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BUSINESS

# The Virginia wine country is growing. The local labor pool is not.

Haley Sandlow Jul 15, 2023 1



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Week In Review



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As Donald Trump began his ascent to the highest office in the land in the mid-2010s and his rhetoric on immigration was broadcast across the country, the

businesses bearing his name naturally came under greater scrutiny for hiring undocumented laborers.

Several of those enterprises — the hotels, the golf courses, the casinos — began thorough reviews of their staffs, removing employees who were found to be undocumented.

One of those was Trump Winery, just south of Charlottesville.

Between 2013, the year Trump's speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference made clear his political ambitions, and 2019, the year he announced his doomed reelection campaign, Trump Winery conducted extensive reviews of its payrolls, removed undocumented workers from its ranks and began applying for temporary worker visas, known as H-2As.

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Trump Winery officials reached out to other large operations in the Virginia wine country, also known as the Monticello viticultural area, asking for best standards and practices.



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"I gave them advice about H-2A, because they called me about it," Fernando Franco, viticulturist at Barboursville Vineyards on the Orange-Albemarle county line, told The Daily Progress. Barboursville, he said, has been using the H-2A program for more than two decades.

Today, Trump Winery, owned by the former president's son Eric, says the H-2A program is an integral part of its hiring process for foreign laborers.



Jonathan Wheeler, winemaker at Trump Winery, points at grapes hanging on the vines on Tuesday, June 27, 2023.  
CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

“Pretty much anybody that’s a decent-sized vineyard, 50 acres or so, will be using the H-2A program,” Jonathan Wheeler, head winemaker at Trump, told The Daily Progress. “Obviously, the Trump name and the labor thing, people have a lot of opinions about it. But if you buy anything at the grocery store — all the strawberries, lettuce, cabbage, all that stuff — they’re all using the same programs. Just the owners of those companies are a little less outspoken.”

But as Wheeler noted, it is the largest vineyards and wineries that can afford to review staff documentation and apply for H-2As. Just because they have purged their fields of undocumented workers doesn’t mean those workers have disappeared.

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The Virginia wine industry has grown “exponentially,” Stephen Barnard, former winemaker at Keswick Vineyards and sitting president of the Monticello Wine Trail, told The Daily Progress. It is now a nearly \$2 billion industry pumping out roughly 2 million gallons a wine every year, most of that concentrated in the Monticello region. It has grown to be the 10th-largest wine producer in the U.S. and the second largest on the East Coast. What hasn’t grown is the local labor pool. Virginians simply aren’t willing to spend the long hours in the long rows of grapevines during the longest days of the year.

Mechanization is an option, but not a cheap one when a single autonomous harvester costs roughly half a million dollars.

“The crux of it all is that in Virginia we’re still very much doing everything by hand,” George Hodson, CEO at Veritas Vineyards and Winery in Afton and the president of the Virginia Wineries Association, told The Daily Progress. “At the end of the day, we’re wholly dependent on people going through and doing it by actually walking through the vine.”

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Many smaller vineyards are routinely turning to traveling crews of laborers whose documentation is questionable or unquestioned, according to Hodson and others in the Virginia wine industry, many of whom asked to remain anonymous.

“If there’s a blind eye to turn, that’s where we can do it, because we’re hiring a company and not individuals,” said Hodson, who was clear that “we” did not refer to Veritas but rather to the wine industry itself. “There’s a bunch of crews led by a foreman of that crew, and what happens at that second level between the foreman and his employees — we just don’t generally ask that question.”



Noe Garcia Corona, assistant winemaker at Grace Estate Winery, pulls a plug on a barrel of wine on June 30, 2023.  
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## Complicated and costly

The H-2A program allows agricultural employers to bring in nonimmigrant foreign workers to the U.S. in order to perform labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature if employers anticipate a shortage of domestic workers.

There are 13 vineyards in Central Virginia using the program employing 117 H-2A workers, including Trump and Barboursville, the two largest vineyards by acreage. That’s 13 of the 40 Monticello-area wineries.

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“Not having the labor, the decision would be not to plant. It’s that drastic,” Kerry Woolard, general manager at Trump, told The Daily Progress. “There’s nothing

negative that can be said about the H-2A visa program. It is a legal program, vital to American agriculture.”

Trump and Barboursville, as well as Grace Estate Winery in Crozet, all use consulting firm másLabor to help complete the multistep H-2A application, which always starts with a call for U.S. applicants, according to Megan Wright, senior director of industry relations at the firm which has clients in all 50 U.S. states.

