

coz and effect

winemaker mitch cosentino blends a passion for golf and the grape

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“HEY, MITCH!” . . . “MITCH, HOW YA DOIN’?” . . . “Got a second, Mitch?” Everyone at the PGA Merchandise Show wants a moment with Mitch Cosