

PBS Ep149 Alison Owen Transcript Audio

Patti Brennan: Hi, everybody. Welcome to "The Patti Brennan Show." Whether you have \$20 or 20 million, this show is for those of you who want to protect, grow, and use your assets to live your very best lives. I'm really excited about today's podcast because we're going to be talking about using your assets to live a very good life.

Joining me today is Alison Owen. Alison is the president and founder of Turks Head Wines. It's a new enterprise that is just starting up. I will tell all of you, this lady is a badass.

Alison Owen: [laughs]

Patti: This lady is something. She spent 20 years in corporate America on planes and trains, and automobiles all over the country in corporate boardrooms and then decided, "You know what? I think I want to do this instead." Welcome to the show, Alison.

Alison: Thank you.

Patti: Tell me about that moment, if you could. I want to hear all about your business and about the wines. By the way, here's the wines, of course. Don't worry. We're not drinking it today, but we will be drinking this stuff.

What was the catalyst? What gave you that courage to say, "You know what? This is really comfortable. I'm doing great." You were a rock star nationally in a very highly-competitive industry, I think, right? Software?

Alison: Yeah, I was. I was actually a national sales leader for an organization that sold professional services into Fortune 500 organizations.

Patti: Oh my goodness.

Alison: As you mentioned, I was on planes, trains, and automobiles, missing kids' concerts and all the things that come along with raising a family. I got to a point where I lost the fire in my belly, and I didn't know why.

It took me, I would say, probably the best of two years to figure out why I just had that pilot light where it used to be an inferno. [laughs] I sat back one day and my husband and I were talking and we've been talking about getting into the wine industry for over 17 years.

I made a career change, left my national sales leader job, went to a startup, where I really wanted to have a new challenge and help build something amazing. It wasn't necessarily what I was looking for.

My husband literally looked at me one day and said, "Quit." I was like, "What?" [laughs] "Are you serious? We have two kids in middle school, a child in high school getting ready to go off to college." He said, "You know what? I think it's time. If not now, when? It's time for you to go build this business you've been talking about for so long."

Patti: Wow. What a great wingman. Amazing.

Alison: 100 percent.

Patti: Amazing. That's not an easy thing to do...

Alison: It's not.

Patti: ...especially maybe that would put more pressure on him, but this is so interesting to me how he just believed in you. "Whatever you're going to do, do it. You'll be fine."

Alison: No. Having his support was obviously critical and gave me the confidence that I had the freedom to go do this.

It really was a hard decision because you sit back and ever since I graduated college, had been in corporate America working towards W-2, working towards a title, working towards climbing the corporate ladder, and to leave all that behind it took a lot of self-reflection, took a lot of confidence.

At the end of the day, I look back on it now and it's, I left the life that I had to build the life that I wanted.

Patti: That's so profound. That is so profound. You left the life that you had which was very comfortable, you were doing great, great reputation, great brand, everybody knew you, to create the life that you wanted.

Alison: In an industry that I had no experience in.

Patti: By the way! How did you learn about the industry? What was that like? What was it like starting up?

Alison: I've always been the type of person that I've always wanted to seek to understand. I've always been extremely curious. Always asking a lot of questions to understand every angle of everything, whether it was in the industry I was in, learning about customer or prospects business how they were approaching the market, and I immersed myself in it.

The first thing I did after we decided that I was going to take this leap is I enrolled in a virtual class at UC Davis. UC Davis, obviously, one of the highly-acclaimed schools in the wine industry and I enrolled in a virtual class in Tasting Room Design and Management.

I Learned and absorbed and worked very closely with the professor, told him what I was looking to do, gained his insights and started talking to people in the industry.

Patti: Isn't it amazing? I didn't even know there was such a thing. [laughs] It's just amazing how there are so many different ways to do this thing called life and you found the thing that you were interested in, curious about and went to the experts. Tell me more about a tasting room. How did you get that idea, and is that what you've built here?

Alison: Yeah, so it's in the process. I'm obviously in the middle of my journey, that started the beginning of 2022. Our actual tasting room will be opening next summer of '24. We are in the middle of this journey.

