



**Kirsty Harmon**  
**Blenheim Vineyards**  
**Charlottesville, VA**  
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**Annemarie Anderson:** All right. Today is July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance via Zoom and Zencast, and I'm here with Kirsty Harmon. Kirsty, would you go ahead and introduce yourself, tell us who you are and what you do?

[00:00:16]

**Kirsty Harmon:** Sure. My name is Kirsty Harmon. I'm the winemaker and general manager at Blenheim Vineyards just outside of Charlottesville, Virginia.

[00:00:16]

**Annemarie Anderson:** That's great. Tell me a little bit about—I think Tracey [Love] did a great job of telling us what Blenheim Vineyards is, but could you tell me a little bit about your job and what it looked like pre-pandemic [COVID-19]?

[00:00:40]

**Kirsty Harmon:** Sure. So I started here as the winemaker in 2008, so I've been here now thirteen vintages. My job is to squish grapes and not make vinegar, so that is my main job. I like my job because I get to see every aspect of winemaking, from the vineyard to the winery and then through the tasting room. So as a winemaker, my primary job is to make wine and to bottle it, but as general manager, I get to oversee the entire operation from the vineyard through sales and the tasting room. And I really enjoy all aspects of that because no two days are the same, so if some days I might be more focused in the

vineyard and talking to our vineyard manager, John [Watkins], and seeing how things are there, sometimes I'm talking to Scott [Wilcox], our operations manager, about a [unclear] that's coming up, sometimes I'm talking to Tracy and Ellen [Houle] and Justin [Bennett] about the tasting room and kind of how we're doing things there.

So I like that my job is seeing everything at all times, and that has not changed before and after this pandemic or during this pandemic. I'm very much involved in all aspects of the business, and I very much enjoy that I get to see every piece of it and have an input in every piece of it. I'm a controlling person [laughs], so I like that aspect. I like that I can, yeah, have a say in what happens at all pieces of Blenheim.

[00:01:58]

**Annemarie Anderson:** That's great. Tell me a little bit, take me back to the first moment that you realized that the coronavirus was in the United States and that it was going to impact Blenheim Vineyards. Put me kind of in that place.

[00:02:14]

**Kirsty Harmon:** Sure. So in late January, my husband and I traveled to Belfast for a meeting that he had. He's an anesthesiologist. So I went along for the trip, and we kind of heard little bits and pieces about the coronavirus, but it was very much still based in China, and we really didn't think twice about hopping on a plane and going across the Atlantic.

We came back, and relatively soon after, went to Mexico, as Tracy mentioned, and it was really in Mexico that we started thinking, “Hmm.” This is starting to look a little more, I guess, extreme or intense than we had ever imagined.

And it was after we came back from Mexico, within two to three weeks, that we thought, “Okay, this is serious enough, we need to start thinking about changing our business plan here at Blenheim.” We went from doing tastings and being open all of the time to doing no tastings and just glasses and bottles, and then within a week, we had to reinvent ourselves again and made the very difficult but very obvious decision to close completely. So that was mid-March. So we went from, I guess, mid-January to mid-March, so in that space of eight weeks, everything changed.

[00:03:17]

**Annemarie Anderson:** Yeah, for sure. Talk to me a little bit about making wine in a pandemic. Tell me a little bit about how you guys have—I’m sure you have had a lot of conversations and you’ve picked a lot of brains and you’ve been really thoughtful about plans, but how have you equipped yourself to do that?

[00:03:37]

**Kirsty Harmon:** Well, I am in the lucky position most of the year to be the only person in the winery working. I have extra folks that come in and harvest and help me, but for most of the year past harvest, it’s just me in the cellar, so in some ways it’s very lucky because my day-to-day operations in the winery didn’t change at all. Because I’m working by myself, I felt very comfortable and I was actually very thankful for the

winery work, because regardless of what was happening in the outside world, I had a schedule of my own that was dictated way before this pandemic because we have bottling at every single month between February and July. So there were tasks that I had to do, rackings, blendings, tasting trials, all of those things that I had to do, and that didn't change at all because I work by myself.

