



Sports figures make their time for wine

By Jill Lieber, USA TODAY

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NAPA, Calif. — For two decades, Olympic skating gold medalist Peggy Fleming and husband Greg Jenkins debated how to get rid of the ugly scrub brush growing near their hilltop home in Los Gatos, Calif., 12 miles southwest of San Jose.

Then, in the summer of 1998, Fleming and Jenkins ran into some old friends who happened to mention they had just planted a backyard vineyard. Instantly, Fleming and Jenkins were captivated by the notion of growing grapes on their property. (Related item: Who's on the wine list?)

The next spring they hired Bill Murphy, owner of Clos La Chance Wines in San Martin, Calif., whose subsidiary CK Vines specializes in installing small vineyards for homeowners. Murphy replaced the scrub brush with an acre of chardonnay grapes — 650 vines — because it was the wine Fleming and her husband most enjoyed drinking.

"To us, it was just gorgeous landscaping," Fleming says. "We loved the beauty and ambiance the grapes added to the entrance of our house."

Never in their wildest dreams could they have imagined their landscaping solution would blossom six years later into Fleming Jenkins Vineyards and Winery.

Launched in June, the enterprise produces four kinds of wine, including a Syrah from ABC sportscaster John Madden's vineyard. Last month they introduced Victories Rosé; the net proceeds of this and future vintages will be donated to breast cancer research. Fleming is a breast cancer survivor.

"If we had planted an acre of apples, people would say, 'Hmmm.' And that would be the end of the conversation," Jenkins says. "But if we say we have planted an acre of chardonnay, people want to talk about it for an hour."

Fleming is just one of many sports icons whose lives are entangled in vineyards and wineries. Athletes, coaches, owners, team presidents, sportscasters and scouts are falling in love with the romance of the wine business, and many of them have left their hearts (and wallets) in Northern California, the center of America's wine-making universe.

The names of the smitten run the sports gamut:

- Auto racing icon Mario Andretti in 1996 established Andretti Winery, a 50-acre spread in Napa complete with a Tuscan villa to remind him of the region in Italy where he spent part of his childhood. Last year, 40,000 cases of Andretti wines were sold throughout the world.
- Golfing great Arnold Palmer joined forces in 1999 with Mike Moone, the Napa Valley legend who built Beringer's into a powerhouse, and invested in Moone's Luna Vineyards on Napa's Silverado Trail. In 2003, Palmer asked Moone to create two signature wines (a pinot grigio and a red-wine blend) for his restaurant in La Quinta, Calif.

Earlier this year, Luna Vineyards rolled out Arnold Palmer Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, bottling 40,000 cases to be sold at golf clubs, resorts, restaurants and grocery stores across the USA.

- San Francisco 49ers Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana and his wife, Jennifer, Napa Valley residents the last 10 years, partnered with Ed Sbragia, Beringer's larger-than-life wine master, to design a cabernet sauvignon blend, Montagia.

Beringer's, in St. Helena, Calif., makes 200 to 300 cases annually for the Montanas' personal use, as well as for the couple to donate to charities. It is also available in the tasting room at Beringer Vineyards, where it can be purchased.

- NASCAR superstar Jeff Gordon collaborated with winemaker Joe Briggs of August Briggs & Sons in Calistoga, Calif., to blend a series of upscale wines. The first, a 2004 Carneros Chardonnay, became available last month. Two reds, a Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon and a Napa Valley merlot, also of the 2004 vintage, will be released between January and April of 2007.

Why are sports figures branching out into wines?

"The wine business has some of the competitive spirit of professional sport, but it's encased in a wonderful sense of romance and drama," says Carmen Policy, the former president of the Cleveland Browns and 49ers who lives in San Francisco and is building a 10,000-square-foot home on his 14-acre vineyard property in Yountville, Calif.

Says Mitch Cosentino of Cosentino Signature Wineries in Yountville, Calif., who's creating a line of wines for basketball Hall of Famer Larry Bird: "Athletes want to be part of the scene of the wine business. They wouldn't do it if they considered it a comedown from what they achieved in their arenas. To those who know wine, this is an important endeavor."

Athletes, vintners of like minds

Peter Marks, curator of wine for COPIA, the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts in Napa, says he's not surprised sports figures have become enamored with the wine business. They have a lot in common, he says.

