

## 15. Stephen Barnard: From Vine to Wine – The Vintner's Tale

**00:04 Kendall Lott:** I'm standing here at Keswick Vineyards in Central Virginia on a 30 degree winter day in January. Sky is blue, air is clear. I wanted to come and look at grapes, but there aren't any grapes this time of the year.

[music]

**00:21 Stephen Barnard:** The only consistency is that next year's gonna be different. How do we create a product that, in its very core, the quality is determined by rainfall, sunshine, growing season, growing degree days?

**00:35 Speaker 3:** In the Washington DC Chapter of the Product Management Institute, this is PM Point of View, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here's your host, Kendall Lott.

**00:45 KL:** Wine. It starts with the vines, and the work with the vines starts during these cold January days. Dictated by temperature, the rain, and the sun, the real schedule of getting grapes to glass is not so much planned as much as it is followed. The schedule is seasonal, so the project manager in us is left to ask, "What's left? What are the issues of scope, team management, quality, stakeholder management? Who manages all this?" Behold, the vintner as project manager. Steven Barnard is the wine maker and vineyard manager at Keswick Vineyards in Central Virginia, and a very busy man. But the chill of January with buds not nearly ready to break allowed him time for a leisurely discussion.

**01:28 KL:** So although there's no grapes this time of the year, of course there's wine in bottles and the tasting room is an active, vibrant place.

**01:36 KL:** From the tasting room, Steven took me towards his office. First through a large, cool, concrete-floored room filled with big oak barrels and even bigger steel tanks.

**01:46 SB:** The tanks have wines in them. Tank one, three, four and the small tank all full to the brim with wine. The majority of them hold around four to five tons, anywhere from 8,000 to 10,000 pounds. Every barrel has wine in it, various varietals. And the oak, we've got French oak, American oak, Hungarian oak of various sizes and various ages as well. This is where we take the grape that was growing from the vineyard and this is where we make it and turn it into wine. Some hold wine that'll be in there for two years. Some will get bottled in the next couple of months. It all depends on the growing season, the intangibles that you can't control: The weather, the rain, the sunshine, all of that.

**02:23 KL:** So it's on a schedule, but you can't control all the schedule.

**02:26 SB:** Winemakers wanna control as much as they possibly can but all the important things, you have no control over. So it's the most frustrating. It's part science, part luck, part growing, part... You know just artistic. And we want you to smell where the grape comes from, what the vineyard

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is. We don't want you to smell and taste the hand of the winemaker. So we always say best fruit makes best wines. Our job is not to mess it up.

**02:48 KL:** Right. Well, let's go talk about some about your background and the vineyard and more on the process.

**02:50 SB:** Yup. Sure. Come on over. Yeah.

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**03:04 KL:** Tell us how you got here. So a quick background of yourself.

**03:07 SB:** I believe it was a 737 plane, 2002 from Cape Town, South Africa, born and raised. And after studying wine making in South Africa, I really wanted to travel the world at that point. I was advised that maybe I need to look at Virginia. It was, I would say, an unknown entity at that point. It was a very small wine industry. And then, also, Keswick was a brand new winery. They had never made wines before, 2002 was their first vintage, so I really could come into a place that wasn't restrictive in terms of 'what we've done many, many years and this is the style of wine that we make'. It was very much an open or a clear palate, so to speak. You could do whatever you wanted to, you could learn, you could experiment.

**03:46 KL:** So what do you do? What's the scope of your work?

**03:48 SB:** Oh, golly. Sure. The scope of the work is to grow the fruit and make the wine. So anything from vineyard to bottle is primarily what I do, but there's a little bit more involved. Obviously, you have to promote the wine and meet with the customers, and learn what people are drinking and look at trends and stuff like that. And create a product that is not only reflective of what we wanna do but a product that is wanted by the customers and who will pay the kind of money that we ask for it. So if you don't like the wine, that's my fault and if you don't like the look of the vineyard, that's my fault too.