The big change was the nervousness of bringing—we have H-2A workers, migrants workers, from Mexico that come in for the season under contract, and right about the time we were shutting down is when they were supposed to cross the border. So it was extremely nerve-wracking to think about bringing people in, away from their families, without being able to really understand what they were going to face when they were here. Our guys were stuck at the border for about five days, sitting in a hotel before they got their visas and were able to make it across, so they made it across right around—gosh, I think it was the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> of March, so right as things were starting to close down a little bit.

So the main concern for me was how do we keep these folks healthy and happy and, you know, basically isolated away from their families in a country that is very foreign to them. So I think from the working perspective, I was much more concerned and all of us were thinking about how to deal with the vineyard, where there is a larger crew, versus the winery, where there is really just me.

[00:05:22]

**Annemarie Anderson:** Yeah, for sure. What were some of the things that you guys ended up implementing in the vineyard?

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**Kirsty Harmon:** Well, because we have four H-2A guys that are coming across and they all know each other, they're staying in the same house and they drive in the same car, it was very easy to—it's very easy to socially distance people in the vineyard because the vine rows are about eight feet apart and you're outside, of course, so the precautions that we took in the vineyard, no sharing of tools, everybody has their own tools, everybody wears gloves when we're using any shared tools, and staying apart in the vineyard as much as they can, which, again, is really not a difficult thing. They have a break room that we've decided to make just their break room, and nobody else goes into that break room. So there are some things that we put in place, but they were very obvious and actually not very difficult to implement because we were sort of already set up that way.

[00:06:18]

**Annemarie Anderson:** Makes a lot of sense. Tell me a little bit about about—let's see. I mentioned this to Tracey, and she said maybe you could answer this, but could you talk a little bit about applying for and receiving the PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] loan and what that process was kind of like?

[00:06:39]

**Kirsty Harmon:** Well, luckily for us, we have a group of accountants that managed Dave Matthews' businesses, so we are one of several businesses that he has, so, luckily, that fell to the accountants and not to me. If it had fallen to me, I think the outcome

would have been very different. [laughs] I'm able to do paperwork, but accounting is not my forte. So we were very lucky in that we already had a team of accountants who knew exactly what they were doing, and they were able to apply for those loans in a very quick manner, and we were lucky enough to receive one of those loans.

As Tracey has said, the Matthews family, when we were talking about closing, the Matthews family decided, before anything, that we would continue to pay every single employee as if they were working, which is incredibly generous of the family. We were lucky enough to then receive additional support a different way through the PPP loan. But that was a commitment and that was never a question from day one, wine or not we would pay our employees. As the general manager, that took a *huge* weight off of my shoulders, because I feel, obviously, a great sense of responsibility not only to full-time folks, but part-time folks here too.

[00:07:42]

**Annemarie Anderson:** For sure. Yeah, that sounds like it would be a really great weight off your shoulders.

[00:07:47]

**Kirsty Harmon:** A very, very lucky position to be in.

[00:07:50]

**Annemarie Anderson:** Yeah. Well, talk to me a little bit about—Tracey talked a little bit about this, too, but talk to me about the limited release of wines [unclear].

[00:08:00]

**Kirsty Harmon:** Sure. I guess about mid- to late March, an old friend of mine, John Kluge, sent me a text and he said, “Hey, I have this crazy idea. Will you call me?”

So I said, “Okay, sure.”

So I called him, and he explained that he was feeling pretty restless and feeling pretty useless in doing anything in this pandemic, helping anybody and doing something, so he really wanted to get involved, and the way he chose to get involved was with Frontline Foods and a friend of his, Hunter Smith. And he said, “Wouldn’t it be cool—would you ever think about doing a wine specifically for coronavirus support or frontline food support?”

