

MAN ON FIRE PRESENTS
**THE COMBUSTION
CHRONICLES**

**EPISODE SIXTEEN
FROM BARRE TO THE BAR**

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CO-HOST: MICHAEL HARPER
GUEST: ALLISON PARC

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Shawn: Welcome to "The Combustion Chronicles" podcast, where bold leaders combined with big ideas to create game-changing disruption. I'm Shawn Nason, founder of Man on Fire, and your host for "The Combustion Chronicles." Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future. We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us. I'm here with my co-host Michael Harper.

Shawn: On this episode, we are speaking with Allison Parc, a former professional ballerina, an award-winning entrepreneur and noted public speaker. As the founder and president of Brenne Whiskey and partner at Samson and Surrey. We were privileged to meet Allison three months ago in another event through the Disruptor League, where we hosted her and got to learn for the first time about Brenne Whiskey. If you are interested in that episode, you can go to disruptorleague.com or to our YouTube channel to watch that.

Allison is one of the leading American entrepreneurs in the world of whiskey, having created Brenne from scratch, 100% organic seed-to-spirit single malt that is the first to be aged exclusively in both new French Limousin oak and cognac casks and made in the heart of cognac, France. In 2017 and 2018, Allison was named World Whiskey Brand Ambassador USA of the Year by Whiskey Magazine's Icons of Whiskey, becoming the only woman to receive the award. She is a respected speaker on the topics of entrepreneurship, sales, dramatic career changes, and thriving in male-dominated industries. Allison currently resides in New York City with her French Bulldog Ernie, who is awesome in turn. Allison, welcome.

Allison: Thank you.

Shawn: So, Allison, we've known each other now for a few months and we've done a couple events together and so I'm honored to have you on "The Combustion Chronicles." But for those who may not be familiar with who you are or Brenne whiskey or what's happening, could you fill our listeners in on your story a little bit because it's so powerful as a woman, as an entrepreneur, as someone that has grit and tenacity. So, can you share a little bit with us, Allison?

[00:02:42]

Allison: Thank you. Yeah, very quickly, I was a professional ballerina and then I got into the booze world, so from the barre to the bar as we like to joke. And I was professional from, like, 9 years old is when I signed my first contract and was on and off professionally dancing until I was 23. And then I fell in love with whiskey, I learned a lot about the industry, I became a huge nerd, I was collecting whiskey, and I realized no one was making a single malt using 100% local ingredients from start to finish of the process. Like, some people had done it start to finish through the distillation but then when it came to the maturation or the aging part, they used

barrels from other places in the world. So, I was like, "Wow, no one is really doing 100% farm-to-table approach," so I decided or I thought that I should do it and just to complicate matters, I chose to do it in France and I don't even speak the language. So, that's how I ended up as an American owning, really, the first internationally recognized French single malt in the world.

Shawn: Yeah, so I love that. Allison, first off, you don't speak French but you did it in France. But there's two parts of your story that I think, to me, that I know about, that the listeners need to know about is first off, your investment strategy and how you decided to invest and when you went into France, how you basically gave your life savings away. Can you share a little bit about that first? I really think that's a true key to show who you are.

Allison: Yeah, thank you. In France, I had been turned down by every distiller I could possibly find and pitch this idea to. And to be clear, in the beginning, I didn't even want to own my own whiskey brand, I wasn't trying to have a distillery or anything like that. I really just wanted to import a brand that really lived and was created by some very simple, basic kind of farming philosophies and I couldn't find anyone who not just was doing it but wanted to do it. And even though I said I could guarantee sales in the U.S., which is a pretty lofty thing for a 23-year-old who had never worked in the industry to say, but I was very confident. And then I was introduced to my now distiller who was all into the idea and loved it.

I asked him, "Okay, well, since this has to be created," the way he was speaking, I was like, "Oh, do you want to be partners?" And then he basically said no, he wanted to just do the farming and the distilling but wanted nothing to do after that. And so, we basically wrote up a contract where, you know, he gets to do all that he wants to do, I would figure out how to, you know, launch, create, you know, everything from the barrels all the way through to the retail shelf.

And when I was excited and we were going to go forward, we had the contract about to be signed, he asked me for money and I realized, you know, I had never gone to business school, I didn't take a class on entrepreneurship, that wasn't happening in college when I was there. And so, it took about, you know, \$86,000 or \$82,000 to get this off the ground and I had \$86,000 in my savings account and I used \$82,000 of it and I had two months of rent left in the bank but I totally wired the guy my life savings.

Shawn: Wired him your life savings, and for our listeners again, to France and Allison, you lived in New York City.

