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Abstract: Edward Russell was born in Lom Poc, California on September 22, 1943. Mr. Russell grew up in Oklahoma and after his graduation from high school he went into the navy. After the completion of his navy career, Mr. Russell began work in the construction and iron industries. He worked in this field for 40 years. In the year 2000, Mr. Russell retired and decided he wanted to grow table grapes in southern Illinois. With minimal knowledge of the grape industry, Ed enrolled in a few college courses. He soon found that the table grape industry would not be easy since he would have to continually go to farmers markets and the grapes would not stay fresh very long. After discussions with classmates and teachers, Ed settled on a vineyard and wine making. Edward Russell now owns 170 acres on which he has a 15-acre vineyard and a 15-acre winery and retail shop. Mr. Russell grows six different types of grapes and can produce 13 different varieties of wine. Mr. Russell explained that to make the varieties one must blend the grapes to get a certain taste to the wine. Mr. Russell explained the life cycle of a grape from the time it is formed to the point that the wine is placed in the bottle.

Keywords: Navy; Construction Industry; Iron Industry; Table Grape Industry; Vineyard; Winemaking; Winery; Types of Grapes; Varieties of Wine; Blending Grapes; Life Cycle of a Grape

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Interview with Edward Russell

#ISM_33_RussellEdw

July 29, 2008

Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

Maniscalco: Today is July twenty-ninth, it's about ten minutes after 12:00, and we're sitting right outside of Creal Springs with Ed Russell at Bella Terra Wineries. How are you doing, Ed?

Russell: Doing great.

Maniscalco: Great, great. Ed, you know, you've walked us around the winery so far, and it's really been exciting—a lot of fun to see everything. And now's our opportunity to kind of sit down and kind of talk a little bit about who you are, why you do what you do, and what sorts of things you do. So first off, we'll start with something real easy for you. Can you just give us your age, date of birth, kind of introduce yourself?

Russell: My age is sixty-four, and date of birth is 9/22/43.

Maniscalco: And your name is Ed Russell?

Russell: Edward Russell, mm-hmm.

Maniscalco: Now, I looked over your biographical form, and I saw that you did construction for quite a while. Did you do construction around here?

Russell: Yes. I was an ironworker by trade.

Maniscalco: Oh really?

Russell: An ironworker, mm-hmm.

Maniscalco: So how does an ironworker, somebody who's worked on iron, come to start a winery?

Russell: That's quite a transition, isn't it?

Maniscalco: Yeah.

Russell: How it came about is I more or less retired from construction and wanted to raise table grapes—a few—and I enrolled in classes at Shawnee College to learn how to grow grapes. And while at the college, I became acquainted with twenty or thirty other students that were there to learn how to grow wine grapes. So what they told me is when you grow table grapes, to try to find a place to sell them, it's very difficult, because the main supermarkets already have contracts with big growers. So I wouldn't be growing that much, so my only outlet would be a farmers market. Well, at a farmers market, you would take a pickup load to sell that weekend and then try to take another pickup load the next weekend. Well, by then, they're overripe. So they said, if you grow wine grapes, then you're able to harvest all at one time and take them to a winery, and that's quicker, and more efficient, and easier to do. So that's when I converted from table grapes into wine grapes.

As I got into the wine grape growing, I began to network with wineries, and working with them, and learning what they were doing, and why they were doing it, and how they were doing it. And that was kind of a stepping stone into the winery business. And after going through the year's training on growing grapes—Shawnee College had a beginner's class, an

intermediate, and an advanced class. The first part was how to prepare the site work for a vineyard, and the second part was the pruning and the maintenance of the vines, and then the third part was the spraying, the fungicide, herbicide, pesticides—the chemical end of it. So after I completed that course, then I planted the vines and networked with other wineries in order to sell them the fruit that I was growing. Then Shawnee had another course on the introduction to winemaking. So I took that course, and then Alan Dillard, who is a winemaker, had a five-week course on the fundamentals of making wine, and I took that with him.

So I became acquainted with the winemaking, and I became familiar with the fundamentals of winemaking. But then I have also a couple of consultants that are winemakers that helped and assist me, that helped me run the tests and do the taste-tests and recommend the blendings and—in other words, people that know what they're doing, to keep me from making a 20,000-dollar mistake on a tank of wine. So that's a good investment. Any time you can get a consultant that knows more than you do about anything, it's cheaper to hire him than it is to venture on your own, because sometimes you get into some of this wine, and you do some things with it, and you can't back it up and start again. You either have to go forward or you dump it. So it's too risky, and it's too expensive. So I've got a couple people that I call on that comes and helps me and assists me until I become more familiar with it and become more knowledgeable.

Winemaking is a science. Everybody makes wines different—they have different techniques; they have different things that they're trying to do with their wine to reach the consumers they're selling to. Some people like dry wines, red; some people like dry whites, and some prefer the Concords or the blends or various styles. And each winemaker's got a little bit different style, little bit different presentation. And it's quite extensive. That's why I don't recommend it for anybody just to think that they're going to press grapes, get the juice, put it in a tank, and turn on the valve and start bottling, because there's a lot more to it than that. But that's how I transitioned from ironworker into winery. Was looking for an outside hobby growing table grapes, and it developed into wine grapes, it developed into winery, and that's where I am today.

Maniscalco: Now I also saw that you're married. Is your wife involved in all this?

Russell: The wife works here. She's the one that's more or less in charge of the kitchen and the bookkeeping, and I am basically in charge of the vineyard and the winemaking, and then I work up here in the marketing and the wholesale end of it. But she's very instrumental in the operation.

Maniscalco: Now, it's a very interesting change that you've done with your life, going from ironworking to this. I'm just kind of wondering, as a child, were you interested in some kinds of vineyards or grapes?

