# FELICIA WARBURG ROGAN

**Oakencroft Vineyard & Winery - Charlottesville, VA**

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Interviewer: Amy C. Evans, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 29 minutes
Project: Southern Wine - Virginia

**[Begin Felicia Rogan Interview]**

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**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Friday, June 20, 2008, and I am in Charlottesville, Virginia, at Oakencroft Vineyard with Felicia Rogan. And Mrs. Rogan, would you please state your name and—and what you do for the record?

00:00:15

**Felicia Rogan:** I am Felicia Warburg Rogan, and I am president and owner of Oakencroft Vineyard and Winery Corporation in Charlottesville.

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**AE:** And may I ask you to share your birth date for the record?

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**FR:** My mother coined a wonderful phrase: it's an unlisted number. **[*Laughs*]**

00:00:36

**AE:** All right. So you are highly regarded in the industry here in Virginia and—and many have—have assigned you the title of the First Lady of Virginia Wine. Could you talk about how you got into the industry and what your life was prior to that?

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**FR:** I lived in New York City, and I moved down in 1976 to marry my husband, John B. Rogan, who was the owner and originated the Boar's Head Inn, a lovely hotel in a country setting in

Charlottesville. And he had a farm, which was called Oakencroft Farm, and I moved down here in February of 1976 and—1977, actually—and not long after that, maybe a couple of years later, I was introduced to a great friend who had a—a—she had a friend, whose daughter ran a vineyard up in the northern neck of Virginia. And she, Coco Davis, thought it would be fun—she was a friend of my husband's—she and her husband, Horace Davis. And Coco thought it would be fun to go up one day during harvest and help Lucy pick the grapes and sort of get involved in what was going on there. I had never—I lived in New York City, but I didn't—can't grow grapes in New York City, and I knew quite a bit about wine because I drank wine when I lived there, but I knew nothing about the viticultural end of it.

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And we went up one—one day and worked in the vineyard and she was—Lucy Morton, who was a noted viticulturist, the first American to go to the school at Montpellier in France. She knew about the—she wrote a book called *Grape Anpalogy—Anpathalogy* **[*Ampelography*]**—you better look that up. Anyway, it's the study of grape leaves and identifying the grape variety from the grape leaves. And she got my husband all excited and said, "You know, you ought to take some of these grapes. We have a little press and the ones that you picked—and run them through the press and maybe you'd like to make some home wine." My husband didn't even drink wine. But he was always up to new challenges and so we—she gave us a carboy, which is a big glass thing, and plugs to put in it when it starts the fermentation. To make a long story short, for a year we made what I call garage wine. Everything bubbled. It was terrible stuff, but it was fun and we got bottles, and we made up our own label. And then Lucy noted my interest in the whole project. I really needed a project because I had never lived in a—in the country full time and I—this was—seemed to be a great thing to get into—growing grapes. And she came down, and she set up a small vineyard near our house, and that's really how we got started. The small vineyard

grew into a bigger vineyard, and then there was talk of establishing a—a winery and it—it went from there.

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**AE:** Now do I understand correctly that your first vines that you planted that would have been in 1985, or was it earlier than that?

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**FR:** No, no, it was much earlier. We were—we were licensed in 1983. We just celebrated our twenty-fifth anniversary. Now we—they must have been planted in ’80.

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**AE:** And when you got here to Charlottesville, what was your perception of the industry as it existed at that time?

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**FR:** It didn’t exist. There were five wineries when I arrived there, and now, today, in 2008, 130, so it’s been enormous growth in the whole industry. There were—there were just five wineries in the whole state. And there was a woman up in Middleburg, Mrs. Furness, and she was one of the first people to plant European variety grapes. Up until then—and I even planted my first grapes—were French-American hybrids because of the vagaries of this weather. It’s—we have late spring frosts and we have, you know, high humidity, which encourages all kinds of fungus, so this is not the ideal climate to grow French-American—I mean French or European varietals. But slowly, we did start to plant them and they—they’ve done very well. But we—we didn’t know anything—very little when we started. Lucy was a viticulturist—viticulturist but she—

she's not a winemaker and, after a couple of years of doing this, my husband had this—this was a farm, a working farm, and it was a small shed and that grew into a winery building and a tasting room and, you know, we were licensed in 1983. And our first vintage of Seyval Blanc won a gold medal in Atlanta. And that encouraged us to plant more grapes, and any medals you get it always encourages you to do—to do more for the industry.

