

## *A Nichols Worth of Wine*

June 2009

### *Celebrity Vintners*

For decades, high-flying celebrities with unlimited disposable income have invested in businesses outside their acclaimed careers. Who could forget Broadway Joe Namath's Bachelor's III nightclub filled with mobsters, girls and more girls, or the George Foreman Grill, or Suzanne Somers multi-million selling Thigh Master? In the last decade though, it's been vineyards and wine branding attracting the Hollywood types, sports stars, aging rockers, and even a current high-profile politician.

In the past, many of these "second careers" were about a grab for cash. There was little to get excited about once the 60-second infomercial ended. But the majority of the celebrities who invest in the wine industry today seem pretty passionate about the wines they are making.

None perhaps is better known and respected for producing quality wine than Francis Ford Coppola, who bought Napa's century-old 1500-acre Inglenook Estate and Vineyard in the early 1970's, with royalties from his first Godfather blockbuster. Since then a number of silver screen alumni have lent their name to a wine or invested millions of dollars and are very involved in critical winemaking decisions. And many of their wines are winning awards.

Wineries bearing the big-name stars on the label, like *MacMurray Ranch*, founded by Fred MacMurray, of My Three Sons fame, bought vineyards in Sonoma back in 1941. Six decades later, the family is still involved and they are making some very good wines, especially their pinot noirs.

Who would have ever imagined Fess Parker, aka Davy Crockett, would have traded in his coonskin cap for barrels of chardonnay and pinot noir on a huge spread in Santa Barbara.

And so you don't think the wine business is just for mainstream media types alone, consider that a not-so silver screen porn star named Savanna Samson, teamed up with one of Europe's most respected wine consultant's, Roberto Cipresso, to produce a Tuscan red wine blend called *Songo Uno*, or Dream One.

There are a number of other Hollywood notables, who while not quite ready to abandon their Oscar aspirations for stomping grapes, have jumped into the wine business with both feet, including Dan Akroyd, who was introduced to wine while filming the Blues Brothers. He now produces wines in his native Canada as well as partnering with growers and wineries around the world with his eponymous label. Jurassic Park star Sam Neill, a Burgundy aficionado, is turning out some great pinots in his native New Zealand under the *Two Paddocks* label.

Lorraine Bracco, best known for her role as Tony Soprano's therapist, founded her *Bracco Wines* company in 2005, sourcing grapes from vineyards throughout Italy. Having lived in France for ten years, Bracco knows a thing or two about wine, and to hear her speak about her wines, there's no doubt that she is very passionate on the subject.

And while I doubt you're likely to hear of Johnny Depp crushing his own grapes, he is known to love French wine so much that he recently purchased a vineyard and wine estate outside of St. Tropez, in the South of France, for his girlfriend.

With the super riches from their superstar status in every arena, sports also has its share of enthusiasts with very deep pockets and a love of wine. Baseball, football, basketball, soccer, ice skating, race car drivers, and especially golf legends, all have branched out into the vineyards of the world.

Greg Norman, and fellow pro golfers, Ernie Els and Arnold Palmer, have their name gracing the label of their wines. Norman, and Els in particular, have as much at stake in the vineyards these days as on the greens. Els' wines from his native South Africa Stellenbosch region consistently score well with the critics. In fact, his Bordeaux blend *2005 Stellenbosch*, just received 94 points from *Wine Spectator*. *The Shark*, Norman has been making big, bold, value-packed Aussie Shiraz and other varietals since his winery launch in 1999 and now also has extensive vineyards in Santa Barbara, California.

Race car driver Mario Andretti left the Indy 500 tarmac for 42 acres of prime Napa Valley vineyards, and Jeff Gordon hired respected Napa winemaker, August Briggs, to produce small lots of cabernet, merlot and chardonnay.

One-time Naples, Florida resident and basketball giant, Larry Byrd teamed up with Napa's *Cosentino Winery* to make what were regarded to be marginal-at-best wines a few years back. Today, Cosentino is fighting for its financial life in a California bankruptcy court and it appears that Larry's better days were on the hardwood of the Boston Gardens than the dusty floors of Napa Valley vineyards.

Other sports celebrity turned vintners include hockey's Wayne Gretzky, soccer bad-boy David Beckham, Hall of Fame football great, Joe Montana, three-time Cy Young Award winner, Tom Seaver, of the NY Mets, and Figure Skating Champion, Peggy Fleming. Fleming is producing some very good wines from her estate vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains as well as from grapes she buys from football coach and TV commentator, John Madden's vineyards in the East Bay of San Francisco.

Unless he has truly returned from the beyond, I suspect the wine with the *King* on the label has more to do with lining the coffers of Elvis' Graceland estate than producing quality wine. It should come as no surprise though that a few musicians would venture into the wine business given their substantial wealth and for a few, a genuine passion for wine. *BR Cohn Winery* in

Napa, owned by Bruce Cohn, is the longtime manager of the Doobie Brothers and Fleetwood Mac's, Mick Fleetwood owns a winery in Santa Barbara. Bob Dylan has collaborated with Italian producer, *La Terrazze* and rocker Sting is producing 30,000 bottles of wine a year from his *Il Palagio*, Tuscan estate. *Ciccione Vineyards* may be a name you recognize. Based in Michigan, its owned by father and daughter team, Tony and Madonna Ciccone - yes the *Material Girl* and dad are producing a line of five wines. Hopefully the wines will attract better reviews than her acting.

But wait, I've saved the best for last. It seems that politics and wine also make strange bedfellows. Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi owns cabernet vineyards in Napa's St. Helena, and she has received as much criticism there in wine country as she is in Washington DC lately. It seems that none of the grape pickers in her vineyards are unionized. Given how very vocal she is in supporting the unions, and that she accepts millions in campaign donations from them - but doesn't employ union grape pickers, it is raising more than a few eyebrows.

Cheers!

And remember...

*Eat, drink, and be merry!*

*Bruce*