Russell: Oh, I've always been interested. Yes, I've always been interested in vineyards and orchards and a lot of that. As a kid, I worked in a lot of those, and… It hasn't been a long-term desire to get into it, but I'm comfortable being in it because I've been around it pretty much my whole life. This whole southern Illinois area was mostly all apple orchards and peach orchards at one time. Because of the labor constraints and the different problems, it's kind of reduced down to probably three or four main growers now. But it used to be that you probably couldn't drive three, four miles that there wasn't a peach orchard or an apple orchard or a strawberry patch or something down here.

Maniscalco: As you grew up and you were working in the construction business and everything, was it always like a thought in the back of your mind—I want to get into this agricultural type life style. (both speaking)

Russell: Yeah, I think that's in the back of everybody's mind, because we have a lot of people come in here from Chicago, and they've been in Chicago working their whole life, and then they retire, and what do they do? They want to come to southern Illinois, the quiet life, and then they come in, they sit down, and they say, "What would you recommend if I wanted to grow two acres of grapes or if I wanted to get into strawberries?" So I think that's in the back of everybody's—everybody's kind of a grower or wants to be a grower. They want the earth, and they want to be around the good times of life or the quiet times of life. They remember Thanksgivings, and they remember pumpkins, and they remember…

And I think that's entrained in people's lifestyle. I don't know of too many farmers around here that retired and went to Chicago. (laughter) It's most of them retired in Chicago and come to southern Illinois. And not necessarily Chicago, but all over the country. There's people that live in southern Illinois from all parts of the country that come here. Because the winters are basically fairly nice here. There's some people that live in Florida that's moved back to southern Illinois. It's got a nice climate. Once in while, we'll have some bad weather, but as a rule, on average, if you take a five- or ten-year average, you have nice winters. It's not too bad. Maybe two or three weeks of real bad weather, and then everything else is bearable and doable.

Maniscalco: I'm kind of wondering now—I mean, you say you're in your first real year of growing grapes and making wine, but can you tell us kind of when you really, really started?

Russell: Well, it's not the first year of growing grapes. This is the first full year that I've been open for retail business. The vineyard was planted in 2000. I started selling grapes in 2004, 2005. But I've been opened here since May of 2007. Actually, the basement was finished first, and that's when we started with the wine in order to have wine to sell when the retail was finished. So it's not just been a recent thing; it's been an ongoing thing for the last eight years. And then there's a lot to—you don't just open a winery. There's a lot of planning, there's a lot of equipment, there's a lot of lab equipment, and chemicals, and cleaning equipment, and scheduling, and labels you have to buy, and bottles, and capsules.

It's not an overnight—there's a lot of planning that goes into a winery—a lot of planning, and a lot of luck to a point. Because if you don't have good fruit on the vines, you don't have quality fruit, it's tough to make quality wine—if you don't have something to work with. So everything starts in the vineyard. You have to have a good, sound, healthy vineyard, good quality fruit, a good growing season—just enough moisture to be ample enough for the plants to grow, and not too dry, not too wet. If it's too wet, you get a lot of disease. So you have to have a lot of luck in the vineyard along with doing the best you can with what you have in order to get disease-free fruit so that when you do process it and it goes into that tank, it's got good flavors and good smells and makes a nice wine. So everything starts in the vineyard and then ends up in the tank, and whether you have good wine, bad wine, mediocre wine, award-winning wine, or acceptable wine, or however you want to describe it. It all starts with good fruit to get sound wine, to keep it within the parameters of the different things.

And it's a lot more complicated than I thought it was going to be. I'm not afraid of a challenge—because that's what life is. Life is nothing but daily challenges. And I thought this would be just a quick learn, and then I find out it's not a quick learn, it's a learning process.

And I don't know near what I need to know, but I'm learning, and I have people that come in here—customers that come in—that say that the wines that I have here are some of the best that they've drank, and that's quite a compliment. And then a lot of them back it up by buying cases, which is good, but it's even better because they buy mixed cases. If you buy a mixed case, that means you like all of them. If you just buy a case of one kind, then that's one style that you like. But I've had several come in here: "Give me two bottles of each one." So that's good, that's good, and that's what I want. I'd rather sell two bottles of each one and know that they're all good-quality, good sound, good-tasting, flavorful, and people enjoy, rather than just specializing in one style of wine.

Maniscalco: You mentioned a little bit earlier that a planning goes into making a winery, and a lot of planning goes into the vineyard. Can you take us back to kind of that early planning stage, when you're sitting down with your wife, saying, "I think I want to do this." Can you kind of describe to us—

Russell: Well, you don't want to go back that far. (Maniscalco laughs) There was some discussion in there, and I don't want to cover that ground again. But I would recommend anybody that wants to get into a winery or into vineyard, or any kind of agriculture or whatever they want to get into, they need to find out where they can get the training. If there's no training available, they need to find out in their area, who's in that type of business, and then they need to apprentice with them, and they need to do that for a few months or a year so that they fully understand what they're getting involved with and what the investment's going to be, and what they're going to do with their product when it becomes mature. There's no sense to raise a product if you don't have a place to sell it, and there's no sense in taking the ground that you have and investing thousands of dollars in it on the chance that it's going to turn out.

You need to know what you're doing to protect your investment, and that's why I would recommend networking, just like myself. I went to school to learn how to grow, I went to classes to learn how to make wine, but I didn't stop there. I started networking with the other wineries. I became acquainted with the vineyards and the winemakers. I witnessed the problems they were having. I assessed their strengths and their weaknesses. What's their winery got that everybody likes, or what's this winery got that everybody dislikes?

And then you take an assessment of all the ones that you visit. You go to one place, and they sell pizzas—delicious pizzas—but they've only got three tables in the whole building. Well, three tables, you've got eight people, and twenty people standing. So obviously they needed a bigger area, or make a less attractive pizza—one or the other. But those are the things that I looked at. Strengths and weaknesses of the other wineries and the other people that are—the parking lots, you know—a nice building, but no parking lot. A big parking lot but small building. No shade trees. No retail bar. People come in, they want to buy a bottle of wine and leave, and the tasting bar's full, four deep. Well, they're not going to stand in line and wait for you to talk for thirty minutes to somebody to buy a bottle. So I put a retail bar in so they can sidetrack the tasting bar.