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**AE:** And you say this was a working farm. It was a cattle farm, is that correct?

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**FR:** Yes. Yeah, it was a cattle, Polled Hereford cattle.

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**AE:** And you have cows on your label.

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**FR:** Did—did, which we thought was wonderful, but a lot of wine people thought, well, what do the cows have to do on a wine bottle, and eventually, I had to take them off. I probably would have kept them to this day because this is one of the few working farms that has a farm winery on it. Most of the other places, they've taken property and developed it and—and put, you know, buildings on. But up until about four months ago, there have always been cattle on the farm.

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**AE:** And there is a photograph of some of your bottles from 1983 with that label with the pasture scene on it—really beautiful label.

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**FR:** That's right, yes, yeah, yeah.

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**AE:** And it kind of strikes me as funny—is today in the wine industry, you see so many animals on labels that you—.

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**FR:** You see goats and gosh knows what else, yes. But in those days, it was very stereotyped. It was you put your name, and it was like European labels. They have—they don't have pictures of anything other than the appellations on their labels.

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**AE:** And I understand, too, that your—your gardener for the property, Deborah [Welsh] was her name, that she became your winemaker?

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**FR:** Yeah. Yeah, Deborah—yeah, Deborah was and Jacques Recht, who was a French **[Note: Belgian]** viticulturist, who came over and was working at Ingleside [Plantation], which is in the northern neck of Virginia, he came and he tutored her. She said yes, she'd be interested in making wine, and he tutored and she made that—that first wine. She was here for a number of years and the—the innovative touch was two women involved in a winery. Up until that point, mostly, it was men who were involved in the industry. So yes, Deborah certainly started this off, and I've had a number of winemakers over twenty-five years.

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**AE:** And now in Barbara Ensrud's book, *American Wineries*, she talks about how—

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**FR:** *American Vineyards*.

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**AE:** *American Vineyard,* I'm sorry. Thank you for the correction. She talks about in Virginia, specifically, people being both stubborn and visionary in—in getting into the wine industry. Did you feel that way in the early days?

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**FR:** Well there wasn't—there weren't many people who were interested in it, and they didn't have the property and what—what we didn't know, we certainly know now because my site is not good—is that site selection is very, very important. My husband gave me the property that was a cattle field—where the cattle were and actually the—it's not high enough, and these late spring frosts come and we—we've had many vintages where the Chardonnay, which came out first, was wiped out in an April frost. People were stubborn in that they thought they knew a lot about wine, but it wasn't until we started something called the Jeffersonian Wine Growers Society, which is active today—very active—and we had people come and—and instruct us from other states about enology and viticulture, and we started a wine festival. My husband had the beautiful Boar's Head, as I said, and we had an annual Monticello Wine Festival every year since the '80s, until two years ago, when the Boar's Head took back the site that we had by the lake. And we had a Bacchanalian feast; people came from all over the state and out of state and sadly,

that stopped when the Boar's Head didn't want to continue that anymore. My husband died twenty years ago.

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**AE:** And tell me about trying to educate people about wine, in general, and Virginia wine, specifically.

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**FR:** It's—it's been a long, hard road, really. You still see restaurants with wine lists that may have just a token Virginia wine on them. It's going to take many years for people to, you know, have all-Virginia wine lists, which I would love to see suddenly in Virginia. But people are stubborn and they think that—or certainly the people who own restaurants and the people—the wine distributors are used to selling European and California—the established areas, and it's been a tough sell to get them to take on Virginia but—but the barriers are being broken. And the bigger wineries, Barboursville, which is—and—and Prince Michel and many of the others are selling Virginia wines all over the United States. I doubt they're making great inroads because, again, people are wine snobs and in New York City I—I would question whether anybody in a fine-dining restaurant would order a Virginia wine.

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**AE:** Do you think that's—that's changing and—and how fast will that maybe change?