However, my husband and I, we have lived in West Chester for over 12 years, raising our family here, and love the borough, love everything that it brings, the small businesses. There's over what? 65 restaurants and bars.

There's always something to do, there's somewhere to go, but what we felt as wine people, and winos that love to go out and drink and enjoy wine and talk about wine, is there was this void. It goes back to the whole find a need, fill a need.

Patti: You betcha.

Alison: When we decided to get into the industry, start our own wine label, start producing wines, we wanted to bring the West Coast wine tasting experience to West Chester. We wanted it to be in our hometown. We worked with commercial realtors to find the right spot.

Based on the location, we came up with this vision of what could be. Beyond just doing a California tasting room, we're going to be focused on wine education.

We're building in a classroom, a VIP membership lounge, so we can get some of these winos that are sitting at home out and engaging with other winos, [laughs] and people that enjoy talking and geeking out about wine and giving them that social venue to do so.

Patti: It's so interesting to me because there is that community element to this. I think that that's fascinating that you're solving many needs all with this one concept. I will tell you, as a sidebar, we often have these client events, and we'll have someone who is a wine expert. I am shocked at how much people love hearing about wine.

Alison: They really do, and the world of wine is vast. There's always more to learn. Nobody knows everything. We want to cater to people. I think there's a group of folks that want to understand wine, but don't know how to get there.

You don't get a lot of guidance when you go into a wine store or education. You just look for the big labels, you look for a pretty label, you pick up a bottle, you buy it, you drink it, you either like it or you don't. Our goal again is to get people that are interested in wine, wanting to get into wine, into wine.

Then, even catering to your point, to folks that have sellers and collect wine, and giving them a venue to get out of the house and meet other people and learn more, and expand their palates.

Patti: That is so cool. You're bringing the West Coast to the East Coast. How did that happen? How do you create your own wine label? What's involved? Folks, I will tell you this is how little I know about this industry.

Initially, I said, "Alison, what do you do? Do you go out and pick grapes and pick out the grapes that you want to put in your wine?" She said, "Well, it's not exactly like that, Patti."

Alison: [laughs] You don't just show up at Wegmans and purchase grapes and go for it. No. We met our winemaker again, seeking to understand, trying to meet as many people in the industry as I could.

I had heard of a gentleman, Kieran Robinson and his wife, who were Chester County natives, who recently moved to Chester County, and he was a winemaker out in Napa and Sonoma for over 20 years.

Patti: How convenient.

Alison: How convenient. Right down the street. Josh [my husband] and I said, "Hey, I think we need to go meet this guy, Kieran, pick his brain, tell him what we're planning on doing, and he can tell us if we're crazy or not." Exactly.

We met, talked to him about our business plan, what we were looking to achieve, and he was on board. So much on board, in fact, that we have actually hired Kieran as our winemaker.

He is bi-coastal and spends, five months out of his year living in Napa and seven months here in Chester County. Again, between the two of us, we've really formed an amazing partnership and bringing this whole West Coast wine experience to the East Coast.

Patti: What's so cool about it that I didn't know, Alison, it's not just about the wine, it's about the experience.

Alison: 100 percent.

Patti: That's the differentiator.

Alison: Yes, absolutely. What we're looking to deliver in the tasting room and what we've already started to deliver in our retail store, which is already open down on Church Street...

Patti: By the way, is it true that this weekend there was a line out the door already?

Alison: It was, yeah.

Patti: That's pretty wild.

Alison: It was wild.

Patti: It's just all brand new.

Alison: It's been absolutely amazing. We opened the bottle shop at the end of October, and the amount of people that have come in that live in the borough and are super excited because they don't need to get in their car to drive to go buy wine.

People are excited about our story, and people are super excited about the tasting room coming and having this new experience. It's not going to be a true bar in the sense of, having three people deep.

We want to provide more of a lounge-type experience for people where you can come, sit, have conversation, not be yelling and screaming and learn about wines or just enjoying...

Patti: Talk about whatever.

Alison: ...and create memories. That's what's beautiful to me about wine is that behind every bottle there's a story. At the same time, when you open a bottle of wine and you pour into glasses and you're sitting with friends or your partner or your spouse or family, you're creating stories.