**04:19 KL:** So tell me about the size and scope or scale of this environment where we're sitting now at Keswick.

**04:25 SB:** I would say we're a good mid-level range winery. Currently we're 43 acres of vines. And we produce anywhere from 4,500 to 5,500 cases a year. In 2000, the vines were planted. So when I got here the vineyards were established. The planting itself was done by a crew that put in the trellising system and the drip-irrigation and all the vines, and I've sort of continued that work. Hopefully, in 20, 30, 40, 50 years' time someone else will be doing that.

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**05:01 KL:** So give me a snapshot of the vineyard.

**05:03 SB:** It's winter, the vines are dormant. At this point, they've got to get pruned. We have to be done by beginning of April. So we do that in the winter time. The vine then comes out of dormancy and the growing season starts. So we have bud break where the buds open, and...

**05:18 KL:** When does that happen, the bud break?

**05:20 SB:** Bud break's around April 10th for us. Northern Virginia's a little bit...

**05:21 KL:** Wow! Very specific.

**05:23 SB:** Yep. Give or take, it could be a couple days before, couple days after. And then from April through August we have the growing season. So it grows the fruit, the fruit gets bigger, the fruit ripens, and then in August we start the harvesting. So that fruit then gets taken off the vine and then from August, September, October, you're making the wine. You're actually physically taking that grape, you're processing it, you're taking grape juice and you're fermenting it into wine and you're manipulating the product. And you've still got some barreling work to do, the wines need to be barreled down. You get finished in the end of November, give or take. You take a little bit of a vacation, we go down to Disney World and you come back and you start pruning the vineyard again.

**06:04 KL:** You've actually bottled by the end of that period?

**06:06 SB:** We haven't at this point.

**06:07 KL:** It's a one year cycle, grow it to bottling?

**06:08 SB:** Yeah. So you do multiple bottlings throughout the year, based on when the wine's ready, or the needs of the taster, or the needs of the business.

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**06:23 SB:** Behind every wine maker is a very good team, whether it's an assistant wine maker, or cellar workers or vineyard workers, a wine maker doesn't do everything on his own. So, the stronger the team and the more educated the team, and the more philosophically like-minded they are, and the more technical they become, the better it is. I have two main people who work with me. They work very closely with me in the vineyard and the winery. It's very much a team effort. Firstly, you have to teach them about what we're trying to do and you have sell them on the whole sort of philosophical approach to making wine.

**06:55 KL:** There's a mission.

**06:56 SB:** Absolutely. We do the pruning together, we work very closely with each other, we do a lot of the production.

**07:00 KL:** You're out in the...

**07:01 SB:** Oh, yeah, I'm out in the vineyard as well, I appreciate the fact that I'm out there and I can touch the vines, and I know the vineyards and it forces me to get out there and work. And it makes you a better wine maker when you know the vineyard.

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**07:17 KL:** So from a project management perspective, you just have described kind of what we would call the scope. You grow a grape and it ends up in a bottle somewhere that gets sold. What's the biggest thing that you wrestle with from the position you sit in, is it more around the quality, the schedule?

**07:33 SB:** Well, from a wine maker point of view, it's definitely the quality. And I would take it a step further and say it's consistent quality. They say the only consistency is that next year is gonna be different. So, how do we create a product, how do we create a consistent quality of a consistent style year-in, year-out despite those things we cannot control?

**07:54 KL:** You mentioned earlier that all the important things are the ones you can't actually control.

**07:57 SB:** Sure, yeah.

**07:57 KL:** So which one are those?

**08:00 SB:** Rainfall, sunshine.

**08:01 KL:** How much and when?

**08:02 SB:** Yeah, when the timing of which, I'd love to get rainfall early in the year, nothing at the end of the year. I'd love to get a lot growing degree days, I'd love to have cooler evenings. For a consumer, it's very hard to drink a wine in one year, fall in love and then go back and then find out that next year's wine is very different. The trick then is to sell that and to get people to buy into the philosophy of the wines will be different, not because of we're a manufacturer, we're not a, we're not making keyboards, and every keyboard's the same. We're making wine and if our philosophy is we focus on the vineyard so we have to do very little in the winery, those wines are gonna be different and it's a chance to educate.

