



Photo: Mike Weir Estate Winery.

Celebrity

If Wayne Gretzky, Mike Weir and Dan Aykroyd walked into a wine bar, what would they order? **Tony Aspler** explores how each of these Canadian icons got into the wine business.

VINES



Golfer Mike Weir was first in the field. Maybe he got the wine bug from his PGA buddies, Greg Norman and Ernie Els who both have their own wine labels, the former in Australia, the latter in South Africa. A little off-course competition perhaps. "Actually, I've never considered it a competition at all," Mike told me. "I've always enjoyed good wines. I spent a lot of time growing up in the Niagara region, and I've paid close attention to the growth and success of Canadian wines over the years."

Mike's grandparents emigrated from Italy and settled in Niagara Falls, and like many Italian immigrants, they made their own wines. The first wine Mike ever drank was a homemade wine at his grandfather's table. "I think he cut it with ginger ale," says Mike. "The grapes came from Niagara, even if they were a little rough back then."

Does Mike Weir get to share the wine that now bears his name with his fellow international golfers? Indeed he does. He has hosted events at the last two Presidents Cups where his wines were



Photo: Adam Rankin.



Photo: Gretzky Estate Wines.

LEFT – RIGHT: Dan Aykroyd; Wayne Gretzky.

the only ones served. Currently under the Mike Weir label are Cabernet Shiraz, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Cabernet Merlot and Vidal Icewine.

And what has the pursuit of the grape taught Mike Weir? "There are incredible similarities between wine and golf. Golf, like wine knowledge, is a journey. They are both lifelong pursuits that keep you constantly trying, practising and learning more. I don't think you ever get to the point where you can say that you've reached 'perfection' in either case."

The wine epiphany for comedic actor Dan Aykroyd occurred in a Los Angeles nightclub in the early 1980s. The erstwhile Blues Brother, Ghostbuster and Conehead was the opening act for his 'Saturday Night Live' chum, Steve Martin. That night, his Blues Brothers Band guitarist Steve Cropper opened a bottle of wine for him. "It was a big Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon," Dan recalls, although he doesn't remember the winery or the vintage. "I changed my whole perception of what I wanted to taste for the rest of my life."

Until that Proustian moment, he confesses that a big night out in his hometown Ottawa was a bottle of Mateus Rosé. "On our dinner table at home, my parents had Kressmann and big jugs of white Italian wine. My dad bought in volume. But actually my first taste of wine was Mogen David at a Seder."

In 2005, Dan Aykroyd acquired the Canadian rights for the ultra-premium tequila, Patrón. The Canadian importing agent for this brand is Toronto-based Diamond Estates, a company that controls three wineries in the Niagara region – EastDell Estates, Lakeview Cellars and Birchwood Estate Wines. Dan sunk \$1 million into Diamond Estates, saying at the time, "This is a sound investment in a growing and exciting company with smart people. It's also an investment in my home province and an opportunity to put more Canadian wines on shelves alongside Australian and Chilean vintages."

Given his international celebrity status, it was perhaps a no-brainer that Dan Aykroyd should have his name on the label. "They asked me if I'd like to have my own wines...how good is that?"

In the fall of 2007, the company broke ground for the Dan Aykroyd Winery. This 4,200 m² (45,000-sq.-ft.) facility will be built off the Queen Elizabeth Way, on the site currently occupied by Diamond Estates' Birchwood Estate property. The range of Dan Aykroyd wines includes Vidal Icewine, Chardonnay and Cabernet Merlot at popular prices, and a new Vidal Icewine produced under the exclusive Reserve label.

Click onto gretzkyestatewines.com and you'll be greeted by the photo above, a portrait of Wayne Gretzky that suggests his interests go far beyond the hockey arena. Posed against a backdrop of vine rows with a glass of wine in his hand, he wears an enigmatic smile. Perhaps the wine reminded him of the first glass he ever tasted – a red wine made by his grandfather in the 1960s, when Wayne was growing up on a farm in Brantford, Ontario.

Wine is not a beverage you would necessarily associate with hockey, but now that Wayne Gretzky is coaching behind the bench rather than scoring on the ice, he can allow himself that

indulgence. "For many years Janet and I have wanted to fulfill a dream of launching a winery that makes world-class wines," he says. "And we are fortunate to have found talented winemakers who have already won numerous international and domestic wine awards."

Like Mike Weir's wines, Wayne's are made by the winemakers at Creekside Estate Winery in Jordan Station – Rob Power and Craig McDonald – and the labels of the unoaked Chardonnay and Meritage (a red Bordeaux blend) and a new Vidal Icewine bear his legendary number 99. In 2009, these wines will be made at the Wayne Gretzky Estate Winery in Niagara Region, currently under construction.

While none of the three celebrity winery guys actually get their feet in the vat, they do involve themselves in selecting the final blends that end up in the bottle. According to Mike Weir, "I have been fortunate to have been involved in every aspect of the wines – from packaging and labels, to commenting on the wines themselves. I actually do the blending on the Cabernet



Shiraz with the winemakers, although I wish that I had much more time to dedicate to that part of the process. I really enjoy being part of the winemaking and I have a lot of respect for the talents of the winemakers.”

Both Mike Weir and Wayne Gretzky donate proceeds from the sales of their wines to their own foundations. For Mike, the mission is “to advance the physical and educational welfare of children;” and for Wayne the recipients are at-risk or disadvantaged youths.

Now to go back to that question that opened this piece: they would probably do the gentlemanly thing and order a glass of Bob Izumi’s Coyote’s Run Chardonnay – because that TV fishing personality also has his own vintages, produced at his small craft winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake. [MO](#)

Online Grapevine

In an effort to ‘make a difference’, Mike Weir formed the Mike Weir Foundation to support children in need. Net proceeds from the sale of his wines are donated to this worthy cause. [weirwines.com](#)

An investment in his home province, the new Dan Aykroyd Winery will celebrate the region’s terroir as well as pay tribute to Dan’s 30-year career by showcasing some of his favourite memorabilia. [danaykroydwines.com](#)

Take a light-hearted video tour of Wayne Gretzky’s winery with colourful host Jim Jerome, and learn more about Wayne’s winery and its support of the Wayne Gretzky Foundation. [gretzkyestatewines.com](#)