I can't tell you how many times I've been talking to people, and they're like, "I remember when I had that bottle. It was back in February of this year. We were celebrating our anniversary, and it just brings back all these memories."

That's what I'm also so excited about is not just creating this experience, but creating a place where people can have memories and build memories and stories over a bottle at Turks Head Wines.

Patti: That is another question that I have. Thank you for saying that. Turks Head Wines, how did you come up with the name?

Alison: As I mentioned earlier, it was important to us as West Chester residents to build this tasting room in West Chester. One of the things that was important as well was making sure that we built a brand that people locally could rally behind.

Turks Head is actually what West Chester was named and known as prior to the name "West Chester." From 1762 to, I think about 1790, it was known as Turks Head.

Patti: I'm going to make another confession here, everybody. I did not know that. I'm on a board called Turks Head, and I did always wonder what that meant. I did not realize that that was the name of West Chester. Full disclosure, I admit. That's fantastic. West Chester was called Turks Head.

Alison: It was.

Patti: Then what made them change the name?

Alison: It was known as Turks Head because there was a gentleman in 1762, Phineas Eachus, that commissioned to get a license to build a tavern. He built a tavern called Turks Head Tavern. It was just that, right?

Patti: Mm-hmm.

Alison: People would go, have drinks. I believe, as the history books would say is, once it became the county seat, I think they said, "Nah, we probably need to change the name and not have it be named after a tavern where people go and drink and probably get a little tipsy." We were west of the town of Chester. That's essentially how the name came to be.

Patti: That is so interesting. You are resurrecting it, right?

Alison: Yeah.

Patti: It may not be a tavern, but it's going to be the tasting room.

Alison: Exactly.

Patti: You're resurrecting that history, that camaraderie that we all think about with the tavern and some education. It's going to appeal across the board as a community-gathering place where you're going to have some good wine to choose from, right?

Alison: Correct.

Patti: It's all going to be this wine that's coming from Napa Valley. Is that right?

Alison: Yeah, so between our 2022 harvest and our '23 harvest, we have direct contracts with 14 different vineyards across 10 AVAs. We source directly from these vineyards. Some are literally people's backyards. Some are these 800-acre huge vineyards that have been producing exceptional fruit for years.

We do produce all of our wine in a production facility in South Napa. However, the vineyards that we source from are all throughout Napa, Sonoma, and some of the surrounding counties. They come from 10 AVAs, which are American Viticultural Areas.

Patti: I was going to ask you what that stood for.

Alison: That's an American Viticultural Areas. Within the wine world, you can source from different places. That could be Napa Valley, Sonoma Valley, Sonoma Mountain, Moon Mountain, Alexander Valley.

As you're going to wine stores and looking at the labels, you'll see that the more specificity that is on that label as to where the wine is coming from, typically, the higher quality it is, all the way down to the vineyard. We will be producing some single vineyard-designated bottles...

Patti: Oh, that's very cool.

Alison: ...that we will be bottling this spring and bringing here late spring before the tasting room opens, where all of our Cabernet Sauvignon that is in a specific bottle is specifically from one vineyard. Right now everything is going to be 100 percent direct to consumers. We are specifically making all of these wines to bring them back here to West Chester. As I mentioned, we source the fruit direct from the vineyards. We do not sign a contract to source fruit unless either myself or our winemaker has actually stepped foot into the vineyard.

We own all the decisions, from when the fruit is picked all the way through the decisions on the wine making, what's going to go into the bottle, what's going to be blended together to go into a bottle. I specifically picked out the glass, the corks, how the corks were going to be imprinted.

I hired a company out in Napa to come up with our packaging and our logo, and brand design. Everything is a 100 percent owned by us. Every single decision is made by us and our team, and then will be brought here to West Chester once embottled to be sold 100 percent out of our brick-and-mortar here in West Chester.

Patti: I am just thinking that must be a logistical nightmare. There's a lot to this, isn't there?

Alison: There's a lot.

Patti: I would also imagine, and I hope I'm not reading your mind too much, but I would imagine that it's a fair amount of upfront capital requirement to get all this stuff even before you open the tasting room.

