



A thriving enterprise, the Andretti Winery in Napa, Calif., is one of retired racing legend Mario Andretti's off-track passions.

DRIVEN TO SUCCEED

Looking for acclaim beyond the track, celebrated names in motor sport have their sights set on the wine business

BY MARGARET SWAINE

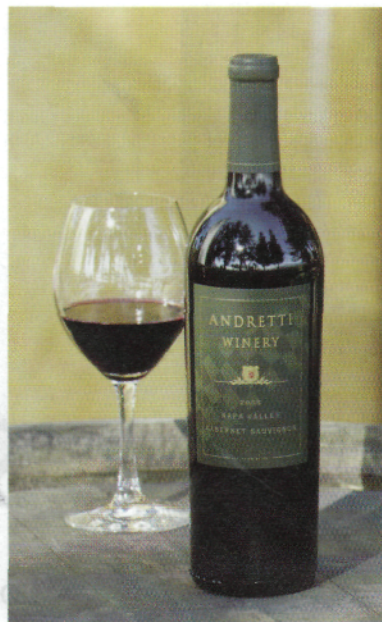
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INE IS MIXING WITH

the whine of engines as racers, car owners and the good old boys of IndyCar are raising a glass and plenty of vines in pursuit of their other passion. Mario Andretti, arguably the most famous driver in motor sport history, is the most high profile and successful on both accounts of this august lot. He's the only man who has won the Indianapolis 500, NASCAR's Daytona 500 and the Formula One World Championship. His Andretti Winery, established in 1996, has vines spread over 42 prime acres of cherished land in Napa, Calif.

Andretti grew up in Italy, where wine was on the table at every family meal. "As a teenager, I would have enjoyed soda pop more," says Andretti. "I can't say I started enjoying wine until I was in my late 20s." However, his world travels exposed him to many wines, and he was surprised at how good they were as he followed the lead of his more knowledgeable friends, trying local varieties and brands. His evolution was progressive: "Things build as life goes on," he says.

The advent of Andretti's winery was certainly an unexpected, but welcome, turn of events. "My involvement came about by chance," says Andretti, "and I've enjoyed the ride ever since." Before the start



With well-regarded vintages such as the Andretti Winery 2005 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon – of note to wine critic Margaret Swaine, among others – Mario Andretti (far left) is leaving his mark on yet another profession. The 2006 release won the Best of Class award earlier this year at the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition.

of race season in 1994, he licensed his name to appear on wine (a Louis Martini cabernet) used as part of the "Arrivederci, Mario" festivities supporting his farewell tour. This soon expanded to a property (where the winery is now) and a licensing deal with the agency that had suggested the first project. Early on, however, not satisfied with the way his fledgling wine business was funded and wanting more control over the product, Andretti had to make a decision: buy out the licensers or pull out. He bought.

He also brought in Joe Antonini, the just-retired former CEO of Kmart, to help run the company. "I said, 'You do the business side, and I'll do the drinking,'" quips Andretti. "He's more of a hands-on day-to-day guy. All the major decisions we do together, and it works. I don't have the time to get involved day to day."

Andretti also considers himself fortunate to have been able to hire Bob Pepi, one of the country's most respected winemakers. With Pepi, the racing legend says he took an unscientific approach to arriving at a consensus on their direction – Andretti just started name-dropping famous wineries, saying "I'd like certain varietals to be this style..." They agreed on every point. Andretti says he learned a great deal from Pepi, asking him what to look for in young wines and gaining more knowledge from harvest to harvest.

As a longtime wine critic, I can attest that the wines from Andretti are generally delicious. The Andretti 2007 Napa Valley

Chardonnay recently released in Ontario's Vintages store (\$32.95) is quite full bodied yet elegant, with the kind of focus and finesse needed in high-speed race-car driving and in high-quality wines. The Andretti 2006 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$24.95) is a racy white with tangy passion fruit and pineapple tastes. His 2005 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$45.95) is full bodied and structured with a velvety smooth ride to the finish. And Andretti's personal likes? "If someone said, [choose] only one varietal red and white – it's chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon." However, he does stray from his favourites on occasion. For example, while he's not a total zinfandel fan, he really does enjoy the primitivo and zinfandel blend that Pepi created.

Andretti has no big plans for expansion, but he'd like to streamline their distribution and aim for sales of 60,000 cases. But it's not so much about money. "Wine has been a passion for me. It's something that begins with pride, and the pride is what carries you," he says. "I am vis-à-vis the winery the same as I was with my racing: as a driver, I was able to take advantage, take it to the victory line and enjoy the finished product."

That's the sentiment echoed by other motor sport champions who have turned their talents to the wine world. "The racer's mentality goes into making wine. You're trying to beat everyone and do the best you can. A lot goes into making wine and doing

American racing star Kevin Buckler (far right) and his wife, Debra, are in the driver's seat at Adobe Road Wines. As co-owners of the boutique winery, they endeavour to produce exclusive vintages in small lots. Current releases include bottles of sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon and pinot noir.




it well," says Jimmy Vasser, a former titlist Champ Car driver and co-owner with Kevin Kalkhoven of IndyCar team KV Racing Technology. Coincidentally, both Vasser and Kalkhoven have started up their own wineries (see "Coming Soon").

