much to do on a day to day basis, you know, and I've had a full time job, you know, running Integra and I sold the business just just recently after 30 years, and so I never had the time to devote full time to winemaking but very much involved in the process and always had a higher and more winemaker producing my wine from the time I started, I bought the vineyard in 97. Planted 99 sold most of my fruit all of my food virtually for a decade and only started taking a little bit of the fruit here from our vineyard for Mitel wine project or any say wine in 2009. And so, I've been I've been making wine under our brand for now, about 12 years.

Pat Bolland 06:08

Okay, and you said that you do it under the appassimento style. I know what that is, but a lot of people don't Can you explain it?

Graham Rennie 06:16

Yes, so Appassimento essentially translates to weathering of the grape it's a technique, all natural technique for partially dehydrating grapes to create better in a bigger aromas, better wrongness, bigger concentration and your fruit you know in the drying process you lose 35% of the water in the grape so when you're ready after 80 to 100 days of slowly drying these berries when you're ready to make wine which generally if you're harvesting in October that means in January you are you are making wine with grapes that are have quite a bit more sugar in them per grape then when you harvested in October, and when you add your super Tuscan and Zinfandel yeast to this to this these grind dried grapes, you create process in a fermentation process. And of course the the yeast converts to sugar and alcohol. And so these wines are very full bodied and rich and luscious. And but they also have higher alcohol, which not everybody likes, but that's just the natural byproduct of the process. So this is Amaroni is the brand from Italy that probably most of your viewers would be familiar with. Amaroni wines are made exactly in this in this style. You know the Romans were drying grapes 1000 years ago to make to make wine. So we just some of us here in this region have have decided that, you know we can't make those full bodied California cabs style wines every year from Ontario's cool climate. So let's utilize this appassimento process to give us that outcome from using the best fruit from your vineyard decade.

Pat Bolland 08:11

Get your sugar up. Okay, so now that brings me to the project that you that you currently have Niagara Custom Crush. How did you actually make the wine did you have the facilities to do that?

Graham Rennie 08:22

Right, so you know, I never wanted to build my own winery with my name on it, I didn't have time to allocate appropriately to to that full... to that business full time. So a friend of mine good friend here in the neighborhood, Martin Malivoire was kind enough to allow me very, very, very well known winery, Malivoire wine company, Martin allowed me to bring my fruit to his winery, and basically retain their team to produce my wine under my label at their facility. And, and then importantly, to allow me to sell my wine at their retail store. And I was real bonus because it was totally integrated. So make the wine there, sell the wine there. And for a decade, it's been a fantastic partnership, a great relationship. But as I was winding out of my day job and just, you know, retired in October from the integrity business. I knew I wanted to keep my hand in the game. I didn't want to, again, put my own name on a winery didn't have, you know, the runway is not that long, as we all know. So what I thought I could do is maybe create a facility to provide all these virtual winemakers like myself, people who don't own a winery, but are making wine at a facility and there's about 3035 of well known virtual winemakers in the region right now. I would think all of them are probably making wine at a facility The, but don't have the ability to sell that wine at that winery, the owner is on the competition. So they're they're looking at our crush Naya cousin creche facility as a wonderful way to grow their business accelerate their, their business, because not only can they make their wine, we're putting in a \$5 million expansion starting this January. So not it'll be a state of the art facility, they can make their wine there, but they can also sell it at the crush. And they'll be you know, we're open seven days a week with a fully knowledgeable hospitality team. So you have the ability, if you're a small producer, you don't want to be buying a vineyard and putting up the money to build a winery, you can actually now condominio your customer crush studio and have a totally integrated partner.

Pat Bolland 10:52

Oh, that's fascinating. Okay, I confess I've made wine in my basement with a demi John, I don't think that's who you're looking for as a partner, but do you have a threshold at which, you know, we have to have certain number of leaders to come and use our facility? And, and we'll work with you?

Graham Rennie 11:08

Yes, I would say right, now we're kind of open to the door is opened to two virtual winemakers. And so I think we have we have an ideal client type would be anywhere from, you know, 300 to 5000 cases of wine. And but you know, we have some friends that we have our first set of clients for only making 50 cases, and we're happy to have them and but in time, you know, we're really going to be targeting those producers who are serious. And today, they may only be making 200 cases, because under that model that they have a distribution models pretty restrictive, they can't really accelerate those, those sales when you don't have a retail store working for you every day, coming to our place. I suspect with the conversations I'm having, you know, one of the real attractive features of our of our facility is the ability to get retail sales every day. And that means the producer could say, well, you know, I could

probably target foreign cases now, because I know I have a team selling my wine from everything.
Okay,

Pat Bolland 12:11

So just to wind things up. I mean, if you had to reduce it down to the hardest thing to do in growing your own, or creating your own vineyard, is it the growing of the grapes? Is it the management of the farm? Is it the creation of the wine? Or is it the selling of the wine?

Graham Rennie 12:29

That's a really good question. You know, I think ultimately, I would say selling of the wine is probably the most difficult. It's difficult for a whole bunch of reasons, not not only is there an incredible competition, from all over the globe, it's that you have really only one up until recently, you've only had one really external distributor and LCBO. And as you know, they do a superb job of providing an amazing range of wines from all over the world, to consumers. And, you know, as a Ontario producer, you're up against amazing wines coming out of Italy, Lebanon, from France, at price points that are really, really good. And, you know, our cost of management here, cost of goods sold there, just because of the nature of the beast are just are high. And so it's hard to compete against a lot of these European wines in the LCBO. So if we had you know, more if we had a direct deregulated industry like California or Oregon, anywhere on the stage, you can provide wine, little grocery stores, liquor stores, all little strip malls, anywhere you want, you can buy pretty good wine, go to Total Wine, you can buy wine, but if you had that opportunity, now the wine stores all over the place where small producers could cut access, I think we would, we would see greater success. But the average I think the average wine brand owner is thinking about the vineyard, an amazing vineyard is thinking about amazing making amazing wine, all the things you talked about in your in your options. And it's not really thinking about the last part, which is the sales part until it gets in there. And he has like a whole bunch of inventory that he that still sitting in his in his house or his warehouse because he can't sell it. So that's why I say if you can get that one figured out if you can get that sales distribution model figured out ahead of time, and you're confident that you can sell the wine, then you know then haven't go to the vineyard as the next most important step in the process.

Pat Bolland 14:34

Graham it sounds like you're filling that gap, but it'll make sure to make a stop on Niagara and see how you're doing with that appassimento technique. Thanks ever so much for your time today.

Graham Rennie 14:43

Awesome. Good to see you again. Pat. Happy Christmas and look forward to seeing you down in the wine country soon.

Pat Bolland 14:49

I look forward to it too Graham. Thanks so much.

Graham Rennie 14:51

Okay, cheers.

Pat Bolland 14:53

Graham Rennie is from Niagara Custom Crush