

Wineries of the Rich and Famous

(Number 56 in a series of opinionated articles about grapes and wine by John Smith)

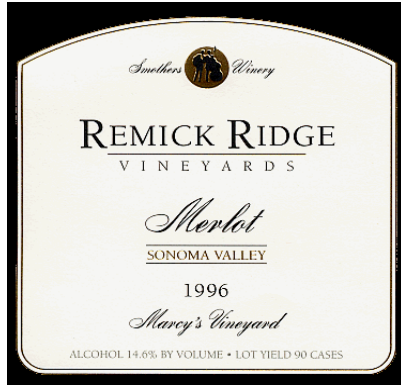
Rich people aren't necessarily smarter than you; they just have more money. The lure of winery ownership, a siren song being heard by an increasing number of people across the land, attracts the rich and not-so-rich alike and has the power to reduce them to the same level in a relatively short time. One of the oldest jokes in the wine industry is that the best way to make a small fortune in a winery is to start with a large one, and over the years, wineries have been very effective in separating many fools from whatever size fortune they started with. This time, we'll talk about those who a.) should have known better (shouldn't we all?), but b.) could afford not to listen to that small, still voice of reason telling them that shoveling money into a furnace is a lot less work and nearly as much fun as owning a winery.

Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher, in an article for *The Wall Street Journal* on what they term "paparazzi wines," reported that "in most cases involving a live celebrity, the winery claims that the star is intimately involved in every aspect of the winemaking. We believe this. We also believe that Paris Hilton personally harvests materials from sperm whales to make her namesake perfume."

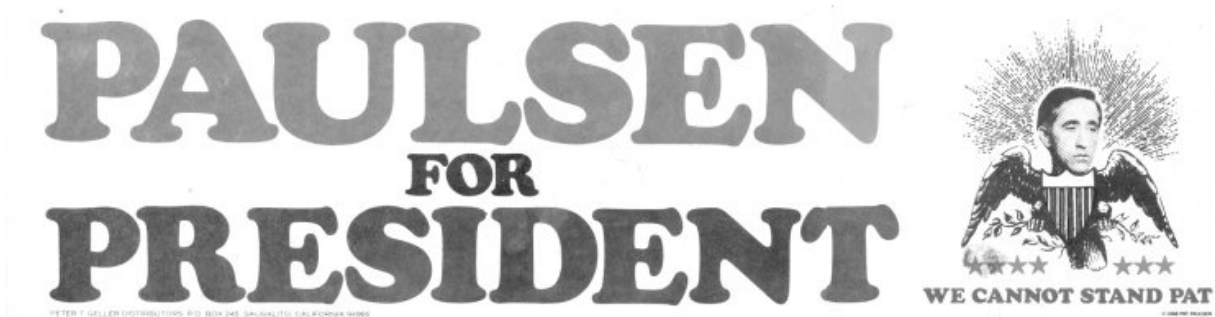
The Stars

The first and best-known superstar owner is Francis Ford Coppola, who purchased the historic Napa Valley winery Inglenook in 1975 and renamed it Niebaum-Coppola after the Finnish sea captain who established the property. Among his portfolio is one of California's cult wines, Rubicon. His daughter Sofia, who directed *Lost In Translation*, has gotten into the act with her own sparkling wine in pop cans, and Francis' son Roman also has his own wine, a Syrah.

An unusual combination of two winery owners from one TV show starts with Tommy Smothers of the Smothers Brothers, who owns Remick Ridge Vineyards in the Sonoma Valley. "Originally the winery was called Smothers Brothers," explains Tom, "but I changed the name to Remick Ridge because when people heard Smothers Brothers wine, they thought something like Milton Berle Fine Wine or Larry, Curly and Moe Vineyards." The winery was established in the Santa Cruz mountains in 1974, but moved to the Kenwood area of Sonoma County, and is now relegated to tasting at "The Wine Room" in Kenwood. Pat Paulson, the deadpan comedian from the same show, also established a winery after he bought the entire town of Asti in northern Sonoma County, home of the once-famous Italian Swiss Colony Winery.



From my own collection, here is Pat's 1968 campaign poster: "It's tough campaigning," Mr. Paulsen once said, "kissing hands and shaking babies."



Even thus trading on his fame, the winery was not a successful business, and Paulsen soon had serious debts and back-tax penalties. His third marriage ended in divorce when he caught his wife embezzling hundreds of thousands of dollars from him, and once while on a comedy tour in Reno, when he won a \$300,000 jackpot on a quarter slot machine, the IRS stepped in to claim \$285,000 of it. By 1986, Paulsen was forced to sell the winery and go back on the road with his comedy. Nevertheless, he made his mark on the industry for the humorous content of labels on wines like White House White and Refrigerator White, where he explained that wine was a gift that men could give other men, unlike for instance, underwear.

Another actor who came to wine from television is Fess Parker, whose winery in Santa Barbara was by far the most visited there even before it appeared under the alias of "Frass Canyon Winery" in the movie *Sideways*. Long after he appeared as the coonskin-clad Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, Fess started his winery in 1989, and it has grown into a multi-media giant, featuring a restaurant, inn & spa, DVD sales, a general store, a website (with a "shooting gallery" where you can post pictures and reminiscences of your own coonskin cap days), and of course, wine.