Alison: Yeah, absolutely. Our 2022 harvest was our first harvest. We are selling our Rosé and our Simeon, which is a white varietal, out of the bottle shop. All of our reds are still hanging out in barrel. The reds that are hanging out in barrel right now will be bottled in March, ready to drink in May.

If you think back, all of those reds were picked in September and October of 2022. It does take a long time to make quality wine, about 18 plus months for the reds, six to nine months for whites. It is definitely upfront capital-intensive because it takes so long to make the product.

In addition to that, coming up with the financial projections and how much wine do we need to make to be able to handle the foot traffic that we believe will be coming into the tasting room and the bottle shop, to buy wines by the glass, to buy tasting flights, to buy wine bottles, and the wine club, and all of that was definitely a very interesting exercise to go through.

Patti: I'll bet it was, and with all that wonderful experience you had in starting a small business, right?

Alison: Yeah, but it's like anything. If you surround yourself with the right people, the right level of talent, the right subject matter experts, the rest falls into place.

Patti: You know what's so interesting, and I don't know you that well, Alison, but it seems to me you have the humility to be able to say, "I don't know everything, so can you help me out here? I trust your judgment, what am I missing here?"

Those are the questions using that curiosity that you have naturally to get to the answers, at least exercising your best judgment, right?

Alison: Yeah, and I think a lot of that comes from the leadership skills that I developed in corporate America. Building a team, dealing with living through divestitures and acquisitions, and a lot of change, especially through COVID and the corporate world as a national sales leader gave me those skills to realize that I don't know everything.

If I hire the right people to be on my team and I consult with the right folks across finance and HR, and legal, and operations to pull together a strategy and do it as a team, we will be successful.

Patti: 100 percent, and you'll adjust along the way. You've got these projections, you've got these estimates of foot traffic, and all of that, and either it sounds like it's going to be more than you might have expected. A lot of people are very interested in Turks Head Wine, very interested. It's becoming viral already.

Those projections may have been underestimated. Most small businesses, you probably in your research know this, but most people overestimate how quickly things are going to ramp up. They underestimate the amount of capital that is required.

They overestimate how quickly they'll hit the ground running. Going into it, you were more conservative. I think that sounds like you're going to be pleasantly surprised.

Alison: I have actually been blown away as to the reception that we have already received in the community. Not just from customers walking in the door to the bottle shop, but other small business owners that are interested in collaborating.

A lot of folks in the business community, to your point, that have prospects and customers and are looking to have a cool experience, other than just a happy hour event to host people at, has been incredible.

Patti: That's a great idea. I can see the application here. This could be a big deal in terms of different things and different avenues that you've already thought about.

Alison: There's so many things that I have thought about. I think what has also been key is, although there's a million different things that I want to execute on, I'm like, "Oh, we could do this, or we could do that, or how cool would this be?"

I've had to make sure that, from an execution perspective, that I take that wish list of "These are all the things I want to do over time" and drill it down to say, "OK, these are the five things that we're going to execute on for day one, and we're going to do it well."

Patti: Wonderful. It's so interesting because what makes you unique as the founder is and what most people don't have is your vision, your ideas. You also have the wisdom not to just throw everything up against the wall and see most of them fail.

The importance of that focus and get those wins, get those early wins is really impressive.

I can't help but wonder what this is going to look like in five years. You'll focus, you'll do your thing, and it is what it is. You'll adapt. You'll adjust.

I'm so grateful and I'm excited to have Turks Head Wines right here in the borough for all of us here locally, probably won't be a long time before it becomes national. For whatever it's worth guys, you heard it here first.

Thank you so much Alison Owen for joining me today. Thanks to all of you for joining me. This was so much fun. I loved having you on the show. For those of you who are interested, Alison, where is the store? Where's the retail store? What's the address?

Alison: We're located at 120 North Church Street. It's the block in-between Gay Street and Chestnut.

Patti: That's fantastic. Listeners, Go to Turks Head Wines! They're opening their tasting room in the summer. In the meantime, you can pick up a bottle or two. Again, thank you so much for joining us today. I'm Patti Brennan, and we are Key Financial, Wealth Management with Wisdom & Care.