“I don’t think any employer gets overly excited about entering a highly regulated federal program,” Wright told The Daily Progress. “It doesn’t necessarily matter what geography, what industry, folks are having a hard time hiring.”

“People often make the false assumption that you’re deliberately hiring out cheaper labor from another country,” Robbie Corpora, winegrower at Grace, told The Daily Progress. “You want to know how many American applicants I got?”

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Wheeler asked the same question.

“We put out a call for domestic applicants,” he said. “We do it every year, and guess how many applicants we get?”

The answer is zero. And it’s the same for thousands of farms across the country.

There were 298,000 visas issued for the 371,000 H-2A jobs in the U.S. in 2022, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In the spring of 2020, the National Council of Agricultural Employers conducted a review of state workforce agencies, including “all of the large agricultural states,” said Michael Marsh, president and CEO of the council. For nearly 100,000 jobs across the country, there were a total of 337 domestic applicants.

There are plenty of reasons for the dearth of domestic applicants, according to Marsh: first, the domestic agricultural workforce is “aging out,” and second, agricultural work is hard work.

“It doesn’t take very long to put someone in a very long row before they realize, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore,’ Corpora said. “And it’s only been one day.”

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Before he began using the H-2A program, Wheeler said Trump couldn’t maintain a staff. After working for a few weeks in the heat and humidity of the Virginia summer, the “hodgepodge” of locals would stop showing up to work.

“It was constant turnover and constant training,” he said.



Thomas Villa, a worker at Trump Winery working there under the H-2A visa program, clears the canopy of the vines on June 27, 2023.  
CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

The need for experienced workers is strong: Make a wrong cut in the vineyard, and the fruit could be affected for years to come. That's not an easy thing to teach, Wheeler said, but it's something he doesn't have to worry about when most of his H-2A workers return every year.

Hiring is also tricky when a job lasts only six to eight months. In the winters, vineyards need very few hands to prune their vines.

"You don't find any Americans who say, 'Yeah, I want to come work for you and give you 90% of my life for six months,'" Corpora said. "These guys [H-2A workers] are willing to do that ... if they're not working, they're bored."

Some vineyards do hire crews full time. Veritas is one. The vineyard's eight to 10 employees are paid year round to tend to its 90 acres under vine, according to Hodson.

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But a smaller vineyard might not be able to afford year-round employees or even the H-2A program, which comes with its own set of costs.

H-2A workers are paid a salary of \$14.16 an hour, well above Virginia's minimum wage. Employers must also pay for workers' visa fees, transportation to and from their home country and food and lodging throughout the working season. Getting workers to the vineyards alone can cost about \$4,000 per person, said Franco at Barboursville.

"If you're as big as Trump or Barboursville, it almost necessitates having a sizable workforce, so the expenditure there would be easily justifiable," said Barnard. "If you're a 10- to 15-acre vineyard, bringing in an H-2A program might not make sense."

Between complex zoning laws and pushback from neighbors, housing is often the biggest barrier for másLabor clients, Wright said. Trump, Barboursville and Grace all house their workers on site, using existing infrastructure that a smaller vineyard might not have.

The H-2A workers often come from the same towns and even the same family, winegrowers said.

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Nicholas Zavala, who is from Zacatecas, Mexico, heard about H-2A through a friend who worked at Barboursville, he told The Daily Progress through a translator. Zavala is on his 18th year at Grace, and now works alongside five others, all family, including his son.

“They were almost already a family when they got here,” Corpora, his boss, said. “It was just a matter of them being able to include us in their family.”



Nicholas Zavala, who works at Grace Estate Winery under the H2-A visa program, walks through the vineyard on June 30, 2023.  
CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

## The knotted labor landscape

If employers are using the H-2A program, they're likely not hiring undocumented workers — at least to their knowledge, Wright with másLabor said.

The largest users of the H-2A program in the country are states that require employers to verify their workers' legal status. Florida is the largest, and with its recent, controversial implementation of the E-Verify program, it likely won't give up that title for some time, said the agricultural employers council's Marsh.

In Virginia, employers are not required to verify their workers' employment status. They're also not allowed to challenge documents so long as they look real, Wright said.



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“Employers obviously want to ensure they’re protecting their workforce, and also protecting themselves operationally,” she said. “But if you’re presented with a document, you can’t question it.”

“If the workers submit credentials that look viable and seem viable, we have to accept them,” Hodson at Veritas said. “Unequivocally, we are getting documents that are perfect.”

