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*Drew Bledsoe  
tackles winemaking*

# From gridiron to grape

BY ANTHONY MANIFOLD  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM RETTIG

Remember Drew Bledsoe? He was the record-breaking quarterback who steered the Patriots to their Super Bowl crown in 2002. Now he's moved on from his charismatic career in football to become a rising star in the wine firmament.

Like fine wine, his interest in winemaking took time to mature.

"When I was at college," he says, "I drank beer — couldn't care less about wine." But, after his marriage to Maura Healy, wine soon became the beverage of choice whenever they dined out. His passion for wine really took over when they both went to the Napa Valley for the first time.

## Wine and football

**Drew Bledsoe** is not the only pro football player to fall into the grip of the grape.

Super Bowl winning coach **'Dick' Vermeil** who hails from Calistoga in the Napa Valley founded Vermeil Wines with winemaker Paul Smith in 2008. His passion for wine is a legacy from his father Jean Louis and his grandfather Albert.

Texas-based Wines of Dotson-Cervantes is owned by **Alphonse Dotson**. He was drafted as defensive tackle by the Green Bay Packers, but signed with the Kansas City Chiefs, then played for the Miami Dolphins and finally for the Oakland Raiders.

Heisman Trophy winner and Green Bay Packers cornerback **Charles Woodson** is the proprietor of the Twenty Four winery in Napa Valley's Stags Leap District, renowned for premium quality cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc. The NFL does not allow him to promote his wines until he retires.

Hall of Famer **Joe Montana**, who captured four Super Bowl crowns as quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, established a 500-acre winery and Tuscan-designed luxury home in the Napa Valley after his retirement. He put the estate on the market for \$49 million late last year.

The whole New York Jets team commemorated the opening of their new stadium with the launch of **Jets Uncorked**, a limited release cabernet sauvignon 2008. It's so good, according to Executive Vice President Matt Higgins, "even a Pats' fan would drink it after tearing off the label."



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"I had already got into the habit of researching, buying, owning and enjoying fine wines," he says. "Starting to learn about the entire cycle of making wine in Napa totally intrigued me. It began with a handful of soil and ended up with a work of art in a bottle."

After retiring from football, the Bledsoes returned to his hometown of Walla Walla, Wash., and embarked on his newly discovered dream of making wine. He found two vineyard sites close to home, one in the Columbia Valley and the other in the Walla Walla Valley. The special combination of soil, airflow and aspect to the sun at the sites he selected held the promise of producing premium-quality fruit for decades to come.

Bledsoe firmly believes that grapes grown in this region are among the best in the world for winemaking. The Walla Walla location is set atop a hill overlooking the entire valley. "It's stunning," he says. "You get full exposure during the day and a cooling effect at night, which not only ripens the fruit but also allows it to hang on the vine for a long time to develop complexity. And it's an awesome location for vineyard events."

But grapes on the vine don't make fine wines without the touch of a talented winemaker. That's where Bledsoe's high school buddy Chris Figgins came in.

Figgins was an apprentice winemaker at his family's winery, Leonetti Cellars, in the Walla Walla Valley. His father, Gary, set up the winery in a garage in 1977 qualifying him as the first Washington State garagiste, as boutique winemakers are known in France. His cabernet sauvignon shot to fame within two years of the opening vintage after capturing the top award at a New York wine show competing against world-class entries from Bordeaux and California. Figgins took over from his father in the '90s. He is now their chief winemaker, creating wines that command three-figure price tags.

Bledsoe says it was a dream come true when Figgins offered to become his consulting winemaker. "It was akin to starting a football franchise, then finding out that Tom Brady was available and wanting to play for you," he says, thus confounding the popular perception of Brady as his nemesis.

*'It began with a handful of soil and ended up with a work of art in a bottle.'*

**Drew Bledsoe**



The first wine to be released: 2007 Doubleback Cabernet Sauvignon.

He learned from Figgins that vines "are almost like children. If you want really great fruit and great wine, you have to discipline them. If you give them everything they want, they produce bland fruit," Bledsoe says.

Since Bledsoe's first vineyard was established only six years ago, Figgins' expertise is also needed in purchasing grapes for current vintages. He planted primarily cabernet sauvignon with small parcels of merlot and petit verdot grapes. "Our vines are just kids right now, moving into adolescence," says Bledsoe. "It will be some years before they start yielding their best fruit." That is why he anticipates that grapes from other vineyards will continue to be components of his wines as they move forward.

His first wine to be released is the 2007 vintage Doubleback Cabernet Sauvignon Walla Walla Valley. The name is a reference to Bledsoe's return to his roots. It also bears his initials but that, he is quick to point out, is coincidental.

"This is not a 'celebrity endorsement' wine," he says, "but rather the product of a lifestyle passion." The blend for this wine mirrors his vineyard plantings with 76 percent cabernet sauvignon grapes, 13 percent merlot and 11 percent petit verdot. And it's the only varietal that he's making now and for the foreseeable future.

"We are microfocused on making one outstanding wine," he says. Just 620 cases of this wine were made, selling out in six weeks at around \$85 an individually

numbered bottle. He predicts that future production volumes will increase to an optimum of 5,000 cases a year.

"Chris, Maura and myself decide on the best blend after tasting the vintage each year," he says. "If the yield goes up as a result of our choice, that's great. If not, so be it. That competitive gene that motivated me as a football player hasn't gone away. I'm driven to try to be the very, very best. We've got the *terroir* and the winemaker to accomplish this goal. Now it's up to me."

His family's involvement in winemaking is another key element in his plan for success. Significantly, his and his wife's names appear as joint proprietors on his business card. His wife not only takes part in selecting the blend for every vintage — Bledsoe

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Drew Bledsoe talks about his new wine at the Renaissance Hotel in Patriot Place, Foxboro.

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believes she has a better palate than he does — but also actively works in the marketing and promotional side of the business. Their four children, a 7-year-old girl and three boys, ages 9, 11 and 12, “get their hands in the vineyard dirt” as he puts it. “They’ve tasted some wines, too, but of course we make them spit it out,” he says. All of which adds up to Drew’s long-term vision of the winery as a legacy for his family.

And what’s in it for him? He compares the situation with his career as a football player.

“I started out as a rookie in football and subsequently in wine. I had to recognize that there was a wealth of knowledge I didn’t have. I needed to surround myself with good people, which I was fortunately able to do in football. Today, I am equally fortunate in having a good team in the wine world. But the big difference now is that I get to pick the team. I’m the owner and general manager and my winemaker is the coach and quarterback. That’s a great feeling.” **W**



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