**08:42 KL:** Stakeholder management is actually getting what you're producing into line with what their expectation is. It's kinda how we view it.

**08:48 SB:** Without a doubt.

**08:49 KL:** Is that consistent, for you?

**08:50 SB:** Yeah. You can look at trends, you can look at markets, you've got such a demographic. Think of the age demographic, you've got 21-year-olds, all the way through 60-year-olds. You've got people from the East Coast to the West Coast, you've got international people coming in. So, people come in with a variety of tastes. It's kinda like music. You've got people who love classical, and hip-hop or rap, and opera, or whatever. So, education is important, you can't assume they know what you know, and I've learned that people see wines in a different way than I do. So, it's our job not only to make wines but to sell our wines and sell the philosophy. That's where our wine club is such an important part of our business, because the wine club members they buy into what we're trying to do.

**09:30 KL:** Do you feel it's a moving target then, the quality aspect or the ability to meet those

expectations?

**09:35 SB:** Absolutely.

**09:36 KL:** Okay.

**09:36 SB:** Absolutely. Which is one of the challenges, you have the things you can't control in the growing season, the actual quality of the fruit, but then you also have the changing demographic, you have people's tastes changing.

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**09:53 KL:** You're subject to a lot of risk, I think.

**09:54 SB:** Absolutely.

**09:54 KL:** How do you feel about risk?

**09:55 SB:** I'm very conservative in terms of risk and that's why I work for someone that owns a winery versus I'm owning my own winery. I think that experience comes back into it. You've gotta do your due diligence. There's certain sort of plots of land, whether it's elevation or slopes or soils that would work for certain varietals. In Virginia speaking, we have a fairly short growing season, so you might want to put varietals in that bud late, that are not as susceptible to frost, using one example. We also have a pretty humid growing season, so you might wanna grow thick-skinned varietals, not tightly clustered. That's why you don't see a lot of pinot noir or sauvignon blanc or riesling, because they're very prone to rot. So you plant different rootstocks of varietals that are less frost-susceptible or produce a second crop or produce a lot of fruit.

**10:43 SB:** We know that every now and again there's gonna be environmental challenges that are not gonna conform with what we would like. In those years, you need to have a plan, whether it's picking parameters or additives or what we can do. We've got plan A, this is what we wanna do under these circumstances. We definitely have a plan B and you gotta think on your feet, because something always breaks, something always goes wrong. You can get a lot of rain and nothing can ripen and you're dealing with rots and you're dealing with fruit that's just, for a lack of a better term, crappy. And how do you make a quality wine from crappy fruit?

**11:15 SB:** That's where the wine maker's tool box comes in. There's always products you can use, there's blending options, adding yeast or putting it in a barrel, but certainly the best wine makers in a weak year will make the best wines. So that's how you can distinguish a really good wine maker who knows the vineyard, who knows how to make wine and...

**11:33 KL:** Do things go wrong in the manufacturing part of it?

**11:34 SB:** Oh, absolutely. Winery equipment only breaks when you need it. The press only breaks when it's filled with five tons of fruit, which is what happened on me. And you can rant and rave and you scream and shout, but you've gotta know how to deal with it and when to deal with it, and that I think is experience. I've had kids who've come in that are highly, highly taught, highly educated and you throw a practical issue at them and they're dead in the water. So you can't negate

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having the technical expertise, but I think there's no substitute for experience as well, which is very important.

**12:07 KL:** Do you have a continuous education that happens for you, besides experience? For example, do you go to additional training of any sort?

**12:17 SB:** I still go to technical meetings. I stay on top of research and development. You've gotta keep learning. You've gotta keep tasting. You've gotta stay current and then you've gotta be true to what you do and what you do well.

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**12:31 KL:** Special thanks to today's guest, Steven Barnard. Our theme music was composed by Molly Flannery, used with permission. Post production performed at Empowered Strategies and technical and web support provided by Potomac Management Resources. I'm your host, Kendall Lott, and until next time, keep it in scope and get it done.