

CHARLIE COWART
Still Pond Winery – Arlington, GA

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[Begin Charlie Cowart-Still Pond Winery]

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John T Edge: I'm with Charlie Cowart and Charlie tell me what year you were born.

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Charlie Cowart: I was born in 1981, lived here all my life. I've grew up out here, spent the summers out here with my grandfather. Actually this is pretty much the only job I've ever had, so besides leaving and going to college and I would come home and help. I always helped during the summer, so this--this is all I know.

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JE: And when you went off to college what did you go off with the intent of doing and where did you go?

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CC: I went to Valdosta State University and got a degree in marketing. Bachelors degree in marketing and just always knew I wanted to come back here and decided that major just to--to hopefully help sell some things. At that point we were--we were in a transition phase. We were in fresh fruit and knew we had to do something else in order to survive, so that was my reason for picking that major and hoping that I'd be able to graduate and come back here and work and then I was able to.

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JE: And what year did you return to the farm?

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CC: Let me think; oh I graduated in 2003 I believe--I go--I may need to go look at my diploma.

Excuse me one second; I need to know that. **[Laughs]**

00:01:48

JE: Sure. **[Laughs]**

00:01:57

CC: Sorry about that.

00:01:58

JE: That's okay; so 2003 you returned from college and that's the same year y'all started making wine--according to your father?

00:02:06

CC: Yes, yes; like I say it all runs together. We're so far in the middle of nowhere we--we don't--we gauge everything by when we harvest, when we're setting fruit, you know when it's hot and cold I guess but yes that's the year we started making wine. I believe we started selling-- had the tasting room and started selling wine that year and started crushing our own fruit that year.

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JE: And tell me how one goes about making wine. If you've never made wine before, what-- what did you do?

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CC: Well we--we spent a lot of time--or I spent a lot of time reading books. Of course I could look at a stack of books this high [*Gestures*] and then spend 10-minutes with someone who has done it for 10 years and you could learn more. And that's mainly what--the way we learned is--. Of course we've been selling fruit to other wineries ever since my grandfather started the vineyard; even though we were mainly fresh fruit sales--we still sold some fruit to wineries. And we had become friends with those winemakers at those wineries and went and spent time with them and they were very, very nice to give us information you know. They said hey there's no secret to making good wine; they said you know I'll tell you how to do it. It's like--it's like a picture; I can tell 10 people to paint this picture and it's going to be 10 different pictures, so--. And so we went and I had their cell phone numbers, their home phone numbers, and you know of course it was--it was very tense around harvest time when it was we have to do something. We had the plan worked out in our head but it never goes the way you have it worked in your head. So and knock--knock on wood, now we pretty much can stand on our own feet. We--we know it pretty good enough where--where we're on our own but thanks to those other winemakers. The first two--three years of us making wine, if it wasn't for them we wouldn't be this far right now. They were very generous with their information.

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JE: Is there one particular winemaker, an exchange with a particular winemaker that you recall and--and that's illustrative?

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CC: Oh I'd have to give a lot of credit to George Cowie at Chautauqua Vineyards and Winery over in DeFuniak Springs, Florida. And another fellow who I'm good friends with is Marty

Hoover. At that time he--he's up in Tennessee; he worked with Highland Manor Winery at that time but now he doesn't work with them anymore.

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JE: And does he have a winery now himself?

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CC: No; he actually works--he helps out another winery. He consults for another winery up in Tennessee, and he works for dairy farmers up in Tennessee, so--.

00:04:34

JE: And what do you recall about those exchanges? I mean you know you walk in and say I want to make wine and their response is--?

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CC: Well most of the time you get a chuckle and--and it's--but--but the two main things that--that both of these guys told me and both hold true and that apply--that makes--that I believe makes good wine is cleanliness and patience. You got to have both of those 'cause if you get in a hurry you're going to mess something up and--and the worst thing you can do is let that wine touch something dirty 'cause--other than that it's you know--. What--that grape and that juice it's going to ferment whether you do it or not, so you're not really making wine. You're controlling the winemaking process, so--'cause it's going to happen. And you just want it to happen your way, so you control things by what you do with it--your temperature and all that good stuff, so--. And--and just like I say every year is a different year.

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JE: And when you started out you read books, you talked to winemakers; were there particular wines that you drank and--and said you know I like this wine? This tastes like the sort of thing that I want to make?