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**FR:** No, I don't think it's changing, certainly not in the big cities it isn't. Yes, I think it's changing more in the states where there are a lot of wineries and there the restaurants are

promoting the wines, but I think in the cities, in the major cities that—which are culinary centers—no, it's going to take many years for that to happen.

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**AE:** Do you think there's any one thing that will help make that happen outside of—of restaurant participation?

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**FR:** Yes, I think the more medals, the more international medals, the more judges tour the country and taste the wines of the different states, not just Virginia, and find that their quality is often equal to California and to Europe, their minds will be changed, but people are slow to do that.

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**AE:** And now, since we're in Charlottesville, I want to touch on the historical significance of Thomas Jefferson being here and—and in your backyard, basically, and his association with wine and what that means to—in what you do here at Oakencroft.

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**FR:** Well that—that was one of the—one of the main reasons I—I'm really devoted to the whole historical tradition in this area, and that's why we wanted to call the society the Jeffersonian Wine Grape Growers Society. Thomas Jefferson, obviously, was a visionary in his time. He had a vineyard. He traveled all over Europe and, in fact, many years ago, when my husband was alive, I was invited to speak at the University of Dijon of Jefferson's travels in Bordeaux, which I did in French. And he, unfortunately, because the—the—just the things that

we've been suffering with the late spring frosts, he was never able to make wine at Monticello. But certainly his influence was felt, and Virginians of that day were urged to plant vineyards in hopes that they would be able to make wine. But we are all on Monticello—we secured the Monticello appellation for the Jeffersonian Wine Grape Growers Society, and I think we have about twenty-five wineries, the largest concentration of wineries in this appellation. You can go online, it's www.monticellowinetrail.org and see the number of wineries. And that's very exciting, and we're all dedicated to promoting the best quality wines that we can possibly grow.

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**AE:** And what has tourism—how has that—that impacted the industry in the last few years?

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**FR:** Well, there's a new word that's been coined, *agrotourism,* in which—it was never when I started the vineyard here, and *agrotours* are—is visiting farms but particularly wineries where the grapes are grown here on the—under the Farm Winery License. And people—it's—it's the biggest attraction next to, I think, visiting historical sites and battle—battlefields, too. It's like we're hopefully becoming the Napa Valley of the East.

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**AE:** And may I ask you how many acres you have dedicated to vines, currently?

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**FR:** We—we've had up to sixteen, but we had to pull a lot out because of the site being difficult, and now we have about twelve. And I have been leasing vineyards in the area that have better sites and are able to grow better grapes.

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**AE:** And tell me about your wines and what varietals you have.

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**FR:** We have all different varietals. In fact, we are the only winery that produces something—I've been able to use the hybrids to great advantage. Our Countryside White and our Countryside Red and we had a sweet wine called Sweet Virginia, which was made up of Seyval Blanc and Vidal Blanc and Chambourcin with the red wine for the Countryside Red. They are enormously popular, particularly with tourists who talk dry wines but drink sweet. And they've enjoyed those wines. We grow Merlot, Cabernet, Chardonnay, and some Viognier. I—I leased vineyards where I buy Viognier. We have a wide spectrum. Again, you can see on the [Web]site which varietals we have.

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**AE:** And back to the tourism point again, you have such a unique property here, and I imagine with opening your—your vineyard to—to tourists and bringing people to this beautiful property that has had an impact on—on what you do and what you sell?

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**FR:** That—well, I capitalize on that in our promotional materials. We're the closest winery to Charlottesville. We're on three and a half miles from Route 29. And yes, we've had thousands of tourists here and we also—it's been a great site up in the vineyard for—for bridal parties, a lot of weddings, and it will be sad to close in the end of December because there have been so many people who've enjoyed, who've sat by our lake. There are very few properties with lakes on it,

and people—the idea, when I started the winery, was that this was supposed to be a farm setting. We don't have a chef making fine foods. We don't have nightly events. This was supposed to be a country setting where people could go in the tasting room, have a glass, or take a bottle and sit by the lake in a bonded area and enjoy the beauties of the countryside. And we're the oldest operating winery in Albemarle County.

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**AE:** Now that you mentioned the closing, just for the record, if we can just say that you were just simply ready to retire?

