

Vroom! Vroom! Vino!

After Mario Andretti stopped racing, his love of wine put him back in the winner's circle

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Mario Andretti might be the greatest race-car driver of all time. He's the only driver to win races in five decades; he won both the Daytona 500 and the Indy 500; he is a Formula One world champion and a national dirt track champion; and the Associated Press named him Driver of the Century in 1999. All the same, it took Andretti practically a lifetime to find his way back to wine, the drink that is the lifeblood of his native Italy.

Though Mario — the most famous resident of Nazareth, Penn., where he lives with his wife of 44 years, Dee Ann — is now 65 and his racing days are behind him, he has not slowed down. He has a multitude of successful business ventures: the Mario Andretti Racing School in Las Vegas, three car dealerships, a petroleum business, two books about his life and an IMAX movie. But, because of his family's Italian roots, one business occupies a special place in his heart: the 42-acre Andretti Winery in Napa Valley. Established in 1996, Andretti Wine Group, a publicly traded company, was formed with Mario as vice chairman and Joe E. Antonini — who as president and CEO of Kmart was one of Mario's major racing sponsors — as chairman.

While in Alpharetta, Ga., for the grand opening of the Andretti Indoor Karting and Games facility, the father of three and grandfather of five hit the brakes long enough to talk with *The Wine Report* about his Napa winery and his love of wine.

THE WINE REPORT: *What first sparked your interest in wine and in owning a winery?*

MARIO ANDRETTI: Not any one given event. Wine taste and appreciation took place over time. I was born and raised in Italy [to age 15], where wine was a norm on our table. My background helped grow an affinity for wine, though as a child I preferred soda pop. I really started enjoying wine with meals in my 30s. I grew curious, learned and developed my own preferences.

As for the winery, it was an opportunity. The timing seemed right. I really didn't have a specific life goal or master plan to own a winery, but now it's one of my favorite businesses. I have a lot of pride in it; it's one thing I truly enjoy in life. I get a tremendous satisfaction out of seeing how



Racing legend, businessman and wine lover Mario Andretti.

the wines are received and appreciated.

TWR: *What are your goals for the winery?*

MA: I want it to be a force to be reckoned with and respected. I want the wines to be appreciated. [Winemaker] Bob Pepi has never disappointed. We've been on the same page as far as styles of the wines since day one. I rely on him and learn new things from him every day.

TWR: *What wines are produced?*

MA: We have three labels. Montona — which is named for where I was born — is for estate and reserve wines that are exclusively available in our tasting room. The Napa Valley line is for Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Sangiovese, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon wines of consistent quality and from the same appellation as the Montona wines. Andretti Selections are high-volume Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon wines at competitive price points.

TWR: *Since you're famous for speed, why not plant mostly whites? They're typically on a faster track from vine to bottle.*

MA: What's most important is that wine has to complement the food. Pairings are very important. Food can make the wine and wine can make the food. Whites alone would be too narrow. You need the entire spectrum.

TWR: *The pace of farming and wine-making is much slower than racing. Was*

it a difficult transition for you? Have you found that racing a car and running a winery have anything in common?

MA: The nuances required a lot of adjustment. My biggest challenge has been projecting so far in advance. Right now, we are victims of our own success to some degree, as we have sold more product than we have. We're committed, so we need to invest and keep our fingers crossed. I lived a life of chance, and this is another one. You hope a lot happens, but there's not a lot of control.

TWR: *How do you now satisfy the "need for speed?"*

MA: Nothing will ever replace professional driving. Things change in life and you have to change with them. You find a way somehow. I still love driving and try to stay close to the sport. I've got my driving school in Las Vegas. My kids do their thing, and my young grandson will be quite a racer someday. In fact, he already is.

TWR: *Who most shaped the way you think about wine?*

MA: There's no individual or event, just a lifetime of curiosity. During my career, I traveled a lot, especially with Formula One. In places like South Africa, Europe, Australia, Argentina or Chile, I'd explore the wines. Europeans would tell me, "Hey, get curious about what's in your own back yard!" I started paying more attention to Californian wines.

TWR: *What led you to choose Napa as the location for your vineyards and winery?*

MA: It's where you want to be if you're going to grow wine in the United States, in my opinion. The soil is best; the weather is ideal. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

TWR: *With whom would you most like to share a bottle of wine?*

MA: Any friend who enjoys wine. Wine is great for meaningful conversation. I don't know why, but that's how it always is.

Hope S. Philbrick is a freelance writer because she doesn't think work and fun should be mutually exclusive.

wine south

Atlanta

make it a weekend

September 17th & September 18th
12:30pm-5:00pm Both Days





VIP HOTEL PACKAGES NOW AVAILABLE!

The Atlanta Marriott Gwinnett Place is offering packages that include:

- Hotel Room including Full Breakfast Buffet
- Roundtrip Shuttle Service from The Marriott to Wine South
- Saturday Ticket to Wine South
- 4-Course Wine Dinner

Pricing: \$150 per person, based on double occupancy

Other Wine South Room Discounts Available:

- The Atlanta Marriott Gwinnett Place
- Holiday Inn Gwinnett Center
- Hampton Inn Sugarloaf Parkway

Each offer includes breakfast and round trip shuttle service to Wine South.

For more information:
(678) 985-9494
www.winesouth.com

Wine South – the premier Food and Wine Event of the South.

Dinner Wines provided by Brown Hunter, Inc.






