



Tracey Love
Blenheim Vineyards
Charlottesville, Virginia

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Annemarie Anderson: Let's see. Okay. It says that we're recording. Everything's good. And so today is July 30th, 2020. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance through Zoom, and I am here with Tracey Love of Blenheim Vineyards. Tracey, would you go ahead and introduce yourself, tell us who you are and what you do and introduce us to Blenheim Vineyards as well?

[00:00:27]

Tracey Love: Sure. Hi. My name is Tracey, and thank you for having me here today. I work with Blenheim Vineyards. We are a family-owned winery in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the Matthews family, you may be familiar with Dave Matthews, the musician, basically bought the property in 1999 and turned it into a—built a tasting room and started a winery in 2002. The winery later became open to the public in 2008, and I have been working here doing our wholesale distribution, our— basically winery events, which right now are not many, and we have done in the past some weddings and larger private events, which we also no longer do. And I also do our social media and marketing and some, you know, behind-the-scenes website design and overall. We have a pretty small core staff which we have grown a little bit over the years, so it's sort of, you know, an all-in kind of job. Help with harvest and various other things.

[00:01:37]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, that's great.

[00:01:39]

Tracey Love: I've been here since, I guess, 2012, so going on about eight years.

[00:01:46]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about pre-pandemic [COVID-19]. What did your job look like? What was a day-to-day job for you?

[00:01:54]

Tracey Love: Well, actually, when I started with Blenheim Vineyards, my job was split between the Matthews' grass-fed beef farm, which was called The Best of What's Around, and I actually basically got us launched into farmers' markets and selling their organic grass-fed beef, and then part-time I helped basically at Blenheim, just running, you know, weddings. This is historically—I mean, it's an old historic farm property, and there's a gorgeous house that sits basically separate on the property from the tasting room, and we had, you know, a big beautiful tent between that house and the library, and we would host our Wine Club events, weddings, and, you know, sort of larger private events up there for a couple of years.

And then my job transitioned, I guess probably about a year after that, into taking over our wholesale distribution. In the state of Virginia, there's a company called Virginia Winery Distribution Company, and it allows farm wineries to self-distribute within the state of Virginia, and so we basically cancelled our previous distribution and took it into our own hands, and I took that over. I guess it's probably been close to six years at this point. Then as the tasting room has sort of grown, our staff has grown, some

of my duties have expanded and changed, and my job has totally evolved over the years [Laughter] into what it is today.

So pre-pandemic, I've never really worked in the tasting room a whole lot, but I have managed our Wine Club events, and basically, we have food trucks every Saturday and we used to have live music. But the tasting room is open seven days a week and, you know, just trying to keep things kind of light and lively and new and, you know, coming up with various ideas over the years. At one point, we rented an Airstream trailer that we put outside to do tastings just because we thought it would be a nice change of scenery. So I guess that is kind of the overall gist. And now, as you can imagine, it is very different, but we'll probably get to that.

[00:03:58]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, for sure. Well, before we get into some of the things you've probably been doing, marketing and distribution-wise and on social media, I want you to take me back to the moment that you first realized that COVID-19 was going to impact you and Blenheim Vineyards specifically.

[00:04:20]

Tracey Love: Well, it has become a yearly tradition for the last, I guess, three years, that Dave Matthews has flown the core full-time staff to— he does basically an acoustic-type concert. It's been in Mexico for the last three years, on the Riviera Maya with Tim Reynolds, who's also in the band, and he's flown the staff there. And this year we basically got a private villa on the Riviera Maya. I think it was like the 24th to 28th of

February, so it was basically just when coronavirus had started to hit the news, and we weren't super worried about it at that time. Went on the trip. My youngest sister actually got married in Mexico the following week, so the whole family was there for two weeks, and basically by the time we flew back to Virginia, it was, I mean, already a pretty different situation. The airports had started putting travel restrictions and travel bans, and it felt like people were starting to get nervous.