Most everybody that visits us got children, so you want to have a children's atmosphere or the family atmosphere. That's why we have the bocci court, we have the horseshoes, we have the beanbags, we have the washers—something to entertain the children while the adults are at the tasting bar or doing whatever other activity. The picnic tables—people like to picnic. They like to bring their own food. So these are all the things that I kind of saw in visiting, and I brought

that all to bear here. And I've still got a ways to go. I've still got some things I need to do. I need to do some night events, and I need to put some lighting up. I've tried to get the county—when I built the building, the county promised me they were going to do the road, and I've been open eighteen months now, and the road—I did see the road grader go by the other day. He was about thirty-five miles an hour, and his blade was a foot off the ground, so I don't think he did much blading. So I've almost gave up on that end of it. But if I had the road in, that would be a big improvement to this. Because we get buses, we get limousines, we get motorcycles, we get antique cars, we get convertibles, and we get people from all walks of life. People in here that own a string of Hilton hotels, people that own a string of restaurants, or a series.

You never know who's coming in that door, because tourists come through here, people traveling. I had two girls coming through the other day going to Chicago—they'd come from Puerto Rico and they were heading to Chicago. They came in; they saw the sign on the highway. You never know who's coming in that door, but you try to make the best presentation that you can, try to put the best face. They may not make a stop in Illinois other than here. So if you can leave a good impression with them, be a good host, show them some hospitality, they leave here with a nice memory. They take pictures. I've had groups come in, and they want me to take their picture as a group. So it's a nice… And I keep a scrapbook of all the different people that come in.

And people leave here, they're pretty happy, pretty content, and most of them are glad they stopped. And that's really what it's all about. When you're in the wine business, you try to make good wine—that's number one—but then again, you've got to be a good host. You've got to be able to communicate with people, talk to them, make them feel at ease. Because when they walk through the door, this is their first time here, and when you walk into a new establishment for the first time, you don't know if they're going to be friendly, if they're going to be grouches—you don't know what to expect, so you kind of got your guard up. But if you break the ice and tell them good afternoon, and how are you doing, and I'm glad you showed up, then it settles them down, and then they become open, and they tell you a little bit about their history and their life, and where they came from, and where they're going. And that's really the fun part of it. If there's a fun part of being in the winery business, that's the fun part. That's the fun part. Everything else is the work part.

Maniscalco: I'd kind of like to talk a little bit about some of the work part, but first, can you kind of explain to us—I mean, you have a very beautiful place here. The vineyards and the winery and everything is just gorgeous. Could you kind of give us a description of what it would look like to somebody who came here?

Russell: Well, it would be a customer-friendly place. It's got a certain amount of ambiance and a certain comfort zone. And it's got some nice scenery. It's got a lot of wildlife that come and go. It's a very family-oriented-type business, so if you have children, you can bring them. It's kind of a retreat. It's kind of isolated. I think the nearest house from here is three-fourths of a mile, so you're kind of out in the wilderness. Excuse me. (quiet talking with someone)

Maniscalco: The hazard of being in charge.

Russell: Pardon?

Maniscalco: The hazards of being in charge.

Russell: That's the hazard of being the only one with the keys.

Maniscalco: Well, there you go, that too. (laughs)

Russell: But inventory control is better when I have the keys.

Maniscalco: (laughs) Well, can you tell us, how much land do you have in the vineyards?

Russell: I've got approximately fifteen acres in vineyards, and about fifteen acres in buildings and ponds and kind of a park area, I'd say. So it's approximately thirty acres on this side, and then I've got about 150 or so acres—145 acres—across the road.

Maniscalco: Were you planning on turning that into vineyards, too?

Russell: It's a possibility, but it'll be probably a couple years from now. At some point in time, when those vines are about ten years old, I'll probably start planting two acres a year until I get a replacement in, rather than planting them all at one time or trying to do it. It's better to start off with a couple acres because it's easier to control and easier to keep up with. Then the next year, maybe two more acres, then two more. Maybe add another variety. I wish I would have planted more Concords. It seems like the tastes in this part of the country—even tourists that come to Chicago—it doesn't make any difference where they're from—but they like the sweeter wines more so than the dry. The dry wines have their place, but that group is probably two out of twenty that like dry wines; the other eighteen like sweeter wines. And then there's a few that really like the sweet, sweet wines. So if I was going to plant, I'd probably plant some of that type of variety of vines—some more Concords, some more Niagara, Vidal, make some nice sweet, semi-sweet wines.

Maniscalco: If we were to look at kind of the life of a grape, I guess, the grape life cycle, can you kind of explain to us what that cycle is, from the time the grape starts growing to when it ends up in the bottle? What goes on in between that?

Russell: Well, probably at least start off in the winter, when the plant's dormant. In the winter, the plant becomes dormant and loses its leaves, but it still has the fruiting shoots from the previous harvest. So then you go in there and cut these fruiting shoots off and leave so many buds on each fruiting shoot, and that'll be your fruiting shoots for next year. And then you clean up all your cuttings. Then in the spring, about the middle of April, the buds on these fruiting shoots start to swell, and then they'll break out, and they'll start getting little leaf structures on them. And that's middle of April to the first of May, then your new fruiting shoots start to come out. And then they'll flower, and then the grapes will form into the little clusters, and then they'll begin to grow. And in the meantime, you're spraying fungicide sprays for black rot and various diseases.

Then as you get up into June, you start cleaning the middles out. If you have a GDC system or a two-wire system, you start cleaning the middles out. You start doing some shoot thinning. Ideally, you like to keep your shoots about a hands-width. You'll start that. And then cut the suckers off of the trunks, keep the trunks clean, put your herbicide underneath the plant to keep the grass down so the humidities and so forth doesn't form under there. And the grass sometimes saps the energy or the nutrients out of the grown, and then the plant doesn't get it.