Allison: Yeah.

[00:06:12]

Shawn: So, I can only imagine what my parents or any parents would think. The other thing is, we're thinking about this too, because I think that's a key thing and then this. Until the age of 23, how many times have you gone out for drinks? Because I think that's also a key part of the story that our listeners need to understand about your drinking experience up to the age of 23.

Allison: Yeah, you could count them on one hand. It was very few. You know, I think I still pronounced Merlot, "Merlot," so, very green.

Shawn: Allison, we hosted you on our Disruptor Connection live event. We discussed entrepreneurs and pivoting and knowing that they need to when you're in those moments. How do you know it's time to pivot and disrupt what you have been doing and how do you stay creative in this process? And what inspires you through this process? Like, you've had to pivot several times and even your self-journey, right? Like, tell our listeners around what that felt like, what that looks like in your experience.

Allison: I love that. Okay, so pivoting, I've got a couple of like kind of bullet points that I'm constantly trying to be conscious of. So, I personally will pivot when I recognize that my team has been able to take ownership of something and is running fully with something, right? Or when I've hit my highest goal. It doesn't mean the highest goal, I just mean my highest goal with either that project, that campaign that ran, like, whatever, right? Kind of just like how far, do I want to go with something. I think also recognizing when, you know, as best as you can, if I project the work to the reward, you know, and I can try and understand and plot out the most realistic timeline, if that is not worth the journey, right?

That's when I'll pivot if I start to really plot that out and go, "Wow, that work on that timeline is not worth that reward, pivot." Maybe, I think I think also I'm still making it up, I'm constantly still learning and evaluating when it's time to pivot. But I think I like also your link to creativity in that question and I think it's very important, especially for entrepreneurs and people who are trying to create something that maybe hadn't been created before, right? I think it's really important to disconnect and spend time alone and spend time alone in nature. For me, those are really vital. I just need time away from my phone, away from other people, and just to really kind of be barefoot in nature.

And even if that's 15 minutes a day in a city park...I wouldn't go barefoot in the city park but, you know, like, it's doesn't have to be some dramatic trip, right? But just like take a walk, leave your phone at home or, you know, put it on but, like, put it on silent or something and just go, like, sit on a park bench and listen to pigeons coo. Like, I think there's something really important for our nervous system in getting that natural rhythm and then, for me, that's usually when I can solve a problem that I've been trying to solve at my computer or something like that. Or take an art class, that also helps. Even though I'm terrible at art, I also like to take...I do like virtual watercoloring classes right now which is hysterical because I'm not great at it but it's very fun and it gets my brain focus in something completely different than whiskey and then I feel like I'm able to take that back to my business.

Michael: Well, even if you are not great at art yet, you are great at dancing and movement and ballet, obviously. And as a parent of a former professional ballet dancer, I don't want us to underestimate the powerfulness of your ballet experience and how that launches you into this

project in ways that may be different for other people. That's huge. There's a lot there and I know that you want to move beyond the identity of being a dancer and to being a business person but how do those lessons learned in the ballet world, how do they translate into everything that you're doing now?

[00:10:31]

Allison: First of all, I will say something to the identity. I fully own and love the idea that, you know, we are a sum of all of our experiences, so I try not to really shut the door, positive or negative, on anything that I've experienced in the past. And I think ballet is a particularly interesting launchpad into entrepreneurship because you are training at such a high intensity at such a young age and are learning fundamentally day in, day out with proven success that having your blinders on, staying focused on your vision, right? Being flexible both literally and figuratively as to how you go about to get to your vision, learning that sacrifices are a fact of life if you are really hyper focused on a goal, on a vision, and to embrace criticism and failure, right?

That's just opportunities to learn. Like, literally, if I had a ballet class and I didn't get critiqued by the teacher, I would feel so terrible, like, I wasn't even worthy of a correction, I wasn't even talented enough to have a teacher say, "You're doing that wrong." So, I always strived for correction and strive for feedback in that way and I think, as in business, if you can walk into business with those principles, then you kind of omit a lot of other stories that other people might get stuck telling themselves and you can kind of quickly sink into, "What's the mission? Let me learn the language of this industry and the business and then I know what to do already to get there, I just put my blinders on and I figure it out and get feedback."

Michael: Yeah, that's been one of my biggest takeaways from watching ballet careers, is that what other art or what other industry is the whole purpose of coming together and taking a class or having an experience and your whole goal is to get correction? And people fight for the center spot in a ballet class just so they can be front and center and have the person teaching it give them corrections and the more they get corrected, the better they are and the ones who don't get it, understand exactly that they're not able to be good enough to get those. That metaphor for me just rings so true in the way we should be approaching business and disruption.