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CC: Well that--that's a funny thing. Before we got into wine we--our family really wasn't big wine drinkers and--and you know we--the wineries that we sold grapes to they would send us some bottles or we'd go visit and get bottles and we'd drink it and we loved it. You know it--it was--of course it was all muscadine wine.

And still to this day that's pretty much the only wine I'll drink. I'll try other wines, but I just you know don't have a desire to and--and I think that's what has helped us to develop our brand the way it is now. You know our wine is--is not for the wine snob out in California who likes to drink vintage merlots or chardonnays. Our wine is for the simple Southern, you know--for a Southerner who--who likes muscadine grapes, likes the way it tastes, who you know isn't--isn't going to turn his nose to something just because it's from the South in other words, you know who will appreciate it.

Like--like my father says all the time; we were raised on Coca Cola and Sweet Tea so we--so we like a sweeter wine, even though we--we do make dry muscadine wines. So--but most people when they hear Muscadine they automatically assume granddaddy's backyard and the milk jug--super sweet. And that's not so and that's something we're trying to prove that you

know a Muscadine can be a good wine, can be appreciated no matter who you are, you know. It's--it can be dry, sweet, semi-sweet--however you make it.

00:07:13

JE: And when you talk about those different kind of bracketings of dry, semi-sweet, and sweet what's you know--you measure that by residual sugar that ends up in the wines? What--what do you classify as kind of dry and--and--?

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CC: Well it's--in my opinion--of course you can probably find in books where they'll say you know less than one-percent dry you know they'll put it in a spectrum like that but in my opinion it's up to the person who tastes the wine because people will walk in this winery, you know. When we have a customer in if it's a busy day and they'll say I like dry wine and we can give them some of our driest wine and they'll say oh gracious; that's too dry. We say okay; so then we'll go to what I call our sweetest wine and they'll say oh that's just right. So you know every person--every person's taste is different, so--.

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JE: It--it seems that you know and this seems to be the case no matter if you're talking about vinifera grapes or--or native grapes that people talk about dry wines but what they really like are sweet wines. *[Laughs]*

00:08:09

CC: Exactly--exactly; you know we'll get a lot of people that--that come in and--and they'll--they'll say you know simply I believe because it's one of your most popular varieties of grapes

are merlot and chardonnay. Everybody knows those two wines and those two varieties. And they'll come in and they'll say I want similar to this, and we'll give them our driest wine and-- and they won't like it. They'll buy the bottle of the sweet wine before they leave and that only leads you to believe that they just told you that because they--that was the only name they could think of and they were wanting--wanting you to think that they knew what they wanted. But you know a lot of people assume that all wines are bittersweet, turn your mouth inside out, but with Muscadine wines it's not the case. And the majority of people do like a sweeter, smoother drinking wine.

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JE: And when you're talking about muscadine that way are you talking about the sugar added that makes that sweeter, smoother wine or--or is there a property in the grape as well?

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CC: Well to me unlike other varieties of grapes, the muscadine has very distinct flavor. When-- when you take that grape or you take that juice whether it's very low-sugar juice or very high-sugar juice you still have that distinct flavor which gives it a taste when--.

00:09:31

JE: What's that taste like?

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CC: Oh gracious; it's hard to--it's very, very fruity. It's--whether it's a dry muscadine or a sweet muscadine it's going to be fruity. It seems to have a--enough acidity just to be slightly tart.

It's not mouth-numbing tart but slightly tart and then it has a very good balance. But as far as describing the taste it--it's just a wonderful taste. It's perfect; it's the way it should be. **[Laughs]**

00:10:04

JE: Is it--is it musky or--you know is there--is there a--is there--is there some sort of--I mean I think of almost a muskiness to it? I mean do you get that at all or--?

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CC: No; I--I really don't. In--in my mind the word *musky* is not a good word to describe anything. **[Laughs]** So you know maybe an old hog somewhere, call him musky but--but--but no I don't get the musky. I mean maybe because the name is muscadine some people think that but--but no; I don't--I don't pick up on that.

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JE: And talk to me about the wines y'all make. There's how many varieties?

