



Champions Vintage



Pruett Vineyard premieres a Syrah fit for a winner

BY JAN TEGLER

CHEERS!

Interested? Stock is limited. Go to pruettvineyard.com for ordering details; prices range from \$25 to \$100. Shipping is immediate.

THE CELEBRATIONS ON the podium at Barber Motorsports Park shortly after 3 p.m. on April 10 were characteristically boisterous. Scott Pruett and Memo Rojas had just handily won the Porsche 250, taking a firm points lead in the Daytona Prototype class of the Grand-Am Rolex Sports Car Series. Job done, Pruett's focus shifted, and he made a dash for the local airport.

America's most successful road racer was on his way to Monterey, Calif., where the product of one of his off-track passions was debuting at the prestigious Pebble Beach Food and Wine Festival the same day.

"We released our first Pruett Syrah," he said. "It was a thrill!"

It was also the culmination of six years of effort and an interest born in the mid-1990s while Pruett was driving in the CART Series for Patrick Racing.

"I'm not a wine guy in the traditional sense," he explained, "but I really enjoy sitting down with a good bottle and some

cheese. And I love farming and just being outside. I started out looking at getting a vineyard in Oregon just outside Portland. But we couldn't quite deal with the weather and then moved back to Northern California, where I'm from."

That's Auburn, Calif., to be precise, a town just up the road from Roseville, where Pruett was raised and where the Pruett family grew wheat, rice and oats for generations. His father carried on the tradition for a time, then stepped away from farming to become an engineer in the aerospace industry.

Pruett had left the fields behind earlier, starting in go-karts at age eight and going on to a career with nine major championships so far. He owns titles in IMSA (GTO/GT), Trans-Am and Grand-Am and wins in CART (1995 Michigan 500, 1997 Surfers Paradise), at the 24 Hours of Daytona (three times) and at the 24 Hours of Le Mans (LMGTS class, 2001). A full season in NASCAR (2001 Cup series) yielded mixed results, but he became a popular road-course ringer thereafter.

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Pruett drives his Grand-Am racing Riley-BMW (above) and steers the winemaking process at his vineyard (above right).



Today, Pruet Vineyard sits on nearly 50 acres of picturesque hillside overlooking the American River Gorge. Roots in the soil help set Pruet apart from other racers-cum-vintners such as Richard Childress ("The Grape Route," *AW*, Jan. 11, 2010) and Mario Andretti ("His Wines Win, Too," Dec. 24, 2007), but so does his hands-on approach.

"I've touched every bottle of wine that has come through my facility," Pruet affirmed. "I cleared the property myself, laid out the vineyard and did a lot of planting. I don't do all of the pruning of the vines, but I do a lot, and I spray the vines, top the barrels, whatever it takes."

He also does full chemical makeups, adds yeast and puts the wine into oak barrels to ferment. Experts were

brought in to research the soil on the property, because the racer didn't want to have wine grapes simply to be able to say he had them in his backyard.

"I did it with the sole intention of getting involved in something exciting," Pruet said.

The learning curve has been steep, but Pruet was wise enough not to go it alone. In addition to his wife, Judy, whom he describes as the winery's "front man," winemaker Brian Mox of Napa-based

Lewis Cellars has provided guidance. Interestingly, there's a racing connection. Lewis Cellars is owned by ex-CART racer Randy Lewis ("Front Runner," *AW*, Dec. 15, 2008). Other racers who are also wine stars, including John Trefethen (Pirelli Drivers Cup USA racer and

owner of Trefethen Vineyards) and Fred Schrader (vintage racer and owner of Schrader Cellars), have also lent a hand.

Pruett Vineyard 2008 Syrah was a hit at Pebble Beach, where Scott and Judy poured glass after glass for luminaries from the food and wine industry and for the public—the majority of whom have no idea what Pruet's "day job" is.

More varietals are on the way, Pruet said, including a Grenache that was bottled in August, not long before he wrapped up a record-setting third DP championship for Chip Ganassi Racing with Felix Sabates.

Pruett Vineyard (which is online at www.pruettvineyard.com) will remain a small-lot, premium-wine producer for now, but it's a pursuit Pruet said he plans to enjoy for years to come.

"Racing is my minute-to-minute, fast-paced life, but winemaking is measured in years," said the 50-year-old hot shoe. "You take a back seat to the wine. It tells you when it's ready to harvest, when it's ready to bottle. It's the complete opposite of racing." 🏎️