And I said, “Absolutely.” My husband and sister work in the health industry, so they’re on the frontline. My nieces worked in a grocery store. My mother and father are at high risk. So for me, the idea of being able to make a glass of wine mean something more than a glass of wine was pretty cool.

At that point, I hadn’t figured out the bottling schedule yet for the entire year, and so I was able to reroute a few wines that I hadn’t really found the right home for, you know, reroute them to something like this. And then I reached out to my direct boss, Ashley [Harper], and told her about the project, asked if she thought we would be interested, and she said, “Absolutely.” And within three days, Dave Matthews had drawn the label for these wines, which is an incredible turnaround. So at the end of April—I believe that’s right—the end of April, we bottled a red blend, and at the end of May, we bottled a white blend, so we were able to do two wines that are called On the Line Red



and On the Line White, where all proceeds are going to support World Central Kitchen and Frontline Foods.

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**Annemarie Anderson:** That's great. Can you talk a little bit about the response?

[00:09:40]

**Kirsty Harmon:** The response has been *incredible*, it really has been. I think people were looking for a way to do something, to feel active in this pandemic, but also—I mean, it's kind of awesome because they get a glass of wine or a bottle of wine and that goes to support the pandemic. So it's not just them giving money to something; it's everybody wins in this situation. They get a glass of wine or a bottle of wine and they get to support a cause. So I think the response has been overwhelming.

The fact that Dave Matthews has drawn the label is also really amazing. That label design—I'm not sure if you've seen it—the label design is really powerful. It's a really cool label. So I think it was an immediate response and a very positive and overwhelming support. I mean, within days, we had—I mean, we were not unbusy in the tasting room. We had plenty of packages to pack, and people have continued to support. We released the red first and had a really great response, and now we've released the white, had a great response. Yeah, I've been floored by how positive the response has been. I knew it would be positive. I didn't think it would be quite this positive. So I feel very fortunate and very thankful and very happy, as I said, that a bottle of wine or a glass of wine could mean more than just that.

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**Annemarie Anderson:** That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about, too, about you guys have done a lot to change the way that you sell and the way that you distribute wines during this time. Could you talk a little bit about just, I guess, how you decided to do that, especially with delivery and curbside in local areas and some of those decisions in trying to market and sell your wines during this time?

[00:11:25]

**Kirsty Harmon:** We kind of all, I mean, sat down far apart from each other and just really talked about what we would want, because I think we are all very cautious and really just go from home to work and the grocery store, and that's about it. So we thought, well, how would we want to get wine? What would be something that we—and that's kind of how we run this tasting room and the vineyard in general, is what experience would we want to have, and we feel like if we as a group decide on something, changes are other people will feel that same way.

So we thought, well, if I didn't have to leave my house to get wine and I lived in Charlottesville, I'd love somebody to deliver it to my doorstep. If I lived somewhere further away and I had the opportunity to buy wine and didn't want to pay for shipping, I would like to do that. We thought that maybe it would be cool to involve some local businesses, to give them some support by offering some local food items and some other wines and ciders as part of our doorstep duo. So we really just put our heads together and

thought what would we want in this situation, and that's really the base of what we used to decide how do we move the business forward.

I think we're all pretty creative people and we all threw out tons of ideas, and the ones that stuck were the home delivery, the free shipping, doing some very embarrassing videos online. [laughter] I don't like being on video. I don't like being photographed. So those first Instagram videos were *extremely* painful for me, but when I started doing Zoom tastings, I actually really started to enjoy them, because rather than just being me in front of a camera, I can interact with people in a very different way. I've probably done twenty or thirty Zoom tastings, everything from a sixtieth birthday party to supporting the rainforest efforts. I mean, they've been kind of all over the place, but they've also been really fun, because I've been able to interact with customers in a way that I hadn't been in the last few years, because production is to the size where I'm keeping busy making wine most of the time or in the vineyard most of the time, that my day-to-day life as a person in the tasting room actually giving tastings was very limited. So this kind of gets me back into that, and it's fun. I enjoy explaining wine and talking about wine with new people, and to be able to see them, even if it's virtually, see them while I'm talking about it is pretty fun, has been good.

