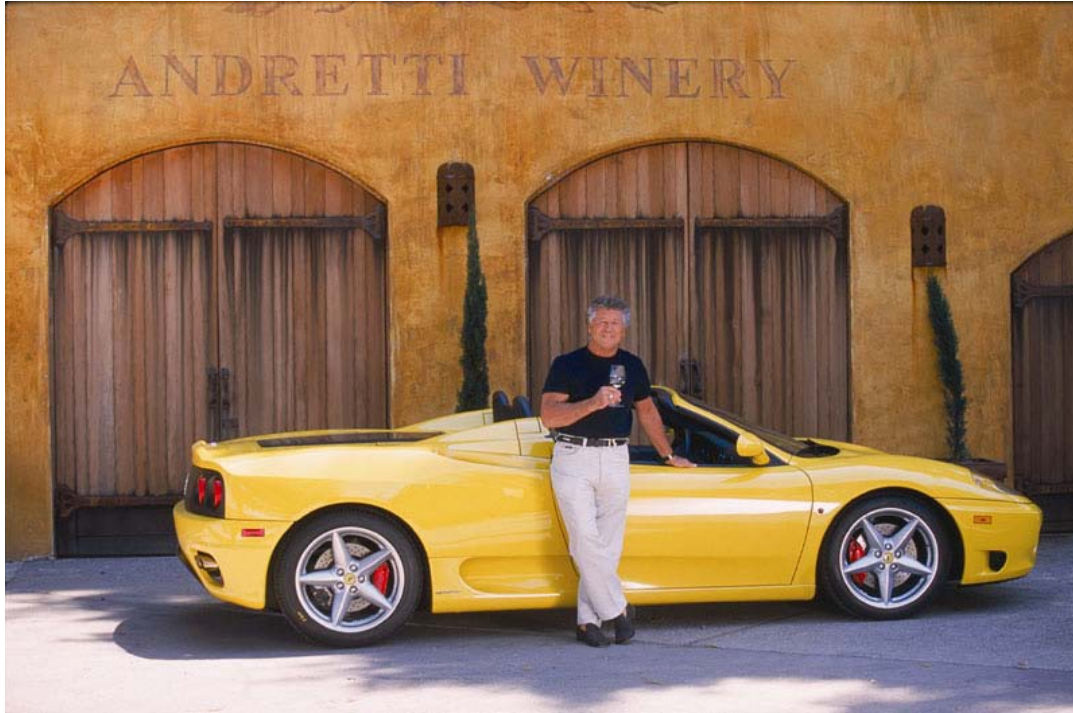


Mario Andretti talks Wine, Life, and Racing

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by Joseph & Curtis



Mario Andretti is quite simply a living legend. He was kind enough to spend 30 minutes with me to discuss his passion for wine, his family, and of course his passion for racing. Please buckle up and enjoy the ride!



In his quest for his various racing championships, Mario traveled the world. His travels to exotic places – combining great dining with fine wine – led to his ultimate appreciation of wine as one of life's pleasures. After years of measuring success in hundredths of a second, Mario retired from racing and turned his attention to the slow art of making wine.

Today the Andretti Winery in California's Napa Valley is a popular destination for tasting the finest wines, as well as a magnificent setting for special events.

www.MarioAndretti.com

What was your experience of wine growing up in Italy?



Mario: I was born in Italy and lived there until I was 15. Growing up in Italy, wine was a part of everyday life. I certainly didn't prefer it; I preferred soda pop. But wine was at our table every day. I had no appreciation for it.

When did you start to really appreciate wine?

Mario: In my thirties, not before that. And it was my career in racing that actually led to my love of wine. I was fortunate while racing to travel the world – Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, South America. I raced on every continent. And my travels to exotic places – combining great dining with fine wine – led to my ultimate appreciation of wine as one of life's pleasures. I remember being in South Africa in the early 70s. I was somewhat surprised at the extent of the wine list at the restaurant we were at in Johannesburg. It certainly wasn't what I would expect in South Africa. All of a sudden, I'm realizing you don't have to have French wines in South Africa. You can have South African wines. And I found the same thing in Argentina. When I raced in Madrid and Barcelona, I found how good Spanish wines are. After a few more experiences like that – finding great wines in what I thought were the most unlikely countries – I made it a point to inquire about local specialties. I would ask and I would try.