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CC: Well we do 10 different wines; one seasonal wine; and we're about to come out with a new wine, so and of course all those are made from mainly from Carlos, Noble, and Magnolia and Higgins varieties of muscadine so which a lot of people don't realize that there are other specific varieties of a muscadine grape.

00:11:04

JE: And--and let's talk about those maybe starting with the driest and going through the sweetest. What's the driest of those that you make?

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CC: Our driest is the Plantation White and the Plantation Red which are our two driest wines. One is made from the Noble and one is made from the Carlos. And then we'll step on up to the Bobwhite Blush which is a semi-sweet. It's--the best way to describe that one is it's very similar to a zinfandel wine but with your muscadine characteristic, but as far as sweetness goes it's--if you're a zinfandel drinker you'll probably usually like that Bobwhite Blush. And then we'll go to the Confederate Peach which is a peach muscadine blend. And we have Blackberry Bliss, which is blackberry--.

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JE: Wait; back on the--on the peach are you using peaches from this area?

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CC: Peach extract; we don't--we don't have the equipment and all this--all that good stuff to actually use the peaches but we use peach extract and--and find out that it has just--just as good a product but not as much work to get it in there. So but and the same with the Blackberry muscadine blend; so then we have one of my favorites--is the Crimson Clover which is very unique. It's a blend of muscadine wine with the tupelo honey and we'll get the tupelo honey out of Florida and actually we named it Crimson Clover because we thought we were going to use clover honey 'cause in the spring we have a lot of clover out in the vineyard. And I thought it would fit very well and then we got to learning a little bit about honey and figured out that clover honey is very likely to crystallize and the best--the best honey to use we found out was tupelo because it--it doesn't crystallize. And so that's what we use in the Crimson Clover wine and it

has a very smooth subtle taste. You can taste the muscadine and then you pick up on a little honey taste. And then of course we have the Notchaway White and Notchaway Red which are our two most award-winning wines and--and two best-selling wines. And the Notchaway White is just like walking out on--out in the vineyard on a hot summer day and picking a good ripe berry and popping it in your mouth with a little bit of alcohol, so it's a very good one. And the Notchaway Red is very similar.

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JE: And Notchaway refers to--?

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CC: Notchaway refers to the Ichuaway-Notchaway Creek which runs as the crow flies probably about five miles from here and it's--it's a very important part of this community and it's just a beautiful creek that everybody around here has grown up around and appreciated, so as well as all of our names, we tried to keep them named after something local, you know to have--to have a meaning behind the names.

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JE: And is that the full range then; Notchaway is the--the sweetest as well as--?

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CC: Those--those are our sweetest I guess you would say table wines and then we do have what we call a dessert wine which is our Still Pond Gold which is our late harvest. It's--it's very concentrated muscadine flavor and very sweet. It's kind of fashioned after an ice wine but of course it's not because we don't get that cold but it is a late harvest white and then we have the

late harvest Noble which is our late harvest that's made from our red grapes that we age in oak--age in American oak. We actually age in non-charred American oak and then charred oak and then at bottling we blend so you get a--pick up a lot of different flavors. It's similar to a port style wine but it's not because it hasn't been fortified.

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JE: And the--the properties, well the requirements to make those late harvest wines, when--when are you harvesting? What does late harvest mean to y'all?

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CC: Late harvest to us is pretty much when everything else has been picked but--but it's--we wait until the--you know pretty much all the berries are extremely ripe. We don't want any--any green berries in there which gives us a very high brix juice to begin with. So when we ferment we're fermenting mostly all on natural sugars.

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JE: And what time of year is that?

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CC: The--the very end of harvest would be late September.

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JE: And when--so you're--you're harvesting the grapes, you're crushing--is everything done in stainless steel or what--what's the--what containers and the like are you using?

00:15:05

CC: Everything is done in stainless steel, all of our wines; an exception to that--late harvest Noble that I was telling you about. It's--and that's something that's very arguable. I mean you could do a muscadine in oak. I don't know of a winery that is but the way I look at that is if someone is looking for a muscadine wine or wants a muscadine wine it--they want to taste the muscadine. So when you put it in oak, you know really what I would so I guess if I had some wine that didn't have any taste I would put it in oak and that would give it some taste, so--.

[Laughs] But--but with the muscadine wine that--hey you know why--why hold back the muscadine flavor? If it's going to say muscadine on the label it needs to taste muscadine.