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**FR:** Yes. I'm of an indeterminate age, and I have decided that it is time to retire and close the winery, which will be closed as of the end of December [2008]. And I'm just hoping we've got—on our website we've got that notice and hoping that people will come and take advantage and buy part of the history of the Virginia wine industry.

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**AE:** Do you have quite a lot of vintages in your warehouse, your—that you're trying to sell?

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**FR:** No, we go back—this is 19—I mean 2008. We probably go back to 2006, and so mostly it's current vintages.

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**AE:** And since you're about to retire, when you look back on your career in the Virginia wine industry, do you—you recognize your impact that you've had on the industry over all these years?

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**FR:** I've been given so much credit for promoting the industry over the years that I really—it's not me. It's all the people who joined with me, all the enthusiasts, and particularly at my own winery, all my staff. They are the ones who were here toiling daily, and they have had a loyalty that is unprecedented. I've had people working for me for twenty-five years, who started in the beginning. I've been with two governors to—to Asia on promotional business trips and we've promoted Virginia wines in the early days. It was really too soon because the wines, at that point, weren't that great, and I wish there were more recent trips, but I haven't heard of the governors taking economic tours of—of Asia and promoting Virginia industries lately. I went with Governor Baliles and Governor Wilder, and I also was able to promote Virginia wines and products at Bloomingdale's in New York City many, many years ago. And what I try to encourage people is that learning is the most important part of this industry. You've got to have a good enologist. If you don't have one at your winery, then we have the state enologist and the state viticulturist. And education is the most important so that you know what you're doing.

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**AE:** And it seems that right now it's a real kind of turning point for the Virginia wine industry, with people getting back in the kitchen and—and cooking again and being so curious about food and—and starting to be more curious about wine and—and with growing agrotours that you

mentioned earlier, that it's really kind of a perfect storm of—of things coming together to bring more attention to Virginia in this industry.

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**FR:** No question about it. And particularly now, with the emphasis on—on homegrown foods, which ties in with homegrown wines. It's a magical combination, and the bigger wineries have chefs and are cooking with the local foods, and what could be more attractive than coming to visit this beautiful countryside and being able to have gourmet foods and fabulous wines.

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**AE:** And I mentioned to you before we started recording that the—the project that this interview is a part of is—is about Southern wine and, being in Virginia, it's been really interesting because it really is an example of the global South with the Italian influence in the Virginia wine industry and—and just the European influence in general. And can you—have you kind of reconciled any of that in your—in your mind or thought about that how this Southern wine really is such—has such an international backbone to it?

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**FR:** Well I don't think here in Virginia we think of us as Southern wineries. I mean I think that's more south of our borders. We think of ourselves as part of the whole explosion of—of wine growing that's taken hold all across the country, and we have had the tremendous influence with Barboursville and the Italians coming here and the investment. And we have French investors, and the best part of our wine industry here is we have the whole East Coast to be able to ship wines to and—and we're so close to—I mean European—Europeans come over here and

bring wines back, and some day they will be serving Virginia wines in Paris, which would be very exciting.

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**AE:** And being a woman in the industry and having a twenty-five year career, and now you said there are 100-plus, 130 wineries in Virginia, are there many women in the industry today that you know?

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**FR:** There are—there is—there is still—there is a lady who started Shenandoah Vineyards with her husband, Emma Randall, and she's still very active. But there aren't—and there's a single woman up in Middleburg [Jennifer McCloud of Chrysalis Vineyards], but they're few and far between. They're mostly families—couples where the wife is helping with the husband, but I can't think of many wineries where there's just a single woman operating **[*Phone Rings*]** you know, on a day-to-day basis, without having a male partner.

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**AE:** And—and how do you reflect on—on that part of your career, being a woman in the industry?

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**FR:** Well everybody has asked me, you know, has it been challenging, and I guess, since I've got started on the ground floor, it was never a question of, you know, whether I was a man or a woman. I had the energy to indoctrinate people in getting involved in this industry and they—they followed me like a pied piper in all the endeavors that I chose to lead them and we had—the

exciting thing was when Governor Robb established the Virginia Wine Growers Advisory Board, and I was the first Chairman. In fact, I was Chairman for a number of years. I never had it; there was no discrimination in those days, or I never felt it. They could have mumbled behind my back.