And then you're going into the summer months, July and August, and you've got to keep your spray program going, and then you try to go back and cluster thin if you've got too many clusters on a fruiting shoot. Ideally on a fruiting shoot, if you had an ideal plant, and you had

three clusters of grapes on that one shoot, ideally, according to what I've read, there needs to be thirteen leaves for each cluster. So if you have three clusters on that fruiting shoot, you should have thirty-nine leaves minimum. Now, that's ideal, and I don't know very many that's got ideal vineyards, but that's the ideal.

And then you come, oh, probably two weeks before harvest, three weeks before harvest, you will go out into the vineyard, and you will randomly pick berries off the clusters. You'll walk down through there, and you'll take one or two berries off that cluster, and then a little further down, one or two berries off that cluster. And you try to get some kind of an idea of what that section is doing. And you'll collect 100 to 200 berries from various parts of that section, and then you'll mash those berries up into juice, and then you'll run your sugar test to see where the brix and where the different parameters are—your acidity or your pH. And that gives you an indication of about how long it is before harvest. Then you'll probably do it again a week before harvest to see where you're at with your sugar. As a rule, the brix or the sugar, they like twenty-two to twenty-four brix, ideally. Low acid, low pH. And a lot of those factors depend on how you maintain the vineyard. If you overcrop it and you do various things, and you don't give it the attention it needs, you end up with the higher pH and the higher acids, and the brix—if you got too many clusters on there, the sugar might not come up, and then you have to chapitalize it to bring the sugar up. If the pH is too high, the wine becomes unstable. You may end up with vinegar. There's a lot of…

That's why I said a few minutes ago, everything starts in that vineyard. That's the foundation of a winery. Everything in that vineyard has to be on target for that wine to be drinkable. And then after you harvest, and you process your juice, and you ferment, and you turn it into wines, then you go back and do a post spray. Just because you've took the fruit off, you can't neglect the vine, because if it picks up a disease going into the fall, it's going to carry that disease right on into the next spring, so you have to do post-harvest sprays as well as the sprays in the spring. So I'll average eighteen to twenty sprays a year, and it runs me, depending on the spray I'm using, 600-800 dollars every time I spray, plus the herbicide, the grass killer, plus the expense of the mowing and maintenance and trellis repair and various things. But if you're looking for a busy job, this would be a good one (Maniscalco laughs) because there's always something to do. I told somebody the other day, "If you've run out of anything to do, you've just lost your list. You'd better go look for your list because there's plenty to do all the time."

Maniscalco: You've mentioned a few times that you have sprays for different things like black rot, and then you've also mentioned some insects as well. Can you kind of tell us what some of the larger ones are? I guess black rot is one of them, that you are looking out for.

Russell: Well, you have to for Botrytis, which is a noble rot or a rot. There's a host of problems that you can have, but I've never had any of the problems to really research it because I prevent them before they happen. That's the thing about the spray program. You start having what they call leaf spot and various types of problems. You don't spray to correct them; you spray to prevent them. So if you do a spray schedule on a regular basis, then really, you don't have anything to worry about. And I've never had any disease problems, so I haven't researched different diseases. If I'd have had a disease problem, I'd research it and find out what it is. But I've always worked on a preventative, so in the eight years, I've never had any disease. But I spray to prevent it. I don't wait until I get the disease and then try to figure out how to eradicate it because it's too late, then; you're already in trouble. But there's probably six or eight standard type—phylloxera might be one of them—that's a pesticide—you spray for that.

There's several, but really, I haven't got into the different ones because I've never had that problem, so I really don't know.

Maniscalco: Now, you said you're in a spray program. What exactly—I mean, how does the program work, and—?

Russell: Well, program is when you—you spray every two weeks or so. And you may use—for instance, the spray this week, you may use Abound. And Abound is a fungicide that's got the chemicals in it to combat most of the problems that you would have. And then the next week, you might use Pristine, which is another fungicide. In the beginning of the year, you would use like Pencozeb, which is good for one type of disease, like bunch rot, black rot, and then you might assist it with Nova or another type of chemical, and you use Sevin. You might use Danitol, which is another pesticide.

But you try to come up with a—like the Vignoles, that's a real tight cluster, and you want to spray that with a chemical—I use Elevate—before the berries swell up and go tight because once the berries go tight, the spray won't penetrate. And that's part of that particular grape, the Vignoles. So you'd use that. You have to be careful with the Concords, because you cannot use the Pristine on the Concords. That particular grape doesn't do well with Pristine. So you have to work around the sprays on that. And that's part of the program.

And not using the same sprays over and over and over again, because if you use the same sprays, then the plants become immune to it, and then when you spray, you're just wasting your time because it's not doing any good. Just like some insects, when you spray them with the same thing over and over again, they adjust to that chemical. That's why on these, I spray with Sevin, but think I come back with another chemical called Danitol, which is a little bit more stringent, a little stronger, and that kind of changes it up a little bit, keeps it different.

But you keep track of—of course, you have to. Now, I went to classes so that I could become a licensed applicator. Some chemicals, you have to be a licensed applicator before they'll sell them to you. But you keep a record of the spray you use, which plants you put what spray on, what kind of a day it was—was the sun shining, what was the temperature, what direction and how strong was the wind blowing—and you keep this in your records basically so that if you forget what you did, you can go back. So it's just a good bookkeeping thing. And then if you were using something that would do damage to your neighbor's crop or harm some plants somewhere else, at least you've got a record to show what you used and that what you used either caused it or didn't cause it, but at least you've got a record of it. But it's really just a reference so that you don't use the same sprays over and over.

Maniscalco: When we were in the vineyard, you kind of explained that there are certain land features that you want to put vineyards on. You were talking about how they were on hills and other things. Can you tell us why?