"Athletes have some natural abilities, but to become the best they must be trained, well fed and nurtured," Marks says. "The same things with grapes. You can produce high-quality fruit, but the grapes need the hand of a winemaker to make them special."

"You can also compare the life of an athlete to the life of wine. When athletes are young, they get by on strength and quickness. But as they get older, they use their experience and knowledge of the game to adapt. The same with wine. A young wine is crisp, fruity. An older wine is more complex because of the nuances it delivers."

Marks says one shared characteristic really stands out:

"When you open a great bottle of wine and you savor it, it's like winning the Super Bowl or sinking a hole in one."

For Andretti, being in the wine business is a way to satisfy his competitiveness. Although he no longer races around tracks at breakneck speeds, he certainly goes gangbusters in marketing and promoting his wine.

He attends dozens of wine industry dinners every year. He stages impromptu blind taste tests at his Nazareth, Pa., home, where he has a 3,500-bottle wine cellar, or at parties around the world.

"Mario likens me to his mechanic in auto racing," says Bob Pepi, Andretti's winemaker. "He trusted (the mechanic to be able) to fly around the racetrack. He trusts me to make his wine."

Adds Andretti: "I only drink the stuff. I don't pretend to be something I'm not. But do I bring something else to the party? I bring awareness. I do the wine dinners. Am I competitive? Damn right. ... When people say, 'Wow, this is good!' that's my biggest payback."

A heritage captivates Vermeil

For Kansas City Chiefs coach Dick Vermeil, getting into the wine business was his way of getting back to his roots. Vermeil grew up in Calistoga, the northern end of the Napa Valley. He is now a partner in OnTheEdge Winery in St. Helena, on the edge of the Napa-Sonoma county line.

Vermeil threw himself into the venture in 2000, soon after he coached the St. Louis Rams to a Super Bowl victory and retired from coaching (for the second time). His paternal great-grandfather, Jean Louis Vermeil, and his maternal great-grandfather, Garibaldi Iaccheri, had owned and farmed the vineyard lands in Calistoga's noted Rosedale-Pickett Road area.

After World War II, the vineyards were acquired and developed by Gene and Jeanne Frediani. Today, the vineyards provide OnTheEdge with its high-quality grapes.

Friday evenings, Vermeil sits down with a glass of wine before dinner and phones Jeanne Frediani, now in her 80s. She still talks about changing diapers when Vermeil was a tyke. Frediani's son-in-law, Paul Smith, is OnTheEdge's winemaker and Vermeil's business partner.

"Wine is in his blood," Smith says. "These are his neighbors. These are not winemaking stars. So many developers want a Napa Valley charm on their bracelet. With Dick, it's absolutely authentic. He's still got his soul here."

Says Vermeil: "When I retire, I hope to rent a place in Calistoga for part of the year to labor and learn. As a kid, I always picked grapes and prunes. I'll do it one day. I'm 69 years old. I've got to do something."

Pure joy envelops Fleming

At Fleming's home, the romance for wine is evident as far as the eye can see. Not just the view of the Santa Clara valley from the living room, but also the lush vineyard that greets visitors as they pull into the driveway and the winery seen down below through the hole they have cut in between the trees in their backyard.

Fleming Jenkins Vineyards

Figure skater Peggy Fleming and her pride and joy in a bottle — Fleming Jenkins Victories Rosé.

In 2001, their first chardonnay harvest, all of their 1,700 pounds of grapes went into Clos La Chance wines. They got 15 cases and glued on their labels.

"So we really didn't know what ours tasted like," she says.

Jenkins became so enraptured with winemaking that he enrolled in classes at UC-Davis, one of the leading viticulture schools in the country. He and Fleming decided to try making red wines, so he bought grapes from Santa Cruz (Syrah), Napa (Bordeaux) and Madden's ranch (Syrah).

Eventually, Jenkins semiretired from his dermatology practice.

"He's a dermatologist three days a week and a winemaker 10 days a week," his wife says kiddingly.

Fleming pitches in to help out with the dirty work — adding fertilizer, pruning vines and sorting grapes on harvest day.

She also lends her artistic touch to design labels and packaging and her taste buds to blend wines. In between, she'll roam the vineyards, a painted parasol in hand, sampling the grapes right off the vine.

"We had no idea where any of this would go," she says, shaking her head.

What's next?

"I'm afraid to ask."