Allison: Yeah, I agree. And it's kind of amazing when you...like, I'm not a parent right now, I just hear from my friends who are and, you know, it seems like some of the kids right now are growing up in this society of every kid gets a trophy, right? And in the ballet class, you start off at the ballet barre and depending on your studio and the culture of that, you know, study group or that ballet group, our culture was the teacher would point to you at the barre and she would place you or he would place you in the center of the room. So, if you were...exactly to your point, like if you were front and center, you were the best student worthy of the most corrections, right?

And then the front row as it goes out to either side, kind of, you know, you understand your tiers, and then second row and third row and fourth row. And so, you really knew every single day where you stood in your teacher's eyes as to your level of potential success. And I think that's very valuable when you're trying to evaluate who you identify as your competitors and it's empowering when you can go, "Wow, I'm two rows behind today but my goal is that front and center," right? Versus, "Oh, I suck," "God, I'm stupid," or whatever stories you start telling yourself because you're not where you think you want to be.

Shawn: Yeah, what a slip in mindset there, Allison, and we're doing a book right now around shifting from mindset to heartset and I think even what you talked about there is a heartset where you would look and say, "Okay, I'm on the third row today, dammit, I suck," right? Instead of that, your heart-set is really, "I'm on the third row today, what the hell do I have to do to get to that front row, front and center?" Right? And I think we are...and listen, I may be a bad parent, but I really do say fuck it to "Everyone gets a trophy." No, not everyone does get a trophy. No, not everyone is the best.

I have a child who loves to sing, and my wife and I are both vocalists and musicians and my children are adopted. This child doesn't have the gift of singing. To sit down and say, "You are really talented at this, but this is not what you're talented in." It sounds harsh but if you're gonna make it in this world, no, not everyone gets a trophy, not everyone gets an A. And that and that leads into this because I remember the last time we talked, you said something, Allison, that was so funny to me. And you mentioned telling your mom that, "One day, my name would be in lights." And so, your name are in lights today but probably not in the way you thought your name is going to be in lights, right? So, how do you personally define success? Is success truly reachable?

[00:16:14]

Allison: Ooh, okay, this is good. Okay, so I would say also I have two...like, I don't know when my shift is changed on how I would define success but I have like, you know, the before and the today. And I think before was definitely like childhood, teenage years, and early 20s when I was like, "Oh, success is fame, money, cover of a magazine, you know, obviously, name in lights." Now, and ironically, I have been on the cover of a magazine before, I really define success as comfort, as ease of living. That doesn't mean having an easy life, right? But being able to have enough money to be able to afford convenience is a very big one for me. And mostly, in time, "Do I have time to invest in my personal relationships?" So, that's a pretty big flip flop from fame, money and, you know, name in lights to afford conveniences and time to invest in personal relationships and comfort but that's how I define it today. I think what it looks like is really just having quality time to do the things that I love with the people I love.

And that also has been a lesson for me because I've had to learn that my boyfriend who I love an extraordinary amount doesn't always love to do the things I love to do, so I have to be clear. Sometimes when I'm like, "Oh, I'm setting up this activity not necessarily for us but it's something that I want to do and I would love for you to do it with me," versus under the guise

of, "This will be great for both of us," if that makes sense. That's been an adult learning moment for me. But what you ask at the end is, is success reachable? I'm 100% yes on that. And I think...I was just having this conversation the other day with someone, I think, you know, first-of-all, especially as entrepreneurs or in business, right?

We kind of look at our businesses through this capitalist lens, right? We judge the success of the business on the profitability, right? On that P&L statement and the higher the number, the better, right? We ascribe those kind-of-words and thinking to it. And, I think, it's very dangerous if we start to take that exact metrics and apply it to our life, right? It's not a simple one access road of higher the number in the bank account, the more the success. And, I love social media but I think there has to be some balance here and some real conversations around life success does not necessarily equal, you know, the Gucci shoes and, you know, the very good car or, like, the fancy travel. Like, I think there has to be some reality to these conversations and let everyone realize that there's, you know, a bigger conversation here than just a straight-line money in the bank.

Shawn: Allison, I love what you were just saying even in your adult, you know, learning adulthood in your relationship that, you know, with your boyfriend, "This is what I would like to do," right? "This is good for me, maybe not good for us." And I think that is a key part, honestly, in my opinion, I didn't plan on going down this route at all, that's what happened and why there are so many failed relationships in this world. (Allison, "yes") You know, I'm happy to say that I am going on 23 years of marriage in November and I remember at some point someone said to me, "You have to roll over every day and choose to love her, (Allison, "yes") that at some point, it's not just a feeling but it's a choice (Allison, "yes") and there's things you're going to have to sacrifice one day and there's thing she's gonna have to sacrifice. And guess what, there are gonna be days that you two don't like each other (Allison, "yep") but you choose to still love each other." Right?