Russell: Well, you want to put a vineyard on the highest elevation you can get—the highest elevation with enough drop so you don't get the frost—the cold air has a way to escape from the hilltop of the vineyard. Which the frosts are important in the spring. They can do damage to your crop. So you want to be up on a hill. And you want to be up on hill for the drainage—not only for the sub-soil drainage, which you take care of when you sub-soil, but the surface drainage, so that the plant is not standing in a sump of water. And then you want to be on top of the hill

because of the air flow. You want the air to be able to blow through those plants and keep those leaves dry. Because wet leaves on humid days is where your disease—there's certain temperature ranges in there when your diseases are more evident and more capable than they are on other days. But you want it on a hillside for air flow, and preferably on the sunny side of the hill, which is not always possible because it depends on how your ground lays. But it seems like the plants on the sunnier side of the hill do better than the plants on the opposite side of the hill.

But before I would plant any vines, I would get soil tests to find out if that soil is where it needs to be for that particular fruit or whatever that you're planting. And I would definitely recommend sub-soiling the ground, fracturing the ground, breaking the ground up down to the hardpan to give those roots of plants a chance to grow and expand. I think you have a healthier—you can see the vineyard out there, how healthy it is. And I think that's attributed a lot to just that sub-soiling, tearing that ground up. You take a piece of old hardpan ground and try to plant something, and it just strangles itself. It just won't let it grow. But if you sub-soil it and fracture the ground up good, then those roots just thrive and grow, and the plant stays healthy. So I would recommend that if someone was wanting to put a vineyard in. And I know a few of them around here that's planting a vineyard, and they bypassed that because of the expense. It's expensive to get a sub-soiler and somebody that's got a tractor big enough to do it. But I think it's the foundation of the vineyard. It's like a building. If you've got a good foundation, you can put a building up—bad foundation, your building's going to fall in. (phone rings) Over a period of five or six, eight years, there will be a price to pay if you don't really sub-soil that ground and get it ready.

Maniscalco: You've mentioned a bunch of times different people that are out there that have given you advice and have helped you out. Can you tell us a little bit about the different consultants that you've had and different advice, and a lot of the networking that you've done?

Russell: The names, or the locations, or—?

Maniscalco: Just the sorts of things that you've—

Russell: Well, it's just like in school, we started off with Dave Ponce, who was an instructor. Gary Orlandini was an instructor. Alan Dillard, a winemaker instructor. Denny Franklin, a winemaker at Pheasant Hollow. Karen Hand, a winemaker at Blue Sky. Those people were probably the most knowledgeable in this area, and that's why the colleges selected them to be the instructors.

Maniscalco: What sorts of advice have they given you? Were there any foundational pieces of advice that they gave you?

Russell: Well, that's the nice thing about people: each one's got a different piece of advice (Maniscalco laughs) Advice as to—I'm not following your train of thought. Advice as to get into the grape-growing business or—

Maniscalco: No, just getting—

Russell: —advice on how to grow grapes?

Maniscalco: Both.

Russell: Well, they've given me that advice—both ends—on how to do it, and the problems they'd had, and how they overcame them, and the winemaking end of it. This is not a widget company.

This is not where you set out your press or your machine and you kick out widgets. This is kind of the difference between a chef and a cook. So if you're going to succeed in this type of business, you better be able to network with other people, to find out what kind of problems they're having, and if you had the same problems, how to overcome those problems, and how their businesses are doing. If there ever was a networking business, this would be the one.

This would be a networking business. And talking to them and finding out the problems that they've had with their vines or the problems they've had with their wineries and the problems they've had with their wines. And everybody kind of works together collectively so that—what we really want to do, I guess, basically, is have a representation of southern Illinois of having acceptable wines and good wines, and try to improve on the tourists, and make a living—that type of thing. And the thing of it is, when you call one of them, they're always ready to help you. They'll loan you something; they'll come help you. Very seldom do they say, "I'll call you back later." They're very nice people, very easy to work with. And it's helped me quite a bit on different things.

Maniscalco: That's good. It's always great to have help. I'm wondering if you can explain to us kind of the end result of all the grapes that you're growing out there, and that's the wine. Can you kind of explain to us the wines that you do make?

Russell: Well, you've got six varieties of grapes, which I told earlier. You know, you've got the Seyval and Traminette, Vidal, Vignoles, Concord—you take those six varieties that I have, and then you make dry wines and semi-sweet wines and sweet wines, and then you blend them in various ways. And what you try to do is to come up with a selection that appeals to different people. Some people only like red blushes. Some people only like white wines. Some people only like dry wines. Some people like semi-dry. Some people only drink sweet wines. So you take those six that you've got, and you try to do things with them. You try to blend them and change them and do things with them that appeals to most everybody. You're not going to have one wine that's going to appeal to everybody. But if you could make ten or fifteen selections that appeal to somebody, then that's really what you're trying to do with them. And then of course, the names of the wines or what you want to call them is your discretion. You can call them—there's Cache River Winery down the road that's got Water Moccasin, (Maniscalco laughs) and I don't know what all—Snake Bite or something. But that's his attraction. You have tourists come in here, and they see the names of these wines, and they take them home as souvenirs. But you can call wine whatever name that the federal government will approve your label for. But basically all you're doing is just blending your wines up to try to make them palatable to various… You have a husband and wife come in, and you think they live together, they're married, and you think they'd agree on something, but he wants the white wine and she wants the red wine. (Maniscalco laughs) So you have to make wines to suit everybody, and that's a challenge. That's a challenge.

Maniscalco: I'm sure it is. So how do you decide what mixes and everything else? What's the process that goes into that?

