

Vintage Performance

Dick Vermeil has had many great years in coaching. With his fledgling wine business, he hopes to have many great years in the vineyards as well.

WORDS BY MICHAEL DOLAN

DICK VERMEIL KNOWS HOW TO MOTIVATE FOOTBALL PLAYERS. Vermeil was the very first NFL special teams coach with Los Angeles Rams in 1969. As a head coach, he always stayed close to the guys who might decide the game. So on a blustery day at Arrowhead Stadium in the fall of 2003, he made his placekicker, the NFL's all-time leading scorer Morten Andersen an offer he couldn't refuse. Make this 35-yard field goal with seconds on the clock and break the 24-24 tie with the Chiefs' hated rivals, the Oakland Raiders, and coach would give Andersen a \$500 bottle of cabernet sauvignon from the Bryant Family Vineyards. Andersen made the kick. But when the NFL found out, they prevented Vermeil from giving Andersen the gift. Turns out, the free wine would have been a salary cap violation.

These days, Dick Vermeil is no longer restrained by the labyrinth of NFL rules and may give wine to whomever he pleases. "I love giving wine as a gift, and I love receiving it as well," Vermeil says. "The other night, I opened a bottle I received a few years ago and I thought of the person who gave it to me. That's what makes it special."

Vermeil hopes to not only give wine as gifts but to sell a few bottles as well in his rapidly growing venture, Vermeil Wines. As a boy, coach Vermeil grew up in Calistoga, California in the Napa Valley, where wine was very much a part of family life. "Growing up, even as a child we would have wine at the dinner table. My father used to like to tell the story of how he got sent home from elementary school because he had wine in his thermos. My grandfather was deeply offended because wine was a very big part of our culture."

The Vermeil family's fascination with grapes all began when the coach's great grandfather, Garibaldi Iaccheri, emigrated to San Francisco from Lucca, a town located in Tuscany, Italy. He was a successful businessman on the board of the Bank of Italy (which would become the Bank of America). Iaccheri found a plot of land 75 miles north of the city in Calistoga that looked like the wine regions of home, complete with vineyards. Iaccheri's daughter married Albert Vermeil, Dick Vermeil's grandfather. And the rest is Napa Valley history.

Albert Vermeil would make wine as a hobby, some to drink at the family table and some to give as gifts. "My brother and

I would help our grandfather with some of the more manual labor," says coach Vermeil. "We'd lift the crates of grapes out of the truck and sometimes I would even get to twist the handle and press the grapes."

Because Dick Vermeil's grandfather was 100% French and his grandmother was 100% Italian, wine became part of the social aspect of dining. As in Europe, it was common for children to taste a watered down version of the wine or have a glass with dinner. "I think I started having a glass of wine at dinner regularly when I was 12 years old," he remembers. "Wine was a part of virtually every meal. You would always be tasting different vintages, even if it was a bit watered down for us."

Vermeil's dad loved wine but didn't keep the hobby going in the family. "My dad wasn't much of a conversationalist," coach Vermeil says. "He worked hard every day and when he was done, he would head off to the garage. And if you didn't want to talk about cars, wine or football, there wasn't a lot left to talk about."

The family did however, become great friends with the Frediani family. The Frediani's continued to use the grapes from Garibaldi's vines to produce brilliant wines in Calistoga. "Gene Frediani was like a second dad to me," Vermeil says. "We always talked about one day going into the wine business together. Gene passed away in 1978, while I was coaching in the NFL."

Gene's wife, Jeanne, still runs Frediani Vineyards, with the help of her family. Her son-in-law, Paul Smith, who spent 17 years working with Robert Mondavi, has now partnered with coach Vermeil to launch Vermeil Wines. "I told Paul, 'You make the wine, we'll get the grapes from the Fredianis and we'll make 200-300 cases a year. I'll pay the expenses and maybe I can help with the marketing, because by that time my name was known in coaching.'" In 1999, Smith's On the Edge Winery began producing 175 cases of the Vermeil Cabernet. In just a few years, the quality of the wine was no longer a secret. When wine expert Robert Parker gave the cabernet a 93 score in 2002, some of Vermeil's close friends, including former Chiefs president Carl Peterson decided to invest some money to expand production. Vermeil now hopes

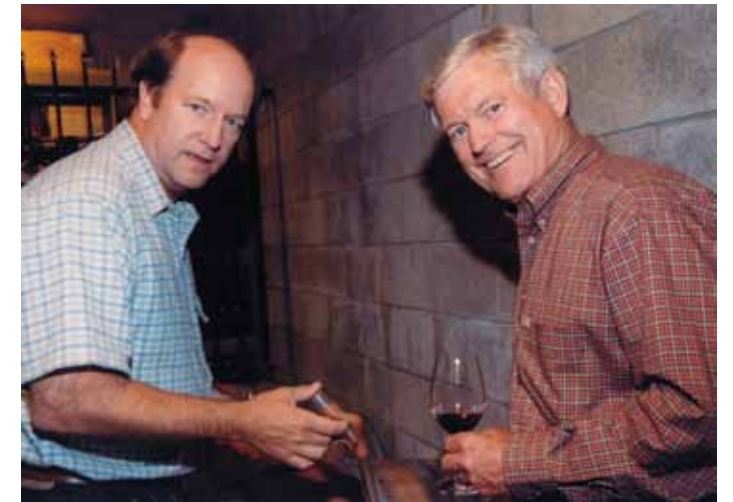


to expand production to 10,000 cases once everything is up and running. And if the wine starts to sell well, they may even build their own winery to continue production.

The increase in production can't come soon enough as Vermeil laments the lack of his own cabernet in his 3,000-bottle



wine cellar. "I'm always giving away a bottle here of there and it goes fast," he says. During spring mini camps, Vermeil and his wife Carol would often have what they would call "Position Dinners," where they would invite the linebacker corps and their wives to dinner one evening, perhaps the offensive linemen and their wives the next. "I would serve the wine and try to educate the guys about it," Vermeil remembers. "Some of them were very knowledgeable about wine already. Tony Richardson, my full-back has a big wine cellar in his house that he calls The Vermeil Room." It's not the same recognition that Vince Lombardi received when the Super Bowl trophy was named after him, but in



some ways you get the sense that Vermeil treasures this recognition from his former players even more.

"Our hope is that we can make this a solid business in five years and if we do, then we can build a winery," says Vermeil. "I've already talked to some of my former quarterbacks and they may take a small interest in it as well. If you're making money and not losing money, it's something that you and some friends can do together. As long as I can help people experience the Napa Valley and the camaraderie and the relationships that good wine creates, it's well worth it."