Perfect, but not necessarily real. A winegrower who chose to remain anonymous said he got a call just a few years ago from a woman in California claiming she could not receive health benefits because her Social Security card was being used by someone else: a worker at his Virginia vineyard. “They moved on when it came up.”

Barboursville began using E-Verify for all its employees about 15 years ago, according to Franco.

“When you are on the H-2A program, you put yourself under the microscope with the Department of Labor,” Franco said.

Winemakers were plainspoken with The Daily Progress: The industry’s biggest source of undocumented labor is “shared crews” — teams of five to 15 workers contracted by multiple vineyards at a time, usually to help with the harvest in the fall.

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The crews are made up of “well-known, well-respected, incredible workers,” said Barnard with the Monticello Wine Trail. And they’re in high demand.

“It’s not like it just rains here and not at Stinson,” Corpora at Grace said. “We all want to pick the same variety at the same time.”

Without an on-site labor crew, there’s no promise that hands will show up to get the fruit off the vine; it’s a problem Keswick ran into before eventually purchasing a mechanical harvester.

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David Hernandez Reyes, who works under the H-2A visa program, walks through the vines at Trump Winery on June 27, 2023.  
CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

“There were times when folks arrived, times they didn’t,” Barnard said. “There wasn’t this guarantee that we were going to get the fruit off when we needed to.”

It’s a question of control.

“If there’s a hurricane coming and you need to get your fruit in, you don’t have an option,” Hodson at Veritas said. “You can’t just get to that on Monday. It’s happening, it’s happening, you could lose your entire crop.”

At Barboursville’s neighbor Burnley Vineyards, owner Lee Reeder said he brings in a crew to help him harvest his 26 acres under vine. He’s been using the same crew of five workers for nearly 40 years, who “graciously” added him to their rotation in 1987.

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“For harvest they try to squeeze me in,” Reeder said. He noted most of his workers were granted amnesty in the 1980s, and he checks documents every year.

But with a hurricane coming, fruit to get off the vine and three other vineyards ahead in line, smaller vineyards don’t always ask for paperwork.

“They’re a whole lot less likely to ask for those documents,” Hodson said. “They’re going to be a whole lot more willing to pay in cash. Because it’s completely, absolutely necessary.”

When asked when and if Trump has had to let go of any undocumented workers and if the operation is using E-Verify, winery employees who had previously led The Daily Progress on a tour of the facilities and answered questions openly stopped responding.

Multiple requests for comment went unanswered.



A tractor drives through the vines at Trump Winery in Albemarle County on June 27.  
CAL CARY photos, THE DAILY PROGRESS

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WINE COUNTRY

# With a shortage of hands, Virginia wine country turns to machines

Haley Sandlow Aug 8, 2023 0



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What might not make a difference — at least, as much as tasters and growers think it does — is whether or not grapes were picked by hand or machine.

The decision to mechanize or not is one weighing on Virginia winegrowers' minds, especially as the wine country grows, gaining national and international attention.



Francisco Ruiz looks at a hedger, a machine that cuts leaves off the vine to clear the canopy for grapes, at Barboursville Vineyards on Friday, July 21. CAL CARY photos, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Some have already mechanized. Lakeview Vineyard Equipment, a vineyard machinery distributor, has sold mechanical harvesters, leaf removers, trimmers and pesticide sprayers to several vineyards in Virginia. Keswick Vineyards has been mechanically harvesting grapes for almost 10 years.

Mechanization is not without controversy: Virginia's slopes and smaller vineyards make mechanization not only difficult but costly. That's not to mention the pushback from certain industry insiders who maintain that mechanization might negatively affect the harvest, producing lower-quality wine.

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“The labor pool hasn’t grown as exponentially as the amount that vineyards are growing,” Barnard told The Daily Progress. “The question mark of labor and mechanization is going to be interesting. There’s been a lot of inquiries into harvesting and mechanization.”

“I do think there’s going to be a certain paradigm shift to the use of that,” Barnard said.



GREENE COUNTY RECORD

**The Virginia wine country is growing. The local labor pool is not.**

Haley Sandlow

When a winegrower decides it’s time to pick a grape, it’s often a race against the clock. Fickle and furious Virginia weather can narrow the picking window to a day or less. Wait too long, and the crop could be damaged or lost.

For vineyards with an on-site crew, that means all hands on deck. But for vineyards without a stable, abundant source of labor, using a machine allows a winegrower to harvest quickly without waiting for extra hands to show up.