And I found that wherever I was in the world, if I went with the local specialties – I was going to like it. And that is what made me more and more curious as I traveled and raced around the world. My interest in wine increased over the years. When I retired at the end of 1994, I turned my attention to wine.

How has wine affected your life?

Mario: Wine affected me differently throughout the course of my life. Growing up in Italy, for instance, wine was always at our table. That doesn't mean I preferred it. I had no appreciation for wine. Then, during my racing career, I got invited to great restaurants and beautiful homes and I tasted some of the finest wines in the world. That really peaked my interest in wine. Today we produce our own wines so I'm affected because I have skin in it – and pride – my name is on the label – and I'm accountable.

Opinions of Napa?

I started visiting Napa in the early 70's and became friends with many people and just happen to fall in love with it. My wine career really started with Louis Martini using my name on one of his labels and one thing lead to the next and next thing I knew I purchased a winery.



What is your favorite wine type?

Mario: That's like asking me which of my children I like best. I hope I never have to choose, but if I had to.... I would choose Chardonnay for white and Cabernet for red (with Sangiovese a close second).

What have you found surprising about your journey as a winery owner?

Mario: I'm surprised that I never got tired. I still go through life with the pedal to the metal. I'm still up for a challenge. I have objectives. I wake up with an agenda. I don't feel worn out. I still get excited about new ventures, from a new race season and wine release, to Twitter and Facebook. I never lost my work ethic. My heart and my soul are still in it. Desire is still very much alive in me. And I'm surprised as hell. When I was 40, I think I figured I'd be laying on the sofa at 65.

What are you most proud of about Andretti Winery?



Mario: I think I'm most proud of our consistency with all of our varietals over the years. We've always been well received. Bob Pepi and I have been true to our styles for 15 years. When he makes his wines, he stays true to my style and his. We talk. We have never deviated. People who enjoy Andretti wines can come back year after year and know the wines are going to be consistently good.

Years ago, you poured your Sangiovese in Italy and received great reviews...tell us about that...

Mario: In 1997, I was invited to the 100th anniversary of Ferrari in Italy. The Ferrari and Fiat families (and their entourages) were there. After unveiling a monument in honor of the 100th Anniversary, we had dinner at one of my favorite restaurants in Bologna. I brought out two bottles of the Andretti 1995 Sangiovese, and we had a blind tasting. Our wine won everyone's praise. I was extremely proud. Of course I wouldn't tell you this story unless it had a good ending.

Has the wine line-up changed much at Andretti since its birth in 1996?

Mario: In 1996 we only produced a couple hundred cases of Cabernet and Chardonnay. Today, Andretti Winery produces 16 different wines, including Chardonnays, Merlots and Cabs, a Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Pinot Grigio, Sangiovese, Syrah, Riesling, Zinfandel, Dolcetto, Moscato, Port and Barbera. Our wines are in four tiers: the Montona Reserve varietals, our Napa Valley and Villa Andretti varietals and our Andretti Selections series.



Mario, you've won more than 100 races in your career. When you win a race, do they always uncork Champagne?

Mario: The champagne tradition was started in Europe in the 1960s, by Dan Gurney, a famous American race car driver. The celebration in the winner's circle had always been very proper. But Dan is a character and when he shook a bottle of Moet and started spraying everybody, that became the fashion over the years in all the top levels of motorsports. The only exception is Indianapolis, where the tradition is very different. It all started in 1911 when Ray Harroun, the winner of the first Indy 500, was asked after his victory what he wanted to drink. He answered "milk!" And the milk industry has been milking the heck out of that ever since.

What is your preference when you won a race – milk or champagne?

There is only one race I wanted to finish with milk 😊 (he laughed and said of course that was the Indy 500)

How is it being a father when your son is racing?

A double edge sword. I had two sons and a nephew racing...the best was once me, my son, and my nephew were 1,2,and three on the podium...there is always an element of concern because its not the safest sport in the world but if you do it its the chance you take. My kids were never forced to race but they just loved it. Once that happened I realized what my wife had to deal with all those years....sometimes I would just shut my eyes and pray...but it is what it is.

I was lucky to drive through the 50's, 60's, 70's, 80's, 90's and I always embraced the change...it was that ability that always kept me in the game...some people have a hard time embracing change I never did. It has been a tremendous asset in the wine business as well.

How many bottles are in your cellar now?

3,000 bottles...I am very proud of my cellar... I have wines from all over the world... there is some really great wines in there. Many of the wines were purchased through estate sales and of course my travels.



From JosephandCurtis.com