[00:13:47]

**Annemarie Anderson:** That's great. Could you talk a little bit about those Zoom tastings, how you guys do that?

[00:14:11]

**Kirsty Harmon:** Yep. Well, the way it started was I got a few emails saying, “Hey,” from our label company. Our label company said, “Hey, we’d like to do some sort of group tasting for our staff. Everybody hasn’t seen each other in a while, and we thought it would be really fun to have you do a tasting.” So they bought wine. They chose three wines. They bought enough wine to give to each of their employees.

And then on a Friday night just after bottling, actually, I sat down on Zoom and I talked to—I think there were fifteen people on the call, and we started talking through the wines. Some of them had visited the winery before. A lot of them hadn’t, because they live in New York. So it was fun. I had a slideshow and showed them pictures of the winery and the vineyard and what the grapes were looking like at that point. Then we just opened it up and talked about—every tasting has been different. Some have been really technical, some have been really fun. This was one of the more fun ones because they wanted to talk about how to swirl a glass, is it okay to put ice in your wine. So it was really fun because it was not stuffy or pretentious in any way. I liked that it was really laid back and I was able to give them a little bit of insight on how I made wine, because they’re a label company for all sorts of products, not just wine. They do labels for dog food and hand sanitizer, you name it. So it was fun for them to sort of delve into wine and winemaking, where I don’t think a lot of them had a huge amount of background in it. So before I knew it, that tasting had lasted two hours, so that was pretty fun.

Most of the other ones have just been people emailing, asking if somebody from Blenheim would do a Zoom tasting, and because I answered the email, I’ve done most of them. In fact, I think—well, Ellen has done one. But, yeah, they call up or email and say, “Hey, we’d like to do a tasting.” So I say, “Okay,” and I pick a wine or two or just any

Blenheim wine, and we can talk. One of the Zoom tastings we did was with our Wine Club members. It was just a complete question-and-answer session. They could ask me whatever they wanted about the vineyard or Dave Matthews or the winery. So, yeah, usually I think about them lasting about half an hour, and they've always lasted an hour or two hours. So I guess I have lots—

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**Annemarie Anderson:** That sounds fun!

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**Kirsty Harmon:** Yeah, it's been really fun. The one I think that potentially is my favorite is a sixtieth birthday party. A woman's two daughters were trying to come up—I think three daughters were trying to come up with an idea for her sixtieth birthday, and they all live in different states, and they were bummed because they would usually get together for something like this. So one of the daughters reached out and said, "Hey, would you be willing to do a tasting or would anybody from the winery be willing to do a tasting?"

And I thought, "Sure."

So I logged on on a Saturday afternoon and got to meet Tama [phonetic], who had just found out about the tasting fifteen minutes prior, but turns out she had come to Blenheim the year before and I had met her on the back deck, and I don't think either one of us knew that at the time. I brought grapes up because it was harvest, so we talked about grapes. I showed her the grapes. So it was fun to kind of reconnect. And they had a

huge spread of food, and it was really fun to be involved. I don't think I normally would have been invited to somebody's sixtieth birthday in that way, but it was really fun to be a part of that experience, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I hope they enjoyed it too.

[00:17:05]

**Annemarie Anderson:** That sounds great! That sounds like a lot of fun. Tell me a little bit about—I guess so we talked a little bit about winemaking and the vineyard, but what about bottling? Because I know that's something that you guys do on a regular basis.

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**Kirsty Harmon:** Yeah, and that is one of the more nerve-wracking things, but I am very fortunate in that we have family members who work here, so we have brothers—Justin and Ryan are brothers—and we have Liz and Brian, who are mother and son. So all of the positions on the bottling line that require tight spacing, I've got family members from the same household in those spots, so I worry a little bit less about any risk that I'm giving, because I know that they live in the same household and they're around each other all the time.

Then the other positions are, I feel, far enough away from the other folks that it's been okay. So, yeah, family members for the win. That's been really good.

