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Golfers having a vine time

Golfers put down their putters to develop top-quality wines

Golfers Arnold Palmer, Greg Norman, Ernie Els and David Frost have more in common than just a love of the links: They also want to sell you a bottle of wine. Their wines are true labors of love, and some of them are on par with the top wines of the world.

James Molesworth, the senior editor of Wine Spectator magazine, said the disposable income and traveling associated with professional golfing match up well with wine.

"It's a lifestyle of pleasure and leisure, in terms of enjoying a round of golf and then coming in for a nice meal and a bottle of wine," he said. "These guys also have their images to deal with, so it makes sense to branch out into other things beyond designing golf courses."

Most wines produced by professional golfers are small batches compared with most commercial wine. The exception is Greg Norman Estates, which annually ships 220,000 cases of seven Australian wines. Mr. Norman approached the Beringer Blass Wine Estates in Australia in 1996, and they introduced the first portfolio of wines in 1999. That same year, he opened Greg Norman's Australian Grille in Myrtle Beach, S.C., where the wine list totaled 259 selections, 196 of which are visible through a window in the wine room. Sheri Ketchum, a spokeswoman for Greg Norman Estates, said the wines were accepted by wine enthusiasts right away.

"He's got this cache for someone who's very oriented towards having the best of food and wine, and the luxury lifestyle," she said. "Winemakers see his name and trust his opinion, so it's never been an issue of the golfing community versus the wine community."

Mr. Molesworth, whose expertise covers South African wines, had high praise for Mr. Els' wines, which are a Bordeaux blend of five varietals (Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec and Petit Verdot) produced by the Rust en Vrede Wine Estate in Stellenbosch, South Africa. David Frosts' 2003 Par Excellence Paarl earned a 90 from Wine Spectator.

"Ernie Els is one of the top wines in South Africa; of course it's also a flagship at \$80 a bottle. The 2002 vintage scored 91 points, (out of 100) which is exceptional," he said. "The David Frost wines score in the 80s, and Greg Norman's wines typically score in the upper 80s to low 90s, so he's obviously putting a lot into them."

Mr. Els recently took the three weeks he had off before the Dubai Desert Classic in early February to be on hand for the 2005 harvest for his label.

"I'm not a wine connoisseur at all, but I like wine," he said. "And obviously, my partner (Jean Engelbrecht, who owns Rust en Vrede Estate), that's his family business. We wanted to make a wine and we made a pretty nice one and we got some remarks on it so we continued that and now it's becoming quite a major business."

Even though he lives in Latrobe, Pa., the home of Rolling Rock beer, golf legend Mr. Palmer bought a share in the Luna Vineyards in Napa, Calif., in 1999. Mr. Palmer, who was featured in a lengthy profile in the September edition of Wine Spectator, also is a partner in his recently opened namesake restaurant in La Quinta, Calif. Diners can sample from the Arnold Palmer Cabernet Sauvignon, or the Arnold Palmer Chardonnay.

Mr. Palmer credits Mike Moone, a friend who used to work his Bay Hill Invitational tournament, for turning him on to wine.

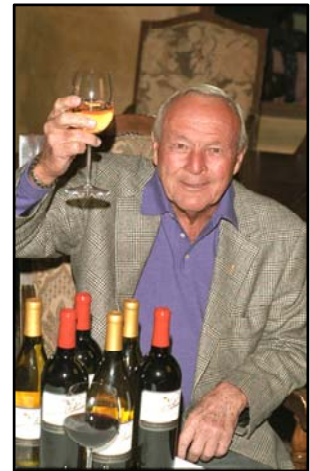
He was with Nestle when they were doing (sponsoring) the tournament," Mr. Palmer said. "He retired and went into the wine business and invited me to go with him and so here we are. We're having a ball."

Golfers aren't the only ones teaming up with vineyards. Francis Ford Coppola used his earnings from the first Godfather film to purchase a vineyard in California's Napa Valley in 1975. You also can find wine from the actor Gerard Depardieu, celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse, and even Elvis Presley and Jerry Garcia.

The reason, Mr. Molesworth noted, is that wine attracts those looking to expand their appeal to a higher income bracket.

"How would you like to be able to host a dinner party and be able to break out a bottle of wine with your name on it?" he said. "After you own the jet and the boat, why not own a winery?"

Of course, there have to be customers willing to shell out money for the wine, and the wine has to stand on its own beyond what's on the label. Mr. Molesworth said a weak dollar combined with lingering fears of traveling have made domestic golf resorts with impressive wine holdings more attractive.



Arnold Palmer, at left, and Luna Vineyards have partnered to produce several types of wine. Luna Vineyards

"With Americans looking for more in their back yards, they're looking for the same high-level wine and fine experience they're used to finding in Europe," he said.

Staff writer David Westin contributed to this article.

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Drinking with the pros

Arnold Palmer: 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon and 2003 Chardonnay, \$15; available at www.arnoldpalmerwines.com.

Greg Norman: 2002 Limestone Coast Shiraz, \$14.99, 2002 Victoria Chardonnay, \$16.99, available at www.wine.com.

More information at www.shark.com/gnestates.

Ernie Els: Ernie Els 2001, \$75; available in very limited quantities at golf courses and select retailers nationwide, www.ernieelswines.com.

David Frost: 2003 Gene Sarazen, red: \$20, and white: \$13 to \$15 (limited amounts). Call (832) 563-5825 or visit www.frostwine.com.