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Keswick started using automated machinery to pick its grapes in 2015, said Barnard, now the winemaker at Delfosse Vineyards & Winery.



Francisco Ruiz drives a hedger through the vineyard to trim the canopy at Barboursville Vineyards on Friday, July 21, 2023.

CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

“There are not enough good, skilled laborers to manage the amount of vineyards that need to be served,” Barnard said. “When we’re trying to pick, everyone’s trying to pick. ... Having the flexibility of pulling out the harvester, hopping in and going out, there’s value in that.”

At Barboursville Vineyards' 178 acres under vine, a team of roughly 20 laborers works to prepare the grape fields for the harvesting machine, which Barboursville winegrower Fernando Franco said he has been using for 18 years.

"Without mechanization, we would need 100 people," Franco told The Daily Progress.

The most obvious barrier to mechanization, especially for smaller vineyards, is the sheer capital investment: It can cost \$100,000 for a tow-behind harvester and up to half a million dollars for a fully autonomous vehicle. And that's not including the continued investment required to calibrate and repair the machines.



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"It blows my mind that a vineyard the size of Keswick has a harvest machine," said Robbie Corpora, winegrower at Grace Estate Winery. "That was a hefty investment for 62 acres."



A tractor sits in a field at Grace Estate Winery in Albemarle County.  
GRACE ESTATE WINERY

Grace hires a small crew of laborers every year through the government's H2-A program for nonimmigrant, seasonal agricultural foreign labor. That comes with its own set of costs in visas, transportation and housing. But for Corpora's vineyard, it's worth it.

"There's no work that's more detailed and precise than the handwork," Corpora told The Daily Progress. "If you watch a leaf-puller go through a vineyard, it looks pretty destructive for the grapevine. You watch the crew go through and pop little leaves off, you can barely tell there was a leaf there to begin with."

“I prefer using my team because they have eyes on everything that I want and they know what to exclude,” Wheeler told The Daily Progress. “If we get some clusters that have detritus or mold and the machine goes down and picks it, it’s going to be in the wine.”



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But mechanical harvesters have advanced over the years. The idea that mechanically harvested grapes are lower in quality is largely a “myth,” and one pervasive among Lakeview Vineyard Equipment’s prospective customers, according to company President Joe Pillitteri.



Godo Arocha examines a harvester, a machine that picks grapes from the vine, at Barboursville Vineyards on Friday, July 21.  
CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

In California, the majority of vineyards use autonomous machines to harvest their grapes. In a place where labor is expensive and often scarce, mechanization is often the cheaper option, according to Anita Oberholster, professor of cooperative extension in enology in the department of viticulture and enology at University of California, Davis.

According to multiple studies by Oberholster and her colleagues to compare wines made with handpicked and mechanically harvested grapes, the differences between the two are “extremely subtle,” Oberholster said.



BUSINESS

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Haley Sandlow

In one study published in 2016, blind tastings between hand- and mechanically picked pinot noir produced only two differences among 18 “aroma, taste and m

“There wasn’t a clear quality difference among these wines,” Oberholster said. “There were very small differences, differences that I think your general consumer would probably not pick up on.”



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While mechanical harvesting might hold different implications among varieties, other studies in California’s vineyards reached the same conclusion.



Francisco Ruiz drives a hedger, a machine that cuts leaves off the vine to clear the canopy for grapes, through the vineyard at Barboursville on Friday, July 21, 2023.

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“At the end of the day, I think if you don’t have the labor, [mechanized harvesting and sorting] is not as detrimental as people think,” Oberholster said. “It doesn’t have as big of an impact as people believe by what their eyes show them.”

Many newer harvesters come with “optical sorters,” which mechanically sort desirable grapes from unwanted ones. Sorters can be extremely gentle and precise, filtering out around 99.8% of leaves, sticks and other “matter other than grapes,” or MOG, Pillitteri said.

The newer models of harvesters shake the picked grapes, which fall through a belt with holes in it, filtering out sticks, leaves and stems, he explained. Then a pressurized stream of air is applied to shoot out anything that is “light,” including raisins and under ripe berries.

“What we’re left with is basically perfect berries in the harvest,” said Pillitteri.



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To address the “freakout factor” of a new, intimidating machine, Pillitteri said Lakeview’s technicians train a vineyard’s staff upon delivery of the machines and then return before harvest to make sure the operator is “completely comfortable.”