Russell: Well, you decide on a lot of different things. You decide on the quality of the fruit you've got. If you have a high-acid wine and a low-acid wine, you blend them together to get the middle of the road. Blend a percentage of one wine with another wine; you get a different flavor. There's just a whole, varied ways that you can come together. But you have to bear in mind that what you come up with, what you put together, you want to try to stay consistent. Because if you're

making a style of wine that a certain person likes, when they come back next year, they want that same style. They don't want to find out it's been discontinued for another style. So you've got the consistency and trying to stay—and that's another—boy, you have a lot of records and a lot of bookkeeping. If you were like a winery in California and you specialized in Merlot of Pinot Noir or Zinfandel, and that was your specialty, and that's what you grew, and that's what you vineyard, and that's what you bottled, and that's what you wholesaled, life would be simple. (Maniscalco laughs) But when you try to make ten or fifteen different styles, it becomes a little bit more complicated. But it would be so simple if I only had one style of grape, only made one style of wine, and only sold it to one distributor, (Maniscalco laughs) I could take six months of the year off, I think.

Maniscalco: Your taste in your different fruits for which one makes a more acidic wine, which one makes a less acidic wine. How are you doing that? Are you physically tasting it, or are you testing it chemically?

Russell: No, you only test it chemically to see if it's sound, to see if it's got enough of the various preservative chemicals like $S0_2$ or sulfites or whatever. But the end result is for taste-test. That's the end result. That's the one that tells you whether you're going to bottle it or not. If it doesn't taste good, doesn't smell good, doesn't look good, you're not going to bottle 5,000 bottles.

Maniscalco: So are you the taster?

Russell: You're not going to bottle 5,000 bottles of something that's just going to sit down there. No, I have various peoples. The ones I explained a minute ago, like Orlandini and Denny Franklin, and I think Alan Dillard a couple of times. But we do tastes and recommendations and ideas. There may be something that you can do with it that you haven't even thought of that one of them could think of.

Maniscalco: So now I'm sure you get this question a lot: which is your favorite wine?

Russell: All of them.

Maniscalco: All of them? (laughs)

Russell: I like them all. I really do. If I had one that I would sit down and have a steady diet of it, I probably would single one out, but there's not a one that I make that I don't like. I like all of them.

Maniscalco: How about your wife?

Russell: Pardon?

Maniscalco: How about your wife?

Russell: Which one does she like?

Maniscalco: Yes.

Russell: I'm not really sure. But she likes all of them too. She might favor one over the other, but I've never—I think whenever I watch her drink wine, she's always getting it out of a different bottle. And I don't know whether she's drinking it because that's what she likes or she's checking it to make sure they're still good. But I like all of them. I like the blushes, and I like the whites, I like the Vignoles. I like a glass of the sweet wines. I don't like a whole lot of the

sweet wines, but I'll like a glass of the—especially the full-bodied red sweet that goes real good with barbecue or spicy foods. It seems like it's got a real nice flavor to it. I've got a light blush that I like that's fruity and flavorable, and it's good. I've got that Vignoles that makes a very nice wine. Really, I like them all. There's none that I don't like.

Maniscalco: That's good. You know, there's a culture about tasting wine. Can you kind of talk a little bit about that?

Russell: Well, I probably don't know a whole lot about that other than the average person, but when you take the cork out, you're supposed to smell the cork. If it smells like vinegar, the wine is no good. Then you pour the wine into the glass, about half-full, and then you swirl it, which is open up the aromas and the flavors and give it that bouquet. And then you smell or nose to see if it smells okay. Then you see some of them, they'll turn the glass sideways to see if it's got the legs on the side of the glass. Then they'll taste it, and they'll try to figure out just what type of flavors is in there—you know, cherries or cream or almonds or chocolate, or what flavors they're picking up. But everybody tastes different. One person will pick up this, and the other person won't. So really what it boils down to—you can do all these things that you want—the nose and swirling and the fork test—you can do it all. But really, it all boils down to, do you enjoy the flavors? Do you enjoy what you're drinking?

I had a person come in here one day and said, "I want to buy a case of this." After they went through all the tastings, they wanted to buy a case to give away. And they priced it, and I was about two dollars too high. They said, "Well, I can buy wine for so many dollars. Yours is about two dollars too high." I said, "Well, you tasted these today." "Yeah, I tasted them." "They taste good. Now, would you rather pay two bottles more for a bottle of wine that tastes good or go to the liquor store and buy it for two dollars less, and then when you give it away, they're going to drink a glass of it and pour it out because it doesn't taste good?" So they said, "Well, that makes sense. I'll buy something I know they're going to drink rather than take a chance at the liquor store on something they're going to throw out."

But that's just part of it. That's why you have the tasting bar. That's why people come in and taste. You don't do that at the liquor store. You go to the liquor store, you look at the fancy bottle, and the fancy label, and the fancy capsule, and you think, "Boy, that should be great wine—got a forty-dollar price tag on it—that's going to be great." Then you get it home and take the capsule off and open it up, and you pour it out, and it takes your breath away. (Maniscalco laughs) You say, "Where in the world did that come from?" So it's always nice to visit a winery, where you can taste what you're actually buying.

Maniscalco: There's a lot of work to be done here. There's a whole lot of work to be done here, and I'm wondering, how many employees do you have?

Russell: Well, it varies, between part-time, full-time, harvest-time, pruning time, cellar time. You'll average anywhere from five to fifteen. Just like bottling—you need five or six for bottling, three or four in the vineyard, two or three in the bar. We won't be bottling tomorrow, so we'll only need two or three in the vineyard, a couple up here. The weekends, you may need four or five up here, nobody in the vineyard, nobody in the cellar. Harvest time, you'll need twelve or fifteen pickers, and then you'll need three or four people running the crush line and the bottling line and two or three people brining the fruit in from the vineyard. There's no constant; it's always a variable, depending on what you're doing for that particular day.

Maniscalco: Kind of seasonal, I guess.

Russell: Well, it's seasonal, and it depends on how the workload falls in place. Just like the bottling. We'll try to bottle a couple times a week for the next four or five weeks, and then the bottling is over with probably until January. So that phase of it is behind you, and then we'll get into the harvesting phase. So it varies. It varies.

Maniscalco: How do you get these employees that are part-time, that come in for just picking, let's say?