And I think that tenacity and that type of relationship also comes into what you're talking about in business, right? (Allison, "yes") Like, I'm a risk taker. Anyone on my team, Michael sitting here with me right now will tell you, I will bet it all if I think it's what's right and I will put the business on the line to do what's right for the person or for the people always. We've learned in this year to this whole concept of disruptive giving. I know you're a giver, Allison, I know Brenne is...you know, your company is a giver. And my wife and I are actually trying to get to this point that we can give 90% of everything we make away and live on 10%, and still have the lifestyle, the comfortable things we want, but to be able to be that type of giving. I think that spirit is what I get out of you and that leads to this, you know, as you've thought about your journey with Brenne, what has been your most satisfying or most rewarding moment on this journey?

[00:21:30]

Allison: I think the most is a tough answer but at least one of the things has been when I got the business to a place where I could afford to live off of my company, right? Like, I could afford to have health insurance and a 401k plan and a salary and share that with our team. Like that,

we didn't take...we didn't have investment for the first bunch of years. You know, it was just, you know, my initial investment and then any profitability the company made, so there wasn't like multiple rounds of funding. I did do a partnership three years ago with a company called Samson and Surrey and that helped catapult us to another level but I didn't do, you know, rounds and rounds of funding. So, I think being able to live off of the work that I did was a very rewarding moment, very satisfying.

[00:22:34]

Shawn: Love that. And I can tell you that, again, speaks to my heart, so, yes. We've bootstrapped everything we've done with our company as you did, you know, for nine years and to have that moment when you can open up the checkbook and you're going, "Oh, my gosh, I'm employing these people." (Allison, "yes") We have money in the bank, you know?

Allison: Not gonna worry about that shit.

Shawn: Yeah, like, we're gonna leave the UK for the next six months to a year, right? Like, you do get that moment of, "Wow," right?

Allison: Totally.

Shawn: So, I'm going to flip this because, again, I love your thinking here and how you think, Allison. Let's say if Brenne had failed, what do you think you would be doing right now career-wise?

Allison: (Allison laughs) I have no idea. I was ruthless with my parents when I was growing up. And by the way, my mom was a stay-at-home mom, she was a painter and a math major in college, so artists and, you know, both sides of her brain. My father is a physicist and most of my family are scientists and everyone was just looking at me...and I got science, like, I loved it, I always used to say at some point in time, "I wanted to be an archaeologist ballerina," right? So, everyone was like, "Oh, okay, but, like, you need to plan for your backup," right? "You've got to plan for your backup."

And I used to say and I would still say today, so this is why I don't know what I would be doing, "If I spend a minute planning for my backup, then I might as well do my backup because that's a minute less time that I can spend on my actual goal." And I can imagine right now, I can flip that role and be the parent of me and be terrified for me, right? Because I know way more about the world than I did when I was that age but I know for myself, if I hadn't planned for no backup, I wouldn't have pushed as hard to be successful, right? And the same with Brenne, if I had a backup, I wouldn't have push this hard, I wouldn't work this hard.

[00:22:45]

Michael: That's true in the ballet world as well, right? As soon as a dancer starts thinking about other things they could be doing, they are wasting energy they could be focusing on their craft and getting better and furthering their ballet career.

Allison: Absolutely, yeah.

Michael: Yeah. You were talking about your younger self. I would love to know, looking back, what advice would you be giving that middle school or high school version of yourself in terms of what you need to do to face the world as you've learned it now?

Allison: Ummm, two things. One, I would try and teach myself a little bit earlier to separate my story of what I think occurred from the facts of what occurred, right? It's very hard for human beings. And I don't know if I would say this to middle school me but certainly, like, high school and on me. Unlike Shawn with your beautiful 23-year marriage, I have a first marriage behind me already. And one of my biggest lessons was I formalized the Brenne company with my premarital money but while I was in a marriage and I didn't legally prepare for my company to need to be 100% mine because I thought, "I was in the marriage and my marriage was gonna last forever."

And when it didn't, because it was... it essentially became a marital asset even though it was all my premarital money that funded the company and it was all my sweat equity and I even had emails proving he didn't want to help with the business, he still got half of it and that was a very hard lesson to learn. So, I think for...yeah, I think for anyone who starts a business, it's not that you don't want to have your partner to have, you know, a part of it, but I would have written, like, my LLC agreement a little differently to put in some better protections for myself in the case of an inevitable, which happened.

