

James: Well, my basic story here is my parents were actually wine lovers, still are. And while they were studying wine, in fact for the WSET Level four diploma exams, in about 1985, I would be in charge of opening bottles from behind the bar and pouring them glasses, blind.

So, that was basically my introduction and then they were kind enough at dinner to let me, as a 15 year old have a few sips, even give me a glass. You know, I have to say, I kind of liked it. I think I probably liked the alcohol component at that age, especially.

And then, at the same age, in fact, I went to Madrid. And on route, I decided to stop in Bordeaux, because, I had poured some of these wines for my mum and dad, and I would be in charge of selecting what to pour. And I went to Saint Emillion, and I had a lunch there in the square. And it's obviously a pretty magical place with all the vineyards surrounding it. I thought to myself, there must be a business or something you can do in this, I mean, this doesn't just happen by itself, surely.

Maybe there's someone in charge of tasting it, can you imagine? And so the seed was sort of planted then, when I was pretty young. And in fact, so much so, when I was finished university, basically the day I finished university in Vancouver, I got on a plane and I went back to Bordeaux. I tried to get a job, and in the end, my last day of job hunting, I managed to get a position as a cellar hand in the 1993 vintage. Just basically working at a chateau. I was thrilled about that, came home told my mum and Dad that I got job and they were so excited.

Basically, that's what got the ball rolling. Then I started Fine Vintage because I wanted to work for myself, first and foremost, I also started it somewhat out of necessity, because the primary skill I had was in export sales. And I had now, after living in France for many, many years, had moved back to Vancouver, to raise a family.

There were basically no jobs in export. I was told I was over qualified to work for an agency, and you know, I didn't have any other options I could find or think of. I thought, maybe we can teach people about wine, let's try that. And that's basically how we started.

Brian: That's pretty amazing. It's funny now, talking to several people, how all these different crossroads sort of present themselves. So you get in the wine world, your story is sort of perfect in that you just go get a job, you're so excited. And as you evolve and learn more and discover more of who you are, you keep reaching these new heights. A lot of people end up realizing they want to work for themselves, or in your case, they have to work for themselves, because no one will hire them.

James: Yeah, well that's basically sad but true. I mean there was just really a niche field that I had expertise in, in exports. In British Columbia, there are no wineries that are serious about export, and I didn't want to move back to France or somewhere else.

Brian: Sure, you know you traveled the world over, you settled in BC. It sounds like your heart initially began, your love affair, in Bordeaux. Do you have one wine region in particular that captivates you more than others? Or is there one that you think is something everybody should put on their radar and pay attention to?

James: Well, I live in Napa valley now, and have been for six years. Napa always captured my heart, it was, in fact after university in Vancouver Napa was the first place I tried to get a job. But with the work permit, being Canadian, it just wasn't possible, or that's what I was told. So being a European passport holder, France was wide open.

But Napa, it's a cliché, but it's a cliché for a reason. It's a fantastic place, I love it. I suppose, my heart will probably, when it comes to really exceptional wine, both of them make it. But maybe at the absolute pinnacle, I've had a few beautiful bowls of Bordeaux wine that that's what maybe created the magic.

Oh, you could say the same for California too. I don't know. Your son or your daughter, you know?

Brian: It's so funny you mention the comparison between Bordeaux and Napa, because today is actually the 41st anniversary of the Paris tasting.

James: Okay, interesting, I didn't know that.

Brian: Yeah, and as fate would have it, I actually talked to George Tabor this morning, author of the Judgment of Paris and the initial article that spun the wine world on its head, 41 years ago. It's hard to believe and look at you, you're still torn between the two, and I think many of us are in deciding, you know which is better. I think the comparison between your son and your daughter, I think that's fair.

James: Yeah, well that's amazing you spoke to George, fantastic. They're both fantastic, in fact, you can't compare. I mean that's the answer, you can't compare. You know, I think in many ways, I think it's normal that Napa compares itself to Bordeaux, you know, but they shouldn't. I was taking a group of people from Stanford to visit a few properties here just a couple of weeks ago. All of the vintners are still banging on about Bordeaux. It's just not ... I think Napa should be Napa. Anyway, I think it's natural to always compare to a benchmark, right?

Brian: Sure.

James: But it surpasses the benchmark often, so that's the thing. It's just different. It's apples or oranges, son or daughter. They're both fantastic.

Brian: So speaking of the educational aspect of Fine Vintage is something that I was fortunate enough to take part of one of the programs that you do here in Chicago. Actually I did the WSET Level one. It kind of pushed me into the formal education of wine. What difficulties did you face when you were starting out to create these wine programs?

James: Well, that's a good question. A lot. A lot. You know, we didn't have any resources, so we were broke, actually. I had a credit card with a bit of a credit limit, which quickly got used up. So we basically started a business, that was all facets from legal and licensing to web and marketing and sales. And then, you know product creation or sort of re-creation and administration.