A tractor drives through the vines at Trump Winery in Albemarle County on June 27.  
CAL CARY photos, THE DAILY PROGRESS

It’s not as complicated as it seems. “Most operators, within a half an hour of training, are what I would consider near-experts on using them,” Pillitteri said.

And despite the upfront cost, Pillitteri said his customers agree it is worth it.

There are other ways to deal with the price tag. In California, vineyards can rent out machinery for the harvest instead of purchasing their own equipment, Oberholster said.

Lakeview also sells used harvesters and mechanical equipment, which reduces cost significantly. The company once sold a used harvester to a vineyard with only 4 1/2 acres, Pillitteri said.

After 18 harvests, Franco at Barboursville said his harvester still runs “beautifully.”

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Leaves hang on a hedger, a machine that cuts leaves off the vine to clear the canopy for grapes, at Barboursville Vineyards on Friday, July 21, 2023. CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

“It harvests, cleans the grapes, destems them, and only the clean fruit falls into its tanks,” Franco said. “The only thing that it doesn’t do is ferment the wine.”

There is still the question of practicality: Virginia’s farmland is often sloped, with vines planted close together, such as Trump’s. One of Wheeler’s concerns with using a mechanical harvester is that a machine might slide and get stuck in the mud on a rainy day.

“If it slid into the vineyard, how am I going to get it out? And now I’m waiting on all this fruit,” Wheeler said.



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Oberholster said there is a movement in Europe to make machine harvesting more accessible. That means planting new vineyards further apart and higher off the ground to make mechanical harvesting easier and circumvent the same labor shortages in Europe.

Those working in Virginia’s vineyards appear to carry a similar sentiment. Pillitteri said there is a “growing market” for Lakeview in Virginia, and winegrowers similarly remarked on the growing interest in mechanization.

“In Virginia, we’re still very much doing everything by hand,” said George Hodson, president of the Virginia Wine Board and CEO of Veritas Vineyards and Winery. “We have been trying to move more and more mechanized, as much as we possibly can.”



Fernando Franco, Barboursville Vineyards manager, points at the temperature gauge for the engine that runs the windmills at the vineyard on Friday, July 21, 2023.

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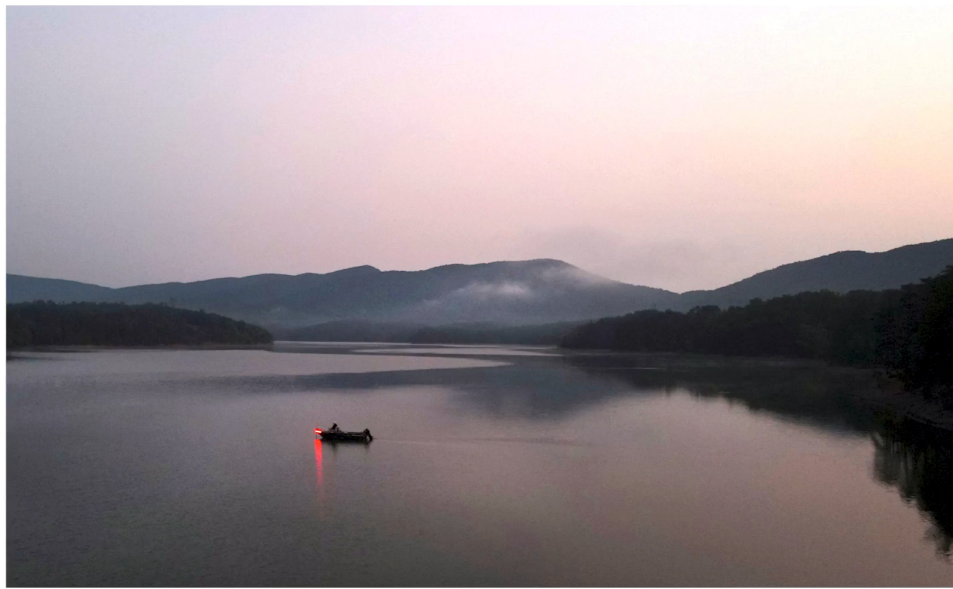
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WINE COUNTRY

# Virginia's turn: Podcast brings local wine industry to the world

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That's one of the messages of Fred Reno, wine industry consultant and founder of "Fine Wine Confidential," a podcast on Virginia's booming wine industry which wrapped up in February with its 44th episode. Now, Reno is donating the series as an oral history to the Camp Library at University of Virginia's Darden School of Business.