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JE: And for someone of your generation making wine, who are you seeing as your consumers? Who--who is drinking your wine?

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CC: The--of course we have a very wide audience that come in the tasting room here. We--we see anyone from people my age to people my parents' age and even older that are drinking our wine. We have a lot of people that drink our red wines because of the health benefits. There's been a lot of research done on red muscadines and proved that they're much higher in the resveratrol and antioxidants than your French hybrid or vinifera type grapes. So that--that has attracted a lot of our older customers to--to drinking for their health; and as far--even though the white wines are still good for you the red wines are better. And of course we--as far as coming in here, people drinking muscadine wine are just--just good ole people you know, people that--that like to drink for a cocktail but not--they're not going home and they're you know fixing a five-

course meal and going to sip a glass of wine with each meal. They're going home and they want a glass of wine to drink while they cook something.

00:17:00

JE: And is that--I mean one thing I'm curious about is you know is there a new generation of--of wine consumer who knows vinifera grapes, knows you were talking about merlot and chardonnay and that they're drinking both merlot and chardonnay and they're drinking muscadine? Do you see a younger generation, your generation rediscovering muscadine as well?

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CC: I--I think so; I have quite a few friends that come out here and really love the muscadine wine you know. Of course some of my wife's friends, they drink all different kinds of wine. They have an appreciation for all of it, so you know--you know it's just--at certain times if they--pretty much whatever they've got a bottle of they'll drink I believe [*Laughs*] but--but I think certain people they appreciate all wines. They're not going--going to snub their nose at one certain wine. They you know--if it's good, it's good.

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JE: Is there a particular challenge in muscadine that--that is unique to that grape in--in making wine from it? Is there anything in terms of PH or whatever the--whatever the--the challenges of the grape and the juice might be?

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CC: This year I believe it's going to be the weather. [*Laughs*] So but like I say, the--the--a lot of the winemaking is done in the vineyard. It's you know for example this year we're having a

very wet time just prior to harvest and during harvest so we're going to have some low-sugar fruit which--which will--which will hold us back, you know. Of course everybody would rather have high-sugar fruit but it's--you can't have everything your way of course. But--but that will affect it. A lot of time we don't like to adjust acid or PH unless we have to; if the acid is too high you'll be able to pick up on that on the wine; if the acid is too low and your PH is too--too high you will have some--you can have some instability in the wine which you want it to be stable and you want to have a good shelf life on the wine. But that's something that will be measured you know when we get the juice in and before we start fermentation. But to this day we've never had to adjust any acid or PH. We could have but it's just--we believe that we want to make this year's wine from what--from what we had this year, you know. It keeps things different, it keeps things interesting even though we've been very lucky to have good crops and the wine--each vintage from each year has turned out very well.

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JE: There is this concept that's bandied about a lot by people--wine people, this concept of terroir that--that grapes reflect the place they're grown and the wines made from those grapes reflect the place that they originate. Is there--are there particular qualities of the soil here or rainfall patterns or you know weather conditions that--that you really feel make for optimum Muscadine growing?

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CC: Yes; I--of course the heat and humidity, I wish it was 110-degrees outside right now with not a cloud in the sky. And that's--typically that's the type weather we have in southwest Georgia and--.

00:20:04

JE: And that's what muscadine(s) thrive in?

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CC: Oh they thrive in it; they love it hot and humid and dry. And believe it or not it--they really thrive on a--in a dry climate but they like the humidity as well. And of course they do have to have some water and of course we are irrigated so we can control that. And but as--as far as the soil goes that's an argumentative thing. Some people say they like sandy soil; some people say they don't. We have more of a sandy clay mix here and I think it's great. With sandy soil you know with a typical weather summertime pattern when we're getting say a half-inch of rain a week it's with this sandy type clay soil we have it holds moisture very well and if it were sand it would drain through very quickly and the vine wouldn't be able to get as much nutrients as--as it would in sand.

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JE: And if you started out--if y'all's family started out making wine in 2003 what's the future? What are the next things you do? What's, you know what's the next wine you--you bring out?