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**AE:** Well and if we could, for a moment, talk about wine and food and—and how that in the early years was part of—of maybe a marketing hurdle that you had to educate people about, Virginia wine itself and then and how to drank it and what to drink it with?

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**FR:** I think in the—in the early days, we had our hands full just growing the grapes and turning them into wine, and nobody was really promoting the wine and food connection twenty-five years ago. Virginians are known to be—drink hard liquor and many of the men to this day still haven't converted. Now with the implosion of all of the, you know, food magazines and the—the history of food, which Jefferson brought over many—he's written many of the books on the foods that he served there and the wines, it's finally catching on. And people realize that wine is not just a drink. It's a—it's a combination of—in combination with food, it enhances the food and food enhances the wine.

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**AE:** Do you have a particular favorite wine that you produce here?

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**FR:** Yes. I've always loved Merlot since I lived in New York, but now I've found a new favorite, which is Viognier, which I love better than Chardonnay and I—once I give up the vineyard. it's going to be hard to find. I can find Viogniers here in Virginia, but you go to New York and ask for a Viognier, they don't have them. They have Chardonnay. Yeah, those two wines are definitely my favorite, and we make a fabulous sweet wine called Encore, which is made from a varietal—many different grapes and it's luscious and—and sweet and rich. It's not Château d'Yquem, but it's just marvelous with cheese and—and—and sweet desserts.

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**AE:** Now the Viognier has become a signature grape for the area. It grows so well here. Do you think that there's anything in the future of the Virginia wine industry that will become a signature grape or blend or—?

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**FR:** Well, over the years, they've talked about so many. I think Viognier at the moment is headed that way. Yes, very definitely. And—and the more tourists we get that come back and—and we get many calls, you know, for the Viognier itself. They had never tasted it before. And I do remember being in France myself, and at Condrieu, which is where the Viognier grape is so—mostly grown there and it's—it's—Viognier can be made in many styles, but it is really I think going to become the signature white grape of—of Virginia.

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**AE:** Could you describe for me for the record the—the nose on the Viognier and the—and the taste profile?

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**FR:** Well it depends, because a lot of people over-oak it, and I don't like overly oaked wines. To me, that—they're—they're not smooth on the palate. This is lovely and fruity, and it's light. It hasn't got the—I think Chardonnay can be very crisp and hard, and this has more full-body-ness of the fruit itself than Chardonnay.

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**AE:** And when you close here, are you going to keep a—a few cases in your closet?

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**FR:** Well, I'm going to have a lot of cases, and I'm **[*Laughs*]**—I—my closets won't hold wine, but I'm going to have to figure out a way. I certainly—I'm not going to give up, you know, drinking wine, and I certainly will hope that I can support the—the present industry. Just because I'm closing my winery doesn't mean that I haven't got the enthusiasm to see that we can do a lot with our industry here in Virginia.

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**AE:** Good. And it's good to know that you'll still be a part of the industry because I know people hate to see you leave.

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**FR:** Thank you.

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**AE:** Well, and I also know that you have very limited time this morning and so we're—we're at about thirty minutes, so I wonder if you have any final thoughts or—or reflections on your—your twenty-five years in the industry or things that we didn't touch on that you want to make sure to share.

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**FR:** No, I can just reiterate that I—my career in this industry has been supported by all these many people who have been part of the Oakencroft staff, and the loyalty that I've had is just unknown in this industry. People change jobs and move on and—and I really have been so fortunate, from the tasting room staff to the people who take care of the vineyard. The original man [Phillip Ponton] who took care of my vineyard is still working for me, I think now it's twenty-seven years, as a consultant, and he will see me through to the end—the end of December. And it's the people in this industry that have made it what it is.

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**AE:** All right. Well thank you for—for being one of those people and sharing your—your story here with me today. I appreciate it.

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**FR:** Will you—thank you. Will you—? **[*Interview subjects ask to be sent a copy of the interview, once transcribed*.]**

00:28:30

**[End Felicia Rogan Interview]**