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**Annemarie Anderson:** That's nice. That's a nice solution. [laughs]

[00:18:03]

**Kirsty Harmon:** It worked out well.

[00:18:05]

**Annemarie Anderson:** Yeah. Well, talk to me a little bit about making the decision to reopen and what kind of things you put in place to keep people who are coming in safe.

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**Kirsty Harmon:** Yeah. So the decision to reopen was not an easy one, and we put it off and put it off and put it off. I don't know how many hours and hours of conversation I've had with my husband. He's an anesthesiologist, he works in a COVID unit, and I figured he is a great source of information, so I really would just grill him every night. How do we keep people safe? What do you think about the things that we're putting in place? How would you feel in this situation? So we really just talked every night about this for weeks and weeks and weeks.

And the staff all talked about it. Again, we thought what would we want to have in place when we went somewhere else. Tracey, Ellen, and I went to one winery just to see how they were doing things. I think we were all very nervous about going, because it was our first outing out. I guess we are all cautious. None of us at that point had gone out and gone to a restaurant or gone to a winery, but we felt like if we were opening, we really needed to make sure that we felt comfortable in that environment.

So we went to a winery with our masks, and it was a fine experience and the winery did a great job, but we saw a few things that we wanted to change or improve

upon. One of those things is a real glass. A lot of the wineries are doing plastic, and while I understand that, I didn't want to create—we all didn't want to create more waste and more plastic waste to open to the public, so we put in place a stack of glasses that come out of the dishwasher, and right as you check in, the customer picks their own glass out of the rack and takes it with them to their seat, and then we have glass carafes that we pour wine into, and then the customer pours that and then we wash the carafes. The customer takes the glass home with them.

So that's one of the things that we've—obviously we've mandated masks. At that point, it was pretty widespread that people were wearing masks, but the governor had said it's a mandate, and we've stuck to that, even though we've had a customer or two that hasn't wanted to wear a mask. We've offered them other options, you know, take a bottle home with them, but we're adamant about people wearing masks on the property at all times, except for when they're actively drinking.

We put hand sanitizer stations in. We've researched a couple of different cleaning products to see what worked. We switched from people coming up to the bar to order their wine to us going to them and doing table service. We're still trying to figure it out. We changed our cleaning product because we felt like the first one was too sticky. It's like all these silly little things, but every aspect of what we do we thoroughly analyze, and if it's not working, we change something. So right now our goal is to do table service, but that might change in the few weeks. Maybe we'll switch it up or maybe we'll do something different. It takes an incredible amount of staff to do things the way we are doing, but we feel like that is what we need to keep the—you know, as much as we can, to minimize the risk.



Of course we're never going to completely eliminate the risk, and that is what I think kept us from opening for the longest time. We wanted to see how other people were doing. We wanted to see if wineries open, are there now reports of wineries having staff get sick or customers get sick. We are, luckily—we have not heard of that at all since, you know, the winery started opening in mid-May. But we try to read as much as we can. We try to think through all of these processes. Again, it is a learning experience for all of us.

I think none of us felt comfortable with the idea of 500 people being on the property again in the course of a day, so by putting reservations in place, we're hoping that even in this weird environment, that we're giving people a more relaxed and more—not a thorough education of wine by any means, because we are not talking to them as much, and that is the one thing that I think we're all looking for as ways to interact with customers in a meaningful way, and we haven't figured that out yet. We're thinking again about doing videos that the customer is there, they can look at it. It's not the same as being talked to in person, and we know that. I think what I keep trying to remind myself and the staff is that this is temporary, and, yes, this is a different world and this is awkward and weird and unusual, but hopefully this is temporary and this is just something that we are doing now to make sure we keep as many people safe as we can, and then it will change again, and whether that changes in a week or six weeks or six months, we don't know, but it's temporary, hopefully.

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**Annemarie Anderson:** Yeah. It sounds like you have to be incredibly flexible.