We just kind of went on with business as usual at the winery until I guess it was—I mean, probably the first or second week of March, you know, we started to get a little bit more nervous and put some more safety precautions in place and talked to the staff about it and did some additional research, and then I think we officially closed the tasting room like the third week of March? The 16th or so of March. And it has remained closed until two weeks ago. So we are one of the last wineries in the area that has reopened, even though Virginia basically went into phase three, I think in early June, like June 10th. We decided to wait and we didn't open until after the Fourth of July. So now we're only open three days week, and that looks very different and it all feels very different.

[00:06:15]

Annemarie Anderson: I bet. I bet. Well, tell me a little bit about selling wine during this time period. I've been reading a lot of articles, just not Virginia ones specifically. Most of them are reporting about folks in California— so I'm sure it looks a little different from you guys—about smaller wineries and the impact that the pandemic has had on them.

Tell me a little bit about what you guys have done to sell wine during this time.

[00:06:50]

Tracey Love: *[This portion of the interview has been redacted]* But aside from sort of the bigger accounts, I would say our wholesale distribution basically just simmered out completely starting in March as restaurants closed and, you know, retailers are still doing curbside. Our retail business, as far as that goes, held on and is still doing pretty well across the state.

And then for the tasting room, I think one of the first things we implemented was basically free shipping on all orders over \$50, so we are able to ship to, I think, about thirty-eight states across the U.S., so we were trying to essentially just, you know, capture and keep our customers that were ordering wine from us and give them the incentive of free shipping. So we started doing that, and then we also offered local home delivery and we did that every Thursday. We created like a Doorstep Duo package each week that included two rotating bottles of wine and some like local food, you know, goodies that would change every week, and, you know, that was basically available only for local home delivery. And then we set up like a remote meeting place, like a pickup location in Richmond, and that, I mean, remained strong and basically kept the tasting room going, you know, at good capacity while the doors were actually closed, until, I would say, until other wineries started opening up, and I think, you know, people started easing restrictions and, you know, getting a little bit less nervous and venturing out themselves.

At that point, we started offering curbside pickup, and we're still offering home delivery, but our distribution, we have actually added a new distributor to sort of help us outside of the state of Virginia, to try and re-expand that and give us a little bit more presence sort of up and down the, you know, the East Coast. So that is a relatively new

change, and I have still retained a couple of territories in Virginia, including Charlottesville, and that is still like in transition right now.

But, you know, we've been trying to do all of the things creatively that we can do to keep business rolling, and then, yeah, now that we're open, it's a whole different ballgame.

[00:09:36]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, talk to me a little bit, too, about the role social media has played in your staying open and selling wine, because I noticed that like for the Wine Club, you all did tastings on Instagram and different things like that.

[00:10:00]

Tracey Love: Yes. Thank you. I think I had totally put that out of my head. [Laughter] Kirsty, our winemaker, she did a couple of virtual tastings for our Wine Club members, and she has also done some like, you know, privately for other groups that have contacted us, and we tried it for a little while and we think that everybody who participated really enjoyed it. We even did like a partner virtual tasting with Heart & Hands Winery in New York, and you could basically order Friends From Afar Quartet online and, you know, it was two Blenheim Vineyards wines and then two Heart & Hands wines, and then Kirsty and Tom, their winemaker at Heart & Hands, did, you know, a joined virtual tasting that I think people liked. We enjoyed doing it, but I don't know that it's our platform moving forward, as far as that goes. We feel like people got burned out pretty quickly on all of the virtual video stuff on social media.

But we have continued, I mean, to try and, you know, remain current and present and, you know, we've been posting photos of the vineyard. We've tried not to make it all about sales, you know. We also just kind of want people to know what's going on here on a daily basis, and I think, you know, that is an important part. I mean, we are, you know, a farm winery and this is still very much, you know, agriculture. I mean, we grow grapes first and sell wine after that. So, yeah, I mean, Instagram and Facebook are basically the two platforms that we focus on the most and have just, I mean, tried to keep it fresh and real and not fussy, and we don't have any professional photos taken. [Laughter] It's usually, just real life kind of cell phone snaps that reflect what we do here on a day-to-day basis.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

[00:11:47]

Tracey Love: I don't know how that translates into sales, but it's doing something in some way.