BUSINESS

**The Virginia wine country is growing. The local labor pool is not.**

Hailey Sandlow

Each episode in the podcast is a conversation between Reno and a winemaker or viticulturist in the wine country that surrounds Charlottesville who shares their background, perspective and approach to winemaking in the commonwealth. The series hopes to spread the word of what Reno said he discovered for himself not long ago: Virginia is making very good wine.

But even as Virginia wine enthusiasts are teeming with excitement for the state's growing industry — now with a \$105 billion economic impact, according to the state — west of the Mississippi, Virginia wines are fairly unknown, Reno said.

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"We're in that moment in Virginia that what we do in the next several years is going to determine whether we seize this opportunity, or if it will pass us by," Reno said.

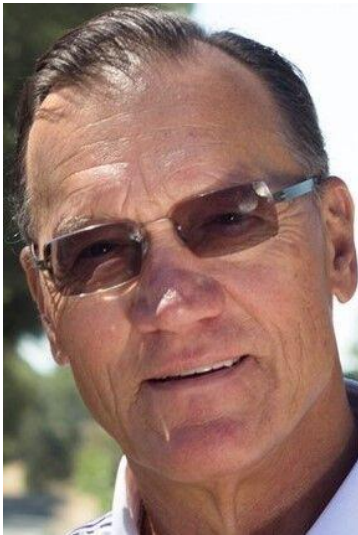
The Thomas Jefferson-era history and modern-day innovations provide a distinct identity for the Virginia wine country, something important to document, according to Stephen Barnard, president of the Monticello Wine Trail, who Reno interviewed for his 20th episode.

The casual, storytelling quality of the podcast is also more accessible and less "polarizing" than actually drinking wine, Barnard said.

"This is the easiest way to talk about wine," said Barnard, who is now winemaker at Delfosse Vineyards and Winery and formerly at Keswick Vineyards. "If you hear the backstories and color in all the pictures, it brings to life a process that is quite complicated but very simple at the same time. We're just farmers, and we tend to the land."

Reno first realized Virginia was sitting on a powder keg — or barrel, rather — of

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Reno

where he realized the quality of wine he had been tasting every summer had grown exponentially.



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“We’re in the early days here,” Reno said. “If we don’t capture this now, those kids are going to come along in 20-plus years and they’re going to think they’re responsible for the success of the wine industry.”

With more than 40 years of combined experience in retail, distribution, production and marketing, Reno knows a lot about the business. Still, Reno said he learned a tremendous amount from his interviews, starting with Gabriele Rausse, the first winegrower at Barboursville Vineyards who now has his own operations south of Charlottesville and is considered one of the fathers of the modern Virginia wine industry. Reno has interviewed other renowned players in Virginia such as Michael Shaps of Michael Shaps Wineworks, Luca Paschina of Barboursville and Andrew Hodson of Veritas Vineyard and Winery.

What became clear to Reno quickly was what the Virginia wine industry needed in order to solidify a place on the national and international map: better marketing efforts outside of the region.

“We need to quit selling wine to ourselves,” Reno said. Very few Virginia wineries have aggressive distribution models, bringing most income from wine clubs, tastings, events and hospitality, he said.



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produces more than 100,000 cases of wine per year, compared to the millions from California and Washington state.

Reno agreed that the distribution system is not only “broken” but difficult to break into. But it can be done, he said. Certain wineries in the world only produce 300 cases of wine a year and still enjoy international acclaim and renown.

That could be Virginia, if only they had the vision, Reno said.

“About 20% of wineries in Virginia today produce as good a quality as anyone in the world, full stop,” Reno said. “There’s a regionality to it, an old-world expression to it.”



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“Fine Wine Confidential” has no sponsors and Reno did no marketing for the project. Still, the podcast saw wide circulation with listeners in 23 different countries and 33 different states, Reno said. His podcast was in the top 10% of all podcasts circulated with Buzzsprout, a popular podcasting platform.



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Reno’s podcast is cataloged at Camp Library at the UVa Darden School of Business, according to library director Tom Marini. UVa is helping to spread the word of the podcast to faculty and students, especially among a growing international student body.

Documenting the history of a local wine industry is not uncommon, with oral histories cataloged at California and Oregon universities. But the West Coast wine industry is already internationally acclaimed and widely known.

Now, Marini said, it's Virginia’s turn.

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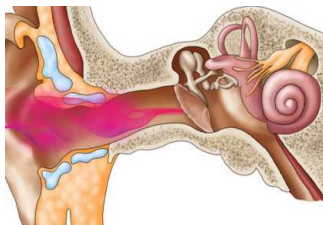
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