Russell: Well, you just run an ad in the paper and interview. They fill out an application, and you try to find out what skills they have, and if they've ever worked with the vineyards or vines before, and if they can run equipment. Get a feel for what they can do, and then you just put them on your list, and if you need someone, you go back to that list and give them a call. And then word of mouth. People that work here tell somebody, and then they come in.

Maniscalco: What kinds of special equipment do you need to grow grapes in a vineyard?

Russell: To grow grapes? Well, you need a tractor—a vineyard tractor. It needs to be small, so it can get up and down the rows. It needs to be ideally a four-wheel drive. And then you need a sprayer. And the sprayer, according to the size vineyard you have and the size tractor you've got. I have a fellow tell me the other day he bought him a sprayer. And I said, "Well, that's good. What horsepower tractor goes with that sprayer?" Well, he said, "I don't know." I said, "Well, you need to check, because you have to match the horsepower of the tractor to the sprayer." But you need a four-wheel drive, at any rate, because when you're spraying, you need to spray when you need to spray. A four-wheel drive tractor gets you through a vineyard in all types of wet conditions. A two-wheel drive, and sometimes you have spinouts—tears up the sod. But you need a tractor, preferably a small tractor, for a vineyard, and you'll need a sprayer of some kind, whether it be a pull-behind sprayer or whether it be a tractor-mounted sprayer, but you'd have to have some kind of a forced-air sprayer. Backpacks, tank spraying doesn't work that well when you're spraying fungicide. You need an airflow-type sprayer that blows them leaves around and gets that chemical all through the plant.

And then you'll need a mower system where you can mow the rows, you'll need hand pruners, you'll need picking lugs. You'll need the small, thirty-pound lugs to pick up and down the rows, and then the 1,000-pound bins to pour them into. Then you'll need a loader of some sort, to load your fruit up on a trailer, either to haul it to your winery or haul it to another winery. You'll need a system to kill the grass, to spray your herbicide. I've got one called an Enviromist system that I put two and half gallons of Roundup in on a twenty-one gallon tank, and I can do two-thirds of the vineyard with it. That's pretty basic on equipment and the type of equipment. And you can buy used equipment or buy new equipment—it just depends on what you want to invest in your vineyard and how big your vineyard is. Now, I've got a 300-gallon spray tank, and I know some people that's got fifty- or seventy-five-gallon ones. The only thing is you have to reload all the time. If you have a bigger tank, you can do a couple, three acres at one time before you have to reload. But the investment depends on whether you buy new, used, and how big your vineyard is. So you could get in with a small expense, or you could get in with a large expense, it just depends.

Maniscalco: Let's talk a little bit about the marketing side of this, because I mean that's really keeping the fuel in the fire and keeping it going. Can you kind of explain what you've done so far with marketing?

Russell: Very little, other than advertise. Newspaper, television. You get some free press, some free interviews, but most of it is through the newspaper. And then that's your initial start, and then after that, it's word of mouth. As far as marketing, the only thing I've marketed is retail here. I have not done marketing extensively with the wholesale end of it. That's something I will get into, and it probably will be a contact, or I'll make calls on various places, and take samples, and do that type thing. The interstate signage is a good marketing tool, the state highway signs are a good marketing tool, word of mouth is a good tool. And I'm still learning. I'm still learning. There's a lot to marketing; that's a trade in itself. So I've got to cover some new ground on that later.

Maniscalco: Can we go take a step back from marketing and talk a little bit about the harvesting and processing of the grapes? When the guys go out in a field during a harvest-time, what is it that they're doing, what are they looking for, all that sort of stuff?

Russell: Well, when they go out in the field at harvest time, they're only looking for one thing, and that's the grapes. They're not looking for anything else because that's already been looked for the day before or before you started. So you already know if you're disease-free, or if you've got disease, or if the fruit's clean, or if it's ripe, if the brix is up, if the pH is right or the acidity is right. That's all been took care of. When you go into that field to pick, you've only got one mission, and that's to pick. That's all you're after. But you pick the fruit and load it in the bins, and then we bring it down to the basement where we have a grading table set up. And the dump the fruit into the grading table and take out the leaves and the sticks and any foreign debris that may have got into that bin, you take it out and grade it out so that it doesn't get into your crusher. Then it goes through the crusher, and it destems it and separates the berries from the stems, and then you pump it into your press. And the press is the vinyl drum system that forces the pressure against the fruit so that the juice goes into the bottom of the catch pan. And then you pump that into your tank, and that's when it starts your fermentation—not that particular day, but the next day you start your fermentation.

But that's one of the reasons that I think the wines are above average, is because when we start picking and when they're in them bins, until it gets into that tank, it's not been over probably an hour and a half to two hours, whereas if you were buying your fruit from a distant vineyard, they usually pick all morning, and then that afternoon, they load the fruit on their trucks, and then they take it to the winery, and then the winery takes it off that truck, puts it in a cooler, and it sits in the cooler for a day or two, and then they start pressing and crushing. So there might be anywhere from one to three or four days during that process that the fruit is degenerating and not as fresh and flavorful as it would be straight from the vineyard right into that tank.

And I think that's one of the reasons our wines are so well accepted, is because they're fruity and got good flavors, got a good nose, and very sound, and very good balance, very good finish. And we've sold quite a bit and had some happy customers. And I've had customers in here—I had one in here the other day that said she'd tasted the wines, and she said she'd been to every winery in the country, and she's never found a wine as good as the wines we've got. She said, "You're way underpriced. You need to double your prices on all your wines because these are better than any I've tasted." Which normally you wouldn't pay attention to that, but she'd only had one glass of wine, so I knew she still had her facilities. (Maniscalco laughs) So anyway, that was a compliment for me. That's a compliment, when they tell you things like that.

Maniscalco: Now, one question that I have about the harvest process: so when the grapes are ripe, they're all ripe, 100%? Or are there some that are unripened?