[00:11:54]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good. I was also snooping around, looking, and Melissa [Booth Hall] and I have had this conversation about just Virginia wine as a whole, I don't know, a couple months ago, about the like intense like local—it's pretty local. A lot of the sales stay in Virginia. You were mentioning you want to have a bigger presence

nationally and regionally. But could you talk a little bit about—and you already have a little bit, but could you go into a little more depth about, I guess, the local response to this moment and the ways that they've supported you guys?

[00:12:32]

Tracey Love: Sure. So we are, I mean, part of the Monticello Wine Trail, which is basically thirty-one wineries kind of in and around the Charlottesville area, and I feel like the Monticello Wine Trail has been—I mean, some wineries are more supportive of others, than others, but I think as a group, it's been a really great community effort, and we also have basically the Virginia wine marketing office, which is based out of Richmond, and they still have two virtual, you know, like phone calls a week, sort of, you know, letting all of the wineries know about new regulations and kind of what's going on, and they have been super helpful and supportive through all of this as well. I mean, they've done a Virginia Wine Together campaign, which has actually helped a lot of the local retailers and restaurants quite a bit. Anyone that carries Virginia wine in their store, I think, you know, it's a #VirginiaWineTogether hashtag, and I think the marketing office supports them financially in return. We've seen Virginia wine, you know, sales and our presence increase because of it, which is great.

And then as far as like our local supporters and our Wine Club members and customers, I mean, they have all been amazing. I mean, I think, you know, our online sales and I feel like the amount of emails and support that we've received throughout this whole thing, you know, I mean, you would think that people couldn't survive without Blenheim Vineyards wine. I mean, I know, I think, alcohol consumption has probably

gone up for everyone since this quarantine, pandemic, you know, crisis began, but our supporters have been amazing in that way.

[00:14:11]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Could you tell me a little bit about—you've already mentioned that you guys were one of the last vineyards to open up, and I know that that's a difficult decision, especially with the safety and health of the folks who work with you guys and the folks who are coming in. Could you talk a little bit about making that decision and kind of walk through making that decision?

[00:14:36]

Tracey Love: Sure. I mean, we have basically five full-time staff people here, and we, I think, all sat down and had a conversation and realized everyone else was opening up, and felt like it was, you know, the responsible thing to do that in a very safe way. So we spent a long time, I mean, just thinking about it, talking about it, researching, kind of seeing what other folks were doing before we really made the decision, and it is a very different experience when you come here now.

We never accepted reservations, and it was just, you know, walk into the tasting room and, you know, we offered tastings, wines by the glass and bottle and flight, and we have not been offering tastings since we've been open, and now it's reservation only, and only our outdoor spaces are open. So we have basically a tented-like covered patio area and then we have a beautiful deck that overlooks the vineyard and, you know, fields and picnic tables, and we felt that it was safest for everyone to basically just open the outdoor

space and limit the number of guests that are coming in every day, and, you know, we ask our staff and anyone visiting to wear face coverings and have implemented all new sanitary guidelines and, you know, basically are limiting our capacity to about 150 people a day. And on Saturdays, you know, sort of pre-COVID, I mean, we were seeing around 500 a day, so that is, I mean, a big difference. And now we're only offering—have one flight option and wines by the glass and the bottle, but we are not doing tastings at this time, and we're just kind of taking it week by week.

Things right now in Virginia are not looking great. The cases are increasing, and I think, you know, the staff and everyone are sort of on our toes again, keeping an eye on it and staying open until we decide that it is unsafe not to be, and then, you know, we'll close again if we need to. So our winemaker and GM, Kirsty, always says, you know, we just serve wine, so we don't need to risk lives over a glass of wine, but we are also a business and are trying to be mindful of all of that.

