

# Jeff Gordon

RETIRED NASCAR DRIVER, 4 SPRINT CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS, 93 CAREER WINS; PROPRIETOR, JEFF GORDON CELLARS

*When did you start getting interested in wine?*

I'm from Vallejo, so I always drove through Napa Valley, whether we were going to a racetrack or a lake, to go skiing or boating or just visiting family and friends. As a kid, I can remember seeing these vineyards and wondering what they were all about. That area looked nothing like the area that I grew up in.

The mid-'90s is what really stands out to me. I won a championship, and I went to London and decided to go out to a really nice restaurant and celebrate. I'd never seen a wine list like that before. It was mind-boggling, the variations as well as the quality of the wines. I went with a white Burgundy, a Joseph Drouhin. They decanted it—it was a whole experience, not to mention the wine was just superb. I really started getting more into drinking wine after that.

*When you decided to launch your own label, were there certain qualities you wanted in the winemaker or location? [Gordon partnered with August "Joe" Briggs, and Briggs's nephew, Jesse Inman, in the Napa Valley.]*

Being a NASCAR driver, we didn't think people would expect Jeff Gordon to make a Harlan Estate-type wine. It's a balance of trying to figure out what wine I would be proud of and enjoy, and making it as high-quality as I could, but at the same time creating a price point that was going to be beneficial to us on the business side. I just really enjoyed [Briggs's] wines. At the

beginning, I was focused on [developing] more of a Chardonnay and comparing it to some of my favorite Napa Valley whites like a Far Niente or a Kistler. Now, I exclusively drink red wine, though we still make one white wine.

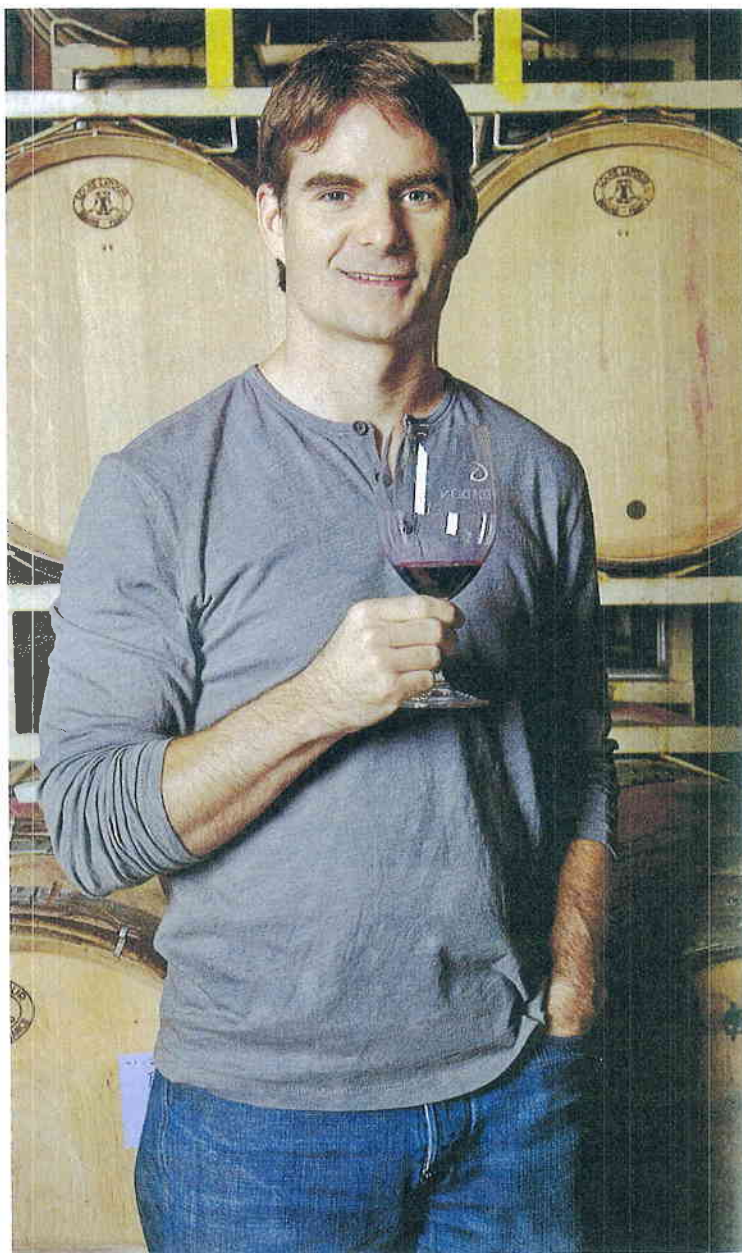
"I've really gotten into French wines—Château Mouton Rothschild to Lafite and Petrus."

*What's in your own wine collection?*

We built a new home in Charlotte, North Carolina, with a wine room. It's not a huge collection, I'd say 300 to 400 bottles. I've really gotten into French wines—Château Mouton Rothschild to Lafite and Petrus. I love drinking a great Bordeaux. It just seems complete. You really get the flavors of the fruit and the earth, and you can't wait for the next sip. Of course, a lot of what I have now, I don't even open them up. If I have a case of something that's special and it's at the right age, I'll open one up for a special occasion.

*Your career involves global travel. Do you have any favorite regions?*

Tuscany was a great experience. While I don't collect a lot of Italian wines, that experience of enjoying them while you're there, and the food—the whole experience is amazing. People are working to live instead of living to work. They enjoy going to



eat and having a glass or two of wine with their lunch or dinner. It's not rushing to get somewhere and doing it quick and getting back to work. I think in America, we tend to see the opposite of that a lot of times. It gave me a whole new appreciation and perspective on enjoying all the things that life has to offer.

*What's ahead for Jeff Gordon Cellars this year?*

Every year, I just want to improve. I taste the wine at different stages of the fermentation process and the bottling process. I'm always giving my feedback. "This is what I like about it, and this is what I'd like to see change or evolve. So let's think about that next year." —Andrea Cooper