

# WINE

## Remembering Chuck Raney and Farfelu Vineyard

Brad Isham

Few people may remember Charles (Chuck) Raney or his influence on Virginia wine making, but the origins of modern Virginia wine started with Raney's two hands. In a quaint vineyard in Rappahannock County with a small blue tractor and a big dream to produce quality wine, Raney began a vineyard named Farfelu.

The son of a physician, Raney was born in 1927 in Memphis, Tennessee. He answered an advertisement for applicants to the Navy V-5 flight-training program in 1945, took the exam, passed and his career took flight. Receiving his wings in 1949, he was assigned to VF-61 fighter squadron in Oceana, Virginia. While stationed in the Mediterranean, Raney's thirst for knowledge of wine and its production began. He studied everything he could find on the subject in the hope of someday building his own winery.

After leaving the Navy, Raney became a commercial pilot for United Airlines. He remained with United his entire career. After living in Chicago and Long Island, New York, he eventually settled in Flint Hill, Virginia. Through study he was convinced that the soil and climate would produce good quality grapes and wine that people would enjoy. There he began to realize his dream of building the winery

In the spring of 1967 Farfelu Vineyard was born. *Farfelu*, a vintage French word meaning eccentric, strange, or even harebrained, is fitting for one of the first Virginia wineries established 160 years after Jefferson's attempts at Monticello. It



The vineyard and the old barn winery

also characterizes Raney's personality. Anybody who had the pleasure of knowing Chuck fondly remembers his dry humor, quick wit and his ability to manipulate words (correctly, in fact) on the fly in conversation, leaving the others lagging sentences behind.

Raney began with a modest planting of 110 vines of 11 varieties to see which would survive and bear fruit. In an imaginative marketing scheme in the early 1970s, Raney took to the phone book and invited total strangers to his home and winery for a party to sample his wine. In Raney's words, "Having made bits and pieces of wine, we had an everybody-come party, to see mostly if we had anything worthwhile and to solicit ideas. As you can imagine, we got plenty of ideas – good and not so good."

In 1975 Farfelu became one of

Captain Chuck Raney



the first licensed wineries in the Commonwealth. Some say the first and I believe this to be the case. In researching this story I found others also making this claim. The Farfelu license information was destroyed after Raney surrendered it to the state when he sold the winery in 2000. We can at least be sure that Raney and a small group of vintner contemporaries worked



Farfelu's first year



Farfelu winery

very hard planting and caring for vines, building laboratories, risking ridicule and retirement funds, and making wine when the rest of the country said it couldn't be done here.

Undaunted by the failures of early French hybrids, Raney pulled out most of his vines to make room for Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. He had a passion for grape-growing and helping a wine evolve. What most people considered technical, the lab work, was fun and artistic to Raney. He simply enjoyed making wine that people liked to drink—Farfelu was fun, family, and community.

In the 80s and 90s Raney had

robust, productive vines including Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Cayuga, Chancellor, deChaunac, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc. From these he made four wines including Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Dry Picnic White from Cayuga and Dry Picnic Red from Chancellor and deChaunac. At his busiest, he had seven acres planted while working full-time as a commercial airline pilot. He enlisted neighbors and friends at harvest time, and his children did a good share of the work.

Raney recognized that without complete financial commitment Farfelu could never grow to be the winery he had

envisioned earlier. In 2000, at age 73, Raney decided to sell the farm and the winery in search of a peaceful retirement. Sadly, he was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis a few years later. But he kept his sense of humor and drank wine until the very end. We would drink Carmenere, I suspect, because he liked to take a breath from his oxygen bottle and roll his tongue as he pronounced the name drawing it out poetically; it made him grin. That was Chuck,—*farfelu*.

So all you whelps of winemakers past, you *vinifera nouveaux* of Virginia's current wine industry, the next time you have a quiet moment to raise a glass of your own creation, give a simple toast to the old-dog vintners that came before you, some of whom are gone, some who are aging, all of whom hunted varietals, blends, and cuvees before you to prove that Virginia can make good wine.

All of us who enjoy Virginia wines should give a thankful toast to Chuck Raney, the little man with the little blue tractor and the little winery named Farfelu.

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