[00:16:52]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, that's a good perspective to have. I was wondering, too—Do you need to take a break or anything? You're doing great. Can you tell me a little bit about your employees and the folks that work with you guys? I know you have a small little capsule of folks similar to us here, but how has the pandemic and this time kind of, you know, impacted your workforce? Have you all had to apply for any of the Paycheck Protection [Program] loans? And if so, what has that experience been like?

[00:17:44]

Tracey Love: We did apply for the PPP loan and were granted it in the beginning. When you interview Kirsty, I would feel more comfortable with her going into those details, but the Matthews family, I mean, before that loan was even approved, they had decided to go ahead and pay our tasting room staff for the hours that they were scheduled. They were basically paid through the end of June, and then, I mean, we reopened shortly after that. So none of our part-time staff or full-time staff lost anything, and they were, you know, covered, even though there wasn't work.

And, yeah, I mean, our tasting room staff, I would say, I mean, most of the folks we have, sometimes as many as forty employees. It kind of fluctuates, depending on the time of year and what we have going on, and this is a main job for some of them, and some of the staff has been here for, you know, almost ten years, which is great. And then some of them, this is like a fun thing for them to do on the weekend. We have a couple of folks, you know, who are retired and they just want to have, you know, sort of a social outlet without a big commitment, and, yeah, it's kind of an all-over-the-place team. It's great.

[00:19:01]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. That's great. And this might also be a question that Kirsty can answer better, but I saw that your On the Line limited release bottle of wine to support Feed the Frontline Charlottesville and World Central Kitchen. Could you guys talk a little bit about that and what went into that decision, and then bottling and selling that?

[00:19:27]

Tracey Love: Sure. Yeah, I mean, I can give you a kind of brief, you know, backstory, and then Kirsty can also go into it. But from what I have understood, Dave Matthews and José Andrés kind of met and seemed to hit it off, and he was extremely supportive of what World Central Kitchen is doing, and Kirsty and John Kluge basically are friends here in Charlottesville and basically came together with this idea to create a white wine blend and a red wine blend, and then we also have basically t-shirts, posters, and stickers, and all of the proceeds from each of those items goes to support the World Central Kitchen, who actually is supporting Frontline Foods here in Charlottesville, which John Kluge is behind. So they are creating meals for frontline responders, and we basically launched that, I think, in early May and they're still going strong and we are selling it only out of the tasting room. I mean, it's available for shipping, but it has been wildly popular, and Frontline Foods actually just made a really awesome video which Dave Matthews, you know, did a short interview and lent a song, and it's been, I mean, great for us and we're really excited to have the opportunity to have done something like that and, you know, I mean, shared a good amount of support for frontline responders, which, you know, they're still working very hard. So we're going to keep it up.

[00:20:56]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. That's great. And I don't have many more questions for you, but one of the kind of bigger question, there's been a lot of talk about like normalcy and what normal looks like both in just like life and in the food and beverage industry, both with the economics of the pandemic and also issues of equity in this

moment, reckonings around both of these things. How has this pandemic kind of changed your perspective in your job, or if it has, about wine or about the industry as a whole?

[00:21:38]

Tracey Love: Well, I can say—I can start by saying I have been consuming a lot more wine because of this. [Laughter] I have definitely been supporting the beverage industry now more than I ever have, both, you know, at Blenheim but also, you know, our local retailers. But, I mean, personally, I have two kids. I have a three-year-old and an almost-one-year-old, and going into this pandemic, I mean, I would say sort of wrapping my head around working from home, essentially, with two young kids. My husband is actually a cheese maker and lamb farmer, and so his busy season basically started—like lambing season started at the beginning of the pandemic, so I was home with the two kids six days a week, trying to figure out how in the world to keep, you know, tasting room sales going. You know, I mean, we've had to completely redo our website and, you know, we've developed a whole new talk platform, and trying to do that was, I would say, probably one of the most stressful times in my life. [Laughter]