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2004 marks the **50th** anniversary of the debut of the Davy Crockett show, the **40th** anniversary of the debut of the Daniel Boone show and the **15th** anniversary of Fess Parker Winery. We think that is a good reason to celebrate.

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The Athletes

Mario Andretti, now that he's retired from the auto-racing circuit, has made quite a splash in the wine business. In 1994 when Andretti quit racing after nearly four decades, a commemorative wine was produced in his honor. He was so taken by the idea that he decided to get into the business for real. With a partner he purchased 42 acres of Napa Valley and now produces five Napa wines under his own name and also under the Montona label. Over a decade later, his Tuscan Villa now receives visitors from all over the country, from race drivers to business executives and wine lovers, enjoying the great wines of winemaker Bob Pepi, Jr.

Joe Montana, the famed 49ers quarterback, "works" with Beringer winemaker Ed Sbragia to produce Montagia wines. They produced an \$80 Montagia Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon in 2001 and together make about 750 cases of this every year.

A much more serious, hands-on grower is former New York Mets pitcher Tom Seaver, who has planted a cabernet sauvignon vineyard on Napa's Diamond Mountain. Seaver says. "I'm out here every day, observing, supervising and doing a lot of my own clipping and irrigating. This whole thing has been a learning process for me. It's like gardening, which has always been my hobby. I guess it's maybe indirectly inherent from when I was a kid growing up in Fresno. My father was in the raisin business there, although the business end of it. Anyway, when we had our first harvest last September, I felt this eerie silence around here. They were like family to me and now they were gone. It was kind of like my own postpartum depression." Says Rusty Staub, former ballplayer, *restaurateur* and wine lover: "Seaver has tremendous soil, an excellent winemaker and the best sun in the valley with southern exposure, which is longer than the rest of the day. He's going to have excellent, excellent wine. I get a kick out of just watching his excitement."

Seaver's Cabernet will be stored for 20 to 22 months before it is bottled and readied for 2008 release. As he says proudly, no expense was spared to make this first vintage a home run.

Golfer Greg Norman's name appears on the labels of some new wines, thanks to Beringer Blass, who make them. The labels also bear the famous shark logo, which is probably not a food pairing suggestion. South African fellow golfer Ernie Els, who got into the wine business through his friend Jean Engelbrecht, is bottling a Bordeaux-style blend.



Peggy Fleming, the former ice-skating champion who grew up in Morgan Hill, has also gotten into the vineyard and winery business. With husband Greg Jenkins (the winemaker and a physician), Fleming has released a 2003 Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay from their own vineyard at 1,400 feet above Los Gatos, a 2003 Madden Vineyard Livermore Valley Syrah from vines owned by former Raiders coach and current Monday Night Football commentator John Madden, and a 2003 Santa Cruz Mountains Syrah. Profits from the sale of their "Victories Rosé" wines go to breast-cancer research. Peggy Fleming was diagnosed with the disease in 1998 and credits early detection with saving her life.

A Few Others

Celebrity chef Emeril Legasse kicked it up a notch when he lent his name to "Emeril's Classics," a white and a red table wine made to his food-friendly specifications by Fetzer Vineyards in Mendocino. Bam! Speaker Nancy Pelosi owns a vineyard on Zinfandel Lane in St. Helena, California, and is rumored to be developing a winery. Aussie singer Olivia Newton-John brought out her cuddly Koala Blue label in 1983, featuring a Shiraz (Syrah) and a Chardonnay.

Lorraine Bracco, who played Tony Soprano's psychiatrist in the hit HBO series, says she has loved wine since she moved to France as a teenager and lived there for 10 years. With many offers for her to endorse this product or that, she jumped at the chance when her business manager brought to her the idea of launching a line of wines. She has "produced" a reportedly excellent Pinot Grigio.

Even Madonna's father has his own winery — Ciccone Vineyard & Winery — in Michigan. His winery says the first Madonna label will be released any day now.

Tributes

Death alone is no reason why stars can't be part of the process. In addition to the Marilyn Merlot brand we mentioned in an earlier column, two longtime Frank Sinatra fans and winemaking buddies, Christian Garvin and Andrew Kahn, decided the day after Mr. Sinatra died in 1998 to make a wine in his honor. With vintage Sinatra songs wafting through Kahn Winery, which they opened in 1996, they made one barrel of Cabernet Franc, which they called Cab Frank — it was a very good year! The late Raymond Burr's name lives on as an actual vineyard and winery in the Dry Creek Valley of Sonoma, as does The Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia — as J. Garcia Wine, made by the Clos de Bois winery, also in Sonoma.

And finally, there is a tribute wine to a great American who may or may not be dead: Elvis wines are available in several different varietals from the Graceland Cellars line, and this leads me to wonder if we couldn't bring back Pat Paulsen to interject some of his comedic common sense into a fortieth anniversary presidential campaign in 2008!