Kevin Buckler, a recipient of the coveted Porsche Cup and the winner of three major championships, has crossed more than 100 finish lines in his racing career. With wins at the 24 hours of Le Mans and the Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona behind him, today Buckler manages his multi-car professional race teams and motor sport businesses from the Racer's Group (Grand American Rolex Sports Car Series) in Petaluma, Calif., and TRG Motorsports (NASCAR) in Morresville, N.C. He balances this love of speed with his other driving fascination – wine.

Adobe Road is Buckler's small, boutique, family owned winery, which produces approximately 6,500 cases per year. They sell most wines directly to the consumer – often through an exclusive wine club called the Inside Track – at prices that range from \$18 for the rosé to \$55 for the Napa Valley cabernet. In addition to the Inside Track, they also have distribution in more than 10 states. Happily, most of these states are home to major racetracks – Buckler likes to enjoy a glass of Adobe Road after taking in a high-speed contest. In particular, he's a fan of Adobe's bigger cabernets and syrahs, and says he's proud of the complexity and intricacy of these wines. However, like Andretti, although he has his favourites, his tastes change from week to week and he's happy that Adobe offers many varietals under its label. As is the familiar refrain among racers in the wine business, he wants to take his label to the top. He wants Adobe Road to be the hottest national brand from Sonoma County while it retains its trademark boutique cachet.

NASCAR team owner Richard Childress, NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon and former IndyCar driver Randy Lewis are other speed merchants for whom wine is a passion and thriving business – they're the men behind Childress Vineyards, Jeff Gordon Wines and Lewis Cellars, respectively. Both Andretti and Vasser admit to enjoying the wines of California-based Lewis Cellars, in particular. "[Randy] has been the most successful at it," says Vasser. "I take my hat off to him." But Vasser can't resist adding: "He's less successful on the racetrack, more in the winery."

Perhaps Andretti sums it up best for all the racers peddling wine. Quite simply, "It's a labour of love." 



FROM FAR LEFT: Vintages from Lewis Cellars based in California and Childress Vineyards of North Carolina – the wine houses belong to the racing world's Randy Lewis and Richard Childress, respectively.

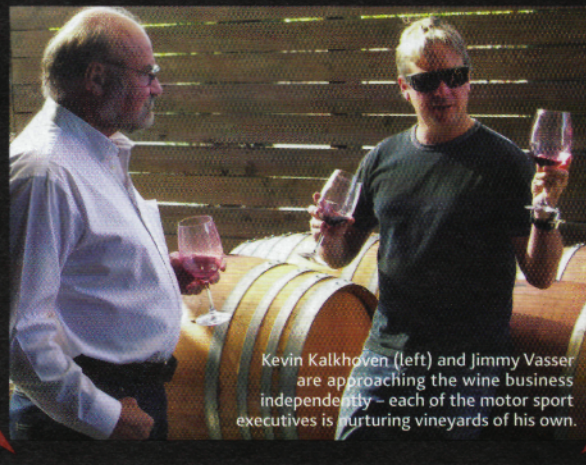
COMING SOON

Jimmy Vasser and Kevin Kalkhoven, co-owners of KV Racing Technology, are also both owners of vineyards – and, interestingly, of Acura NSXs, which are no longer in production. (Jimmy was given his sports car by Acura as a gift for winning the 1996 Champ Car series with a Honda engine; Kevin has one because he is an avid auto collector.) They are in friendly competition with each other over who will produce the best wine.

California-born Vasser has 8-1/2 acres of terrain planted in a coveted area of Napa. "I could hit a golf ball from my vineyard and land it in Stag's Leap [Wine Cellars]," says Vasser. On a hillside just above Clos du Val and Chimney Rock, his vineyards have just produced their second harvest of cabernet sauvignon. Vasser only this year obtained the permit necessary to construct a winery on his property and plans to break ground next spring. In the meantime his wines are made as a custom crush by winemaker Steve Reynolds at Reynolds Family Winery on the Silverado Trail in Napa, as are Kalkhoven's wines. While both Vasser's and Kalkhoven's first harvest wines are still in barrel and will be for another year, Vasser already has a label name picked out: "V12, like a big engine," says Vasser. "V for my name, and the car I drove most of the time was number 12. It's going to be a very cool bottle."

Australian native Kalkhoven's eight acres of vineyards surround his home in Alamo, Calif., an area about 6 km from Livermore that grew grapes in the days before prohibition. "It's unknown as a wine region, which basically suits my perverse nature," says Kalkhoven. He has planted primarily cabernet sauvignon and some syrah. "Originally my concept was to be a great winemaker," he says. But he realized that, as he puts it, "It's a very difficult thing to make great wines." He decided to leave that in the hands of others.

Vasser and Kalkhoven recently joined friends in a blind tasting of their wines out of the barrel. "We're neck and neck as to who makes the best wine," says Kalkhoven. "The one thing I do know is that making your own wine is a great way to make great friends."



Kevin Kalkhoven (left) and Jimmy Vasser are approaching the wine business independently – each of the motor sport executives is nurturing vineyards of his own.