But we got through it, we are getting through it, and I am so thankful that, you know, that I have a job and that it was not something that I had to worry about. I mean, Kirsty especially has been really supportive of me, you know, working from home for the most part, and kind of just, you know, trying to get things done where I can. I am very thankful that both of my kids still take a nap in the middle of the day and one of them in the morning, and it's just been basically trying to figure out, yeah, I mean, a new normal. And, you know, when this thing started and, you know, they closed my daughter's

Montessori School for two weeks, you know, trying to think about that, I was like, “What in the heck am I going to do with these two kids for the next two weeks?” And then two weeks turned into almost five months, and, you know, I kind of like can’t imagine her going back into school, you know. I never thought that I would feel that way now, but, you know, it’s great that I get to spend time with the kids and that, you know, I feel like I’m getting the work done. Kirsty may tell you otherwise. [Laughter] But, you know, the ship hasn’t sunk. We’re still floating along and, you know, it’s at more of a barge speed right now than a racing boat, but, you know, who knows what the finish line is. So, day by day.

[00:24:06]

Annemarie Anderson: That’s great. If it makes you feel better, I feel that barge speed as well. [Laughter] So keep it on movin’.

[00:24:06]

Tracey Love: I know. It has been nice, you know, to sort of take a forced, you know, slower pace to life, and I think it makes you realize, you know, like, well, what the heck was I doing before? Like I don’t need to go to the grocery store every day or, you know, I don’t need to do all of these things. It’s nice to just sort of have, you know, quiet time to think about all of that, and whether we like it or not, we’re in it. [Laughter]

[00:24:41]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, that's great. Let's see. What do you hope to see—this will be kind of my last question, then I'll open it up for you to share whatever you would like to share that we haven't touched on that you want to say. But what do you hope to see going forward for Blenheim Vineyards from this?

[00:25:02]

Tracey Love: I mean, I guess sort of going back to, you know, distribution and casting a wider net, I think we've been lucky to sort of be here, you know, in our own little bubble and have people, you know, visit the tasting room and, you know, visit from all over the world, and I think, I mean, tourism in the wine industry here is huge, and I think moving forward, you know, we are going to have to reevaluate that, you know. I mean, without tasting room traffic, I mean, we have a lot more wine in the warehouse and, you know, I mean, we are running out of space, to be totally honest, but I also think it's great, you know, to introduce Virginia wine to other places.

I was actually lucky enough to come to the SFA Symposium on behalf of Virginia wine two years ago, and, you know, was there with Andy Chabot serving some Virginia wine, and, you know, I talked to a lot of people that had never had it before and, you know, didn't know, you know, what in the world was going on in the Virginia wine industry, and so I think opening up the education and the doors for more people to try the wine and kind of hear the story and know, you know, what we are, who we are, and what we're doing, I think is going to be really exciting, and this is kind of a first step into doing that, because who knows when, you know, we'll be able to invite the number of guests that were coming to the tasting room back again. I'm sure we will get there, but,

you know, we just sort of have to rethink and reevaluate everything that we're doing which is—I don't know that we would have done that otherwise, so it's making us think a little bit differently, and that's exciting.

[00:26:40]

Annemarie Anderson: For sure, for sure. Well, I don't have any more questions for you. Is there anything else that you want to add?

[00:26:48]

Tracey Love: I feel like I have said a good amount of things. [Laughter] I mean, I don't know. Blenheim is a great place. I'm happy to be here and happy to be a part of it, and, you know, I just hope that we can continue making wine accessible to the people that want it, sustainably. I guess I should probably touch on, you know, our ecological ideas as well, because the tasting room itself, and I feel like all of our ethos, is geared towards being as environmentally friendly as possible, which I think now is also more important than ever, but we do, you know, try to make an effort to have a little impact that way. But, no, I'm just thankful that you're talking to us and, you know, I don't know if anyone will listen to this. [Laughter] If so, I hope they don't fall asleep. But we appreciate you including us and me.

[00:27:45]

Annemarie Anderson: Thank you so much.

[00:27:46]

Tracey Love: Yeah, thank you.

[End of interview]