



RACE TO THE FINISH

STAR DRIVER **SCOTT PRUETT** KNOWS THAT WHERE GRAPES ARE CONCERNED, YOU HAVE TO FOLLOW NATURE'S PACE CAR.

BY CHRIS GILL

Scott Pruett has made his mark as the most successful Daytona Prototype driver of all time. His achievements on the track include four Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona overall championships, four Grand-Am Daytona Prototype championships, and a top-10 finish in the 1995 Indianapolis 500. However, Pruett is equally proud of the awards and accolades earned by his Pruett Vineyard wines, which include Championship Cuvee Cabernet Sauvignon, an Estate Syrah, a Reserve Syrah, and a Grenache.

It's hard to imagine two pursuits more different from one another than sports car racing and winemaking. Racing involves instant decisions that can shave crucial milliseconds off a lap; winemaking requires years of patience while waiting for nature to take its course.

"Racing is all about now," Pruett confirms. "When you're racing, you can make things happen instantly, especially in the closing moments, when you're forcing things to happen. When you're making wine, you're just along for the ride. The grapes tell you when they want to be picked, the fermentation process tells you how things are going to work, and the wine tells you when it's ready to be bottled. There is no aspect of winemaking that allows me to force any control over it, and it can take years for things to happen."

While Pruett is not the only racing champion in the winemaking business—Mario Andretti and Jeff Gordon both own vineyards as well—he is uniquely involved in every aspect of his wine's production. "I didn't just want to put my name on the bottle, which is what most personalities and athletes in the wine business do," he explains. "I love being outside in the vineyard. I get guidance from incredible winemakers from Napa, but I manage the grapes

as they develop through harvest and do all the winemaking, bottling, and labeling."

Pruett got serious about winemaking some 10 years ago, when he and his wife, Judy, began performing soil and climate research and planting vines on their home's property in Auburn, California, located in the Sierra Foothills.

Although the location is not as well known for producing wine as nearby areas like Napa and Sonoma, it has a long history as a winemaking region, one that extends back to the California gold rush of the mid 1800s. "The wine industry left the Sierra Foothills years ago," Pruett

says, "but there's been a resurgence of interest in winemaking here. This area is ideal for Sangiovese, Syrah, and Viognier." Along the way, Pruett got assistance from Tom Prentice, a soil, climate, and vineyard specialist who has worked with clients like Screaming Eagle and Harlan Estate. "Tom is one of the best in Northern California," Pruett says. "He did all the research and helped me decide what rootstock to use and what clone of Syrah to use."

The vineyard's location—roughly 1,200 feet above sea level, with vines planted on a steep hillside overlooking the American River and Folsom Lake—is certainly a strength. "It's 80 percent fractured rock and red clay soil that is just beautiful," Pruett says. "Because the river and lake are nearby, our vineyard is a little more temperate, with only moderate heat. All of our rows are arranged true north and south, which is the premium direction for wine growing."

Next year, Pruett will release a Cabernet Sauvignon made with grapes from the legendary Beckstoffer Georges III vineyard in Rutherford. "The Cabernet fruit here in the Sierra Foothills is too bright and cherry-tasting for my liking," Pruett says. "Since I'm so close to Napa, it made sense for me to source my Cabernet there. It's like a dream come true to be involved with fruit at that level of quality." **CA**