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**Kirsty Harmon:** Yeah, I think it is—you plan and then you have to be willing to change your plans, but it reminds me a lot of dealing with harvest and grapes and winemaking, because you make all of the plans in the world and then Mother Nature decides to do something different, and you have to change your plans. So I think the name of the game is adapting and being flexible, but it isn't so different than anything that we're doing in the winery or in the vineyard.

[00:23:20]

**Annemarie Anderson:** That's great. That's great. Tell me a little bit about—this is like a big question I ask everyone, and I asked Kristy (sic) it. But, you know, the idea of like normalcy—in air quotes—what “normal” is, both in terms of like operating a business where you are selling drink to folks and this moment, I think, both in the food and beverage industry as a whole and just around, there are these huge conversations about equity and justice. How has this pandemic, this social moment as well, kind of impacted or shifted your view about the job that you do?

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**Kirsty Harmon:** I think, I guess, in some ways I see how important a glass of wine and an escape from all of this is for people, but I also realize that I have to keep in perspective, and I think that it is—it really is just wine, and I know that we have a business and it is important to keep all of our employees, you know, employed and

happy, but, again, it is not worth risking people's health and safety to sell a bottle of wine to them at a tasting room the way we used to. So coming up with other ideas and other ways to get wine to people and to give them that experience, that is—yeah, that is certainly a challenge and something we continue to think about.

For me as a person, my life has changed very little. I live at work, so I have a three-minute commute. I walk across the field. Because we live thirty minutes outside of town, I'm not popping to town very often anyway. My husband works a lot. So our personal day-to-day life [laughs] is very much the same, and I feel very fortunate that there is that sense of sameness when everything else is so different.

Yeah, it is unfair to see how much people are struggling, families losing both jobs, kids that can't go to school. I feel very lucky and fortunate and sometimes a little bit guilty that I have a great job, my husband has a great job, we have a place to stay, and I don't know how to balance that. It's not easy to figure out the right way to balance that. I think that's why the On the Line Wines mean a little bit more to me because that is a way. It's still a sale, and I understand it's not about sales, but to be able to make an impact that way has been really important to me.

[00:26:02]

**Annemarie Anderson:** Yeah, that's great. That's so great. Well, what do you hope to see going forward for Blenheim Vineyards in this moment as, you know, when you continue to transition [laughs] and after kind of the pandemic has finished, whenever that might be?

[00:26:23]

**Kirsty Harmon:** I mean, I hope that we continue to move forward. I think regardless of what's happening in the world, we still have a vineyard to manage and maintain and push forward, so I'm really excited about projects that we have to sort of help the soil in some areas and always thinking about how to reduce our impact and our chemical impact on the world and the environment. So I'm excited about moving that forward.

I'm excited about potentially changing how we've dealt with customers in the past, which I think most of the days of the week is a lovely experience. On Saturdays, when there's just more people, it feels a little bit more—has felt a little bit more like Disneyland or a little bit too fast paced. So I'm excited to get to a point where we can spend more time with customers, have a bit more education, maybe get a little bit—yeah, a little bit deeper in the conversations about wine and how it's made than we have or at least what it was like on a Saturday.

So I think, again, just, yeah, adapting, being flexible. I don't know what the future holds, but I feel very confident in the team here that we will work as a team to come up with solutions and kind of think things to get forward as a team, and I think not every business has that luxury of having such a good team in place that can work with each other. And, you know, I like to think we're all smart and positive people, so when we put our heads together, it's just that much more powerful.

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**Annemarie Anderson:** That's great. I have no more questions for you, but I was wondering if there's anything else that I haven't asked you or that you just want to share.

[00:28:03]

**Kirsty Harmon:** I think you did a great job. You covered all the bases. I think we're very happy and very thankful for you for reaching out. This is a cool opportunity for us to show a little slice of Blenheim during the pandemic. So thank you.

[00:28:18]

**Annemarie Anderson:** Sure. Thank you. I really appreciate it. I'm going to stop recording now.

[End of interview]