We did a lot of 18 hours a day, sort of seven days a week, literally. Just in the trenches. So, learning, ourselves every day, what was working what wasn't working. And so there was no shortage of challenges. It was a lot more expensive than we had anticipated. And, you know, we definitely, I wouldn't say we ... we were starting a business. I think it's the same for almost everyone, in every field, all the time.

It's a lovely romantic idea, you know, I'm still today jealous of some friends who have jobs, that you know, five o'clock in the afternoon, they walk out of there and they are done. You know, especially one. He never seems to think about work, or very rarely, when he walks out the door.

For us, it's kind of hard to turn off. But that said, I wouldn't change it for the world.

Brian: Sure. I think, ultimately when you go into business for yourself, I'm sure it's hard to remember those days when everything was so lean. But building anything takes time, and takes money and a lot of dedication. So I appreciate it, it shows in how you work today, and I would definitely recommend that someone sign up for or seek out one of your classes, or your travel trips as well that you do.

And speaking of both of those, you know, is there something you wish, besides passion for wine, because I think if you feel a passion for wine they would sign up for a class of yours, or travel with one of your groups. But is there one thing you wish they brought to that experience that would help them enhance it, besides just passion for wine?

James: I guess everybody is going to bring their own perspective, some people are sort of almost there, almost peripheral, just casually and just want to pick up a few tips. And there are other people like yourself, that really leads to the next level and the next level, and then all of a sudden, we see them in the Master of Wine program, or they've started a business, or something along those lines. And I would say that we sort of started the wine education really somewhat out of an income necessity. Not too many other options that were apparent. But today, I'm so ... what 12 plus years on, I'm so happy because on a daily basis we receive so many emails. In fact we've had to hire someone to handle these emails, because I just can't reply myself, all day long.

Literally, three, four, five a day. And they all say the same thing. How these courses and this experiences effectively changed their life, and changed their career and made them so happy and they've discovered something that they're just so into and passionate about. Then people write and say, "I've got a job as the sommelier at the Four Seasons in Singapore. And if it wasn't for you guys," and da, da, da.

And so, we're still obviously right in the midst of it, but I think that one day, I'm 47 now. I think one day, hopefully I make it to 65 or 75 or something like that, I think it will take on even more significance. We actually, what we've done has contributed in a positive way to other people's lives. At the end of the day, it's come about a little by happenstance, but it means a lot to me now.

Brian: Sure, that makes total sense. I think when you see people's growth ... I come from a teaching background, I used to be a Spanish teacher, and that was the one thing that always motivated you, no longer how bad a day you had behind the desk or in front of the blackboard, when you could see someone's growth, and they were appreciative of it, it made it all worthwhile.

James: Yeah, well look at yourself. You took a Level one course in Chicago, which wouldn't have been decades ago. And now you're on the phone to George Tabor. I just think that is so fantastic. So much admiration and respect for that. But it's people's own get up and go. These things don't happen by themselves. Your own initiative, really, that makes the difference. I guess that's maybe the same with us. You sit there and have one tiny school in one small city, but you know, we've tried to grow our business and respond to our demand, really. It's more a question of responding to requests.

"Why don't you open a school here, there's lots of people here, there's no one doing it here." Or, "God, if you offered a wine tour to Tuscany, I'd sign up." And you hear that enough times and, you know, you're sitting there thinking, "Hey, why not? Let's organize something in Tuscany, or let's start a school in Chicago or Miami or New York or LA or somewhere in Canada."

It's exciting for us too, the creation is what I love.

Brian: Yeah, I totally agree, as someone who loves the creative aspect in all things I do, that act of building something is so satisfying, especially once it's finished. And then it's on to the next thing, like you said.

Besides, I think, you've alluded to hard work and desire, what other skills do you need to be a wine expert?

James: You know, I think that there's a ... on the tasting front, I think that there's a few things. Exposure to some really great wines, which is difficult because of the cost, but you know, when I was 23 or even younger, I was fortunate to be able to taste a lot of great wines, some of the greatest wines in the world, just because I worked for a company who sold them or because I was around people who opened them. So I didn't have that cost myself, but that's something that is really important.

I think being taught how to taste. I was fortunate to be taught by many people but Michael Schuster, who writes books on the subject. I tracked him down and went and met in him in London and asked him if he would train me and he did. That, made a huge difference. I think there is an element of natural born ability, but there are some people

who are just good tasters and they figure it out very quickly, and there's some people who they just don't be able to get it or they just miss it, consistently.

People's own personal sensitivities do play a role. I think at the end of the day though, what's really exciting about wine, if you can maybe prioritize your times in life, which is maybe the key and is very difficult for everyone, because you have young kids, we had young babies when I was doing the Masters of Wine exams. But if you can try to find the time, then wine is great. Because you can learn so much by yourself, by reading books and magazines. And there's often a lot of events, wine tastings, trade tastings, supplier visits, coming through major cities or significant sized cities, but if you really put your mind to it, you can basically teach yourself.