Russell: Are you talking about one variety, or are you talking about one berry on a cluster?

Maniscalco: One variety.

Russell: Let's go back to what we were talking about a few minutes ago. When you go through the vineyard, and you think things are about where they need to be for harvest, that's why you go through and you pick berries off randomly, all over that vineyard. Then you put them in a package, and you mash that package up and get the juice, and then you run the tests on it. And that's the reason you randomly do that. You don't go to the first two plants and get your sample because you're not representing that whole section. You've got to go through there all over that section, and then when you bring it in, and you crush it, and you press it, you're doing it as a total package and not just off of a few berries. When you go in there and get those randomly, you don't just pick the ripe ones or just pick the green ones. You try to get an overall selection so that you've got an average of what you're going to have when it goes into that tank.

Maniscalco: Of the different varieties, would different varieties ripen sooner than others?

Russell: There's some varieties, like the Concord and the Seyval, somewhere around the middle of August, they'll be ready, and probably a week or so later, the Vignoles will be ready. The Chambourcins and the Vidals are one of the later ones. They don't all ripen—thank goodness—they don't all come ripe at the same time. There is a little bit of a window in between each one of the varieties. Now, when they ripen depends on the weather and the ripen and different things. If you had a late, cold spring, they may be a week or two behind, they may be a week or two ahead on the other end. They don't all ripen at the very same day of the year, but they do ripen at varied times.

Maniscalco: Now, is there something that you're looking for in like the ideal grape? What are the standards in the ideal grape for your wine?

Russell: The ideal would be a small berry, full of flavors, with a nice sugar, with a low pH and a moderate acid, so that everything comes in ideally, and that way, you don't have to make adjustments. If the sugar comes in too low, you've got to make adjustments to bring the sugar up in order for the yeast to convert to alcohol. The pH is too high, you have to make adjustments to bring that pH down. If the acidity's too high, you've got to make adjustments to bring it down; if the acidity's too low, you've got to make adjustments to bring it up. So ideally, it'd be nice if they would all come in and balance, but that's not likely unless you've got a perfect, ideal vineyard with a perfect, ideal growing season and plenty of experienced help that shoot-thinned and leaf-thinned and did everything perfect. And you're not going to get perfect. I figure if I can get 80 percent out of that vineyard—I'm probably fortunate to get 80 percent. Never get 100 percent. I don't think anybody can get 100 percent.

Maniscalco: You put your vineyard in around 2000, correct, and it was quite an amount of time before you started seeing any return in terms of food and anything else. Financially, financial-wise, how do you deal with this? That's a lot of time in between there? How do you just handle that mentally, is kind of what… (laughs)

Russell: Well, you have to set a goal for yourself. And of course, you sit down with a pencil and paper, and you figure out what your expenses are, and you figure out how long you're going to endure

that and what you're going to do with your fruit when it gets mature and what you think you're going to get out of it. And it's a gamble. It's a gamble, but like anything, there's a certain amount of investment you have to make, and you hope that you get it back.

Maniscalco: What are the pleasures? What's the thing that's making you get up every morning, and come here, and look out on the vineyard, and look out on the lake? What are the things that are—?

Russell: What drives you?

Maniscalco: Yeah.

Russell: Well, you have to have a general interest in it to start with. If you're not interested in plants, if you're not interested in winemaking, if you're not interested in meeting people and talking to people, then I would not recommend this type of business. But it's varied, there are different aspects of it, and it's something different all the time. If you have a passion for it and you're interested in it, you don't have to want to get up in the morning; you're already up and ready to go. If you don't like what you're doing, and you dread it every day, then somebody has to wake you up. But nobody wakes me up. I'm up at 4:30, five o'clock, and I'm here until six or seven o'clock, and I'm open seven days a week. And I can't remember the last day I had a day off. So that's about as much of a passion as you can get. I don't know how you could get any more passionate about what you do.

But I enjoy it. I enjoy people. I enjoy sitting here and talking to you; I enjoy explaining these things to you. These are little challenges and accomplishments that I've did over the years, and I'm relating it to you so that you understand, and that makes me feel good that you understand how this is all put together and how the wine's made. And I take people on basement tours. I do the same thing with the public when they come in, whether it's two people or twenty—take them through the basement, explain it to them. And a lot of them are not familiar with wine-making, them big tanks down there overwhelm them—they just can't imagine a stainless steel tank that big. They don't understand how the presses and the corkers and the frame filters—it's all new to them. And I enjoy that. I enjoy explaining something to somebody that doesn't know anything, that you're starting from scratch and explaining it to them. So that's kind of a fun thing to do, too.

Maniscalco: What's the future for the winery and the vineyard here? What do you see in the future?

Russell: Well, just try to make as best wines as I can, and try to be as successful with it as I can , and try to keep my health. I'm almost sixty-five, so I've just got a few years left. Maybe that's the reason I work seven days a week, because I don't have long to go. But just try to make it as successful as I can and see what develops. I don't have any grand plan about 50,000 cases a year and expanding this and expanding that—I'm done. My years of expanding—this is it. Now it's just going to be to make this profitable and develop what I have. There's no expanding or getting bigger. This is it. Whoever expands it or makes it bigger will take my place, (laughter) will be my replacement. Not me. This is about all that I can handle.

Maniscalco: And finally—I ask everybody the same question, and I'll ask you this question –and that's the fact that this is an oral history interview. And maybe one day your grandkids or your great-grandkids or one of them could walk into the Illinois State Museum, and this interview's going to be archived forever. And I wanted to give you the opportunity to leave something in this interview for them.

Russell: Leave something in this interview that would be memorable to them?

Maniscalco: Well, for them. Anything that you would want them to know or—

Russell: Well, the only thing I can tell them is work hard, do the best you can, enjoy life, and just try to do the best you can to be successful. And that's about all I can come up with, is just…

Maniscalco: Well, great. Thank you very much, Ed.

(end of interview)