

Q&A WITH Gordon Getty, BILLIONAIRE WINERY OWNER, COMPOSER AND POLITICAL KINGMAKER

The longtime Californian riffs on Shakespeare, going green in the vineyard and the easy-going wines he drinks at home.

A

lifelong Californian, Gordon Getty, 76, has been out of the oil business for more than two decades (in 1986 he sold his family's Getty Oil to Texaco for more than \$10 billion). Since then, Getty has aided the political careers of prominent Golden State politicians including San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, continuously refined his opus operatic work (*Plump Jack*, based on Shakespeare's *Henry IV part I*), and helped create the Napa Valley wineries PlumpJack and Cade with partners Newsom and John Conover. *Wine Enthusiast* recently met up with Getty during a trip to New York, where over lunch at Landmarc in the Time Warner Center one of America's wealthiest men spoke about his affinity for big wines and music, and his distaste for Pinot Noir.

Wine Enthusiast: When did you first develop a taste for wine?

Gordon Getty: It was in my late 20's/early 30's. Rudy Light, my mother's last husband, loved Bordeaux, and back then it was all about French wine. California was trying to prove itself, and Italy and Australia weren't yet established in the States. So I became a Francophile, which frankly, I still am.

WE: Do you consider yourself a serious wine maven or more of a casual wine drinker?

GG: I consider myself a composer. That's my passion. Even as a businessman, I'm simply a wine enthusiast. I don't drink wine every day or with every meal. But when I do, I want wine with taste. That's why I like the Aussie wines even if some people call them vulgar and over the top. Personally, I think that's the way wine should be. I don't profess to understand Pinot Noir.

WE: As a man of means, do you ever enjoy a simple table wine?

GG: With reds, I admit to being somewhat of a snob. That said, our house wine is Heartland from Australia, which is under \$20. I'm fairly easy to please when it comes to whites. In general, I think *vin ordinaire* is fine if we're talking white wines.

WE: And how about your favorite wines, price be damned?

GG: I'd have to start with our mighty Napa competition: I'm very impressed with Schrader, and of course Harlan is amazing. I also like the Super Tuscans once in a while, especially Masseto. But like with Pinot Noir, I don't get Nebbiolo and Sangiovese.



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WE: Do you travel much throughout the wine world, and if so where is your favorite spot?

GG: We recently went to Bordeaux, where we tasted through the 2009s in barrel. They seem to be great wines in the making. I believe you have to love and respect the competition, and also learn from them.

WE: Switching to your love of music, the field in which you got your Bachelor's degree. Would you ever compose an opera or score around the subject of wine?

GG: No, probably not. Although John Falstaff, a key character in *Henry IV* who called himself Plump Jack, drank sack.

WE: Do you sing as well as compose?

GG: I sing a little basso; I've sung *Plump Jack* when everyone else was sick [laughing].

WE: By now most wine fans know about the PlumpJack winery, which was started in the 90s in Oakville and is part of a bigger business that includes hotels, restaurants and a clothing line. What about Cade, which went commercial with the 2006 vintage?

GG: The name Cade comes from *Henry IV part II*, where Jack Cade said, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers," which isn't such a bad idea today. A cade is also an Elizabethan term for a wine cask, as in 'draw a goblet of claret from the cade.' Cade is on Howell Mountain, where we have 21 acres of vineyards and are making about 15,000 cases of Sauvignon Blanc and red wines. It's the greenest winery in California, with gold LEED certification. It's entirely solar powered; we even

used recycled blue jeans for the insulation.

WE: Who are some people the public might know with whom you have shared your wines?

GG: The White House has served PlumpJack Chardonnay three times in recent years. I had President Obama over to the house before he was elected. I'm not sure we drank wine that day...maybe we did. He's a nice guy; very interesting.

WE: And your relationship with Gavin Newsom, the 42-year-old two-term mayor of San Francisco and now a candidate for lieutenant governor of California; how would you describe that?

GG: The Newsoms are virtually family. I go back to high school with his father, Bill. He's still my closest friend [and the administrator of the Gordon P. Getty Family Trust]. I remain very close with Gavin as well.

—MICHAEL SCHACHNER