Michael: And that's true for all kinds of partnerships as well, right? Going into a business with a friend, going into a business with a family member of any kind but how do you think ahead about being savvy legally to make sure that doesn't hold your dream back and hold your business back.

Allison: Exactly. Like, have the most uncomfortable conversations when things are great because, God forbid, they don't become great and they make that a little bit easier.

Shawn: Powerful stuff. So, here's my question for you now, and when we start thinking about disruption and even creative disruption, right? What and how do you want Brenne to continue to disrupt the industry going forward and into the future? And in 20 to 25 years, how do you want that to look for your company?

Allison: I love it. I want Brenne to continuously be known and be discovered as the brand that really was, you know, transparent and firm in our founding mission, right, to use 100% local and

indigenous ingredients to make a whiskey. We are certified organic, we don't put extra...you know, we're really good to the planet, basically, in the way that we're making this whiskey. And I think we're...you know, in 20 to 25 years when people think of Brenne, I would love for them to think, "Oh, it's super original, it's really delicious, and it's about having your dreams be possible." Maybe that's lofty for a whiskey but I would like that to kind of be...I want us to be the single malt, like when people think of single malt, they think of Brenne.

Shawn: Yeah, that's disruption at its finest, so. Alright, Allison, well, we have come to this time in "The Combustion Chronicles" where we ask you three combustion questions. And you're a scientist, so you understand algorithms and I joke a lot that we have this major algorithm, which is Michael's brain that's processing these three combustion questions that he wants to hear your answer on before we close up this episode. So, Michael, I'll turn it over to you.

Michael: Absolutely. Allison, here are your combustion questions. We'll even start with a science-related one, which is in the field of biology. Are you ready?

Allison: Yep.

Michael: If you were a bird flying south for the winter, where would you go?

Allison: Depending on what kind of bird I would be, I would probably go to Patagonia. But you'd have to skip over Argentina because they kill a lot of birds there for, like, farming purposes.

Michael: Patagonia. And what might you do in Patagonia?

Allison: I would fly all around the glaciers and I would just take in the rawness of that quiet beautiful...the blues of the ice there, it's just a very different color and it's a very different feeling and it's so powerful to feel small as a human. Or I guess you're a bird, so just, you know, you have, like, really not many other things bothering you, just soar, I would just soar.

Michael: I love all of that, that's fantastic. Okay, question number two. What is your spirit animal?

Allison: Oh, so easy, Energizer Bunny. (Shawn laughing) Like from, like, the 1980s. Boom, boom, boom, the pink thing and the commercials. Yep, all the way. Totally.

Shawn: Oh, my Lord.

Michael: Yeah.

Shawn: And what's bad, Allison, is I'd like to actually see that with you, so that's funny.

Michael: Halloween costume is on its way.

Shawn: That's right.

Allison: Yes.

Michael: All right, your final combustion question is what do you think about bicycles?

Allison: Oh, I love them. I have one, I love them, I love them. I'm a big fan. When I launched Brenne...

Michael: Can you explain why?

Allison: Yeah, when I launched Brenne, I actually delivered...no distributor wanted to work with me, they were like, "You are a young woman in this industry who has, like, a whiskey from a weird part of the world, we don't believe this is possible." So, I actually had to set up myself as a distributor and I literally for the first year of Brenne's existence on the market, I delivered it by bicycle in New York City and that is how eight years later, we got to being...you know, we're in, like, 11 countries at this point and we've got a staff of like 40 salespeople. I love bicycles.

[00:31:42]

Shawn: That is awesome. So, Allison, as always, it is a pleasure to talk with you. What I'm more excited about is for us to finally meet you in person at some point. We've talked a lot on the phone and on Zoom, I feel like we're best friends, but we still never met in person but I'm looking forward to that date. So, thank you for being on this, thank you to share your story with our listeners, and we love you and we asked to stay safe and be well during this time, so we will talk to you soon, Allison.

Allison: Thank you and I cannot wait for your book to come out, I will be first in line. That's where we're gonna meet, I'm gonna be the first in line (Shawn laughing) for signatures at the party.

[00:32:29]

Shawn: Thank you, thank you. All right, Allison, talk to you soon.

Allison: Thank you.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of "The Combustion Chronicles." None of this is possible without you the listener. If you'd like to keep the conversation going, look up Man on Fire on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and at manonfire.co. Give us a shout. Let us know what you think. And please, subscribe, rate, and review if you like what we're doing and if you don't do it anyways. And remember, always stay safe and be well.