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CC: Well we're going to do like--like we were talking earlier, the next wine we bring out is going to be a blend of white and red, which--which will be Carlos and Noble and it is going to be oak-aged and it's going to be targeted for those consumers we have that say hey I'm--you know I want a drier wine. When we have people that--that come up here and taste even though the majority of our customers do like the sweeter wines we--when we want--when a person comes

up and says why are all muscadine wines so sweet, we want something we can sit in front of them and say hey they don't have to be. So and then that's what this next wine is going to be.

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JE: And that becomes a showcase of the grapes themselves and it becomes that answer to the person who says muscadine has to be hyper-sweet. The grape itself isn't hyper-sweet; it's the sugar added.

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CC: Correct, correct.

00:21:53

JE: That should be interesting. Who do you see, I mean you--you talked about this kind of conceptual consumer. Do you see this up in the--in more restaurants? What's the--what's the--if you were a marketing major in college what's your market?

00:22:06

CC: Well our--our market--at this point will be walk-in customers because--and you try to get the word spread out. That's what we found since we're--we're such a young winery and we are distributed throughout the state of Georgia and--but I'll be honest; it hasn't been easy getting that distribution. It's distributors have--have such a--a large array of different products that they have for sale it's really difficult to get on--on that salesman's top of mind and say hey I want to sell some Still Pond. So we found that every person we can get to taste our wine if they like it and go tell--go tell a friend that is the best thing we can do. So every opportunity we get to go somewhere and pour a drop we--we do it.

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JE: And in developing this--this--this barrel-aged wine, this oak barrel-aged wine, how did you come about you know the--where did you strike upon that idea?

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CC: Just trial and error; I guess you know when you're sitting--if you're bored one day it's a pretty good job to say hey let's try this and you know we're pretty much constantly trying something different and--and we'll all as a family get in here and--and I'll pour everybody a glass and--and watch everybody's facial expression 'cause you--you can tell that at first, 'cause that's--that's one hard part about being a family member. There's some people that--that don't want to hurt your feelings but there's--for my brother--example, he don't mind hurting my feelings so if he thinks it tastes bad he'll tell me. And so well we'll taste and--and if we all like it you know--if one person don't like it we don't do it, but if we all like it we say hey let's try it. You know if we like it people like us will like it; so--.

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JE: And as--you mentioned that--that you don't know--do you know any other folks that are doing a--an oak barrel-aged?

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CC: No; I don't but that doesn't mean there's none out there, so--.

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JE: And that becomes a point of differentiation for Still Pond?

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CC: Exactly; it's--it's something that of course that's the way you know we--we thought about like a bunch of other wineries do. They bring in other varietals and make different wines, but hey we're muscadine people. That's what we do and we want to be the best at it and we want to be the leaders in that industry and you know when people think muscadine I want them to think Still Pond.

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JE: And tell me about that wine. How long will it spend in barrel and what--when--when is the first bottling to be?

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CC: Well that--that's still a little preliminary right now. I mean we've--we've got the basic formula figured out of what we want to do. We know we want to do it. I'm hoping to get it out by Christmas and we're going to age it around between three and four months so it's going to be not aged too long, so it's going to be just slightly oaky so you'll still hopefully be able to pick up on a little bit of the muscadine flavor. Of course it will be bone dry you know so the muscadine flavor won't stand out as much but like I say we're hoping to get it out by this Christmas but no guarantees yet because we still--still got a little ways to go before we can put a firm date on the release.

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JE: And that's to be called?

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CC: That's going to be called Westin Dry Reserve which believe it or not is named after my brand new son, so--. [*Laughs*] And of course he don't know it but everybody else does and everybody else is tickled. So I hope when--when he grows up he won't be stealing many bottles to take to parties, so--. [*Laughs*]

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JE: Good luck with that. [*Laughs*]

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CC: It's going to be hard to--to keep him back I think. [*Laughs*]

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JE: And that's going to be aged in charred oak barrels and then in non-charred?

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CC: It's going to be aged in what they call toasted and so it's--it's an American oak with medium toast.

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JE: So not--not a used whiskey barrel?

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CC: No, no.

00:25:50

JE: Just aged--toasted for you and then.. Okay, so new oak in both places?

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CC: Right; right.

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JE: I look forward to trying that; I look forward to trying it. Thanks for taking the time today; I appreciate it--nice rainy day. *[Laughs]*

00:26:05

CC: Yeah; there's not much to do outside right now.

00:26:05

[End Charlie Cowart-Still Pond Winery Interview]