In fact, a lot of it is self taught, right? You don't just take a WSET course, and you know, know it all. You never know it all, of course, I would generally guess that I might know less than one percent of what there is to know about wine, in fact I can guarantee you I know less than .0001 percent of what there is to know about wine. I would say I have the general idea, frankly. Because it's so voluminous. It's so massive. It's never ending. Wine experts ... if the rest of the world wants to think that, then great, but there's no such thing as like a master doctor of the body. It's like, you might have a few people who know a lot about the body, but there's no one who has it all figured out, right?

Brian: That may be the secret. I think you just have to come to terms with how overwhelming the wine world is. I think if you realize that you'll never know everything, and you come to terms with that, you can sort of chip away and you know, hopefully get to .001 percent, or something like that one day.

Because even if you do think you know it all, there's always a new vintage and the world continues to turn. There will be new wine before you know it.

James: That's right. It's always evolving, and there's always new places and new wineries and new regions. You know sort of rediscovery of grapes that have fallen off the radar. The business of it is changing all the time. Well that makes it fascinating that it's not static.

Brian: As someone who is, I think a learner, probably my personality type more than anything else, I love digging in and seeing how things work. That's what appeals to me about wine, whether it's the story about how it was made, where it came from, the geology, the geography, the history of the region, I mean there's so many aspects, and you're talking about one wine there. You talk about multiple wines the world over, it just goes on ad infinitum. There's always something to be learned or information to seek out

James: 100%, 100%

Brian: I know we're closing on time, but if I had one more question. If you were to start over as a wine novice, is there anything you'd do differently or a piece of advice you might give yourself as you were starting out.

James: On the education front, I wish I'd gone to a formal institute, and I still might, like UC Davis or Adelaide University and learn, been formally trained by a wine, post-secondary institute. In fact, I am going to do that, I might be the oldest guy in the class, but I've been salivating over these wine business programs ... Sonoma State and UC Davis and Adelaide.

I don't think I would really make a very good grape grower or winemaker, but I would like to have some more training in those areas. So, you know, the formal education, I can't put enough emphasis on that. Instead of studying political science and international relations at university, I wished I'd studied wine making or the business of wine.

I was really glad that I'd discovered the WSET courses when I was 19.

Otherwise, I was glad that I went to Bordeaux and worked in a Chateau and a winery, and then the commercial end, and I went to Australia and did vintages a couple of times in California, and so on. I would try and do more than that.

You know, there's so many wineries in the world who would be thrilled to have you for a couple of months.

If I was a 18 again, I would be going for a degree in Adelaide University, or Montpellier, or UC Davis or Sonoma State. And then I would be traveling around the world, from northern hemisphere to southern hemisphere, working harvests, trying to get involved in the commercial aspects. I would try and make sure that I spent ... if I was working a vintage at a winery, I would do, you know one day or one week in the lab, and then one day or one week on the crush pad, and then one day or one week in the cellar doing the pump overs or whatever.

Move through the entire cycle or chain of the wine business as much as you can. Marketing, sales, domestic sales, export sales, logistics ... just try and touch every aspect of it, or as many as possible. I don't think there's any point to doing a vintage at a winery for three months and just basically dragging hoses around the cellar, and that's all you do for three months.

After a couple days, you've got the general idea of what's involved in that. So touch as many aspects as possible. Work for a retail store. But I don't think you need to work for a retail store for five years. You can get the general idea in maybe a few months, even. Six months at the most.

You learn what consumer behavior is, how a retail shop works, and I think that would then give you the perspective on the entire business, so you can then say, "You know what I want to do is this part, or these parts. This is what I enjoy the most and this is where I think there's the most opportunity." Rather than getting pigeonholed into one small area.

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Brian: That's solid advice. I just wish I could turn back the clock and be 18 again, because it sounds like a life I'd like to live. But there's still time for that.

James: I was thinking, actually, of maybe doing a harvest this year in Napa. I've been planning on doing that for a long time. You know, I think it would be fabulous. I was thinking of maybe asking a friend at Opus One or Heitz if they would have me. A friend said that I would probably get fired within the first week. I'm going to do that, I'm really going to do that. I really enjoyed working at the harvest, always learning something new there, it's never the same. Different wine makers show you different things. That's the fun.

Brian: If you're willing to go back to school and get your hands dirty, I think that all of us should. Anyone in the wine industry should do that.

I appreciate that...

James: And thank you very much, I wish you the best of success.

Brian: All right James, thank you so much, take care and then we'll be in touch soon.

James: Okay, thanks a lot Brian.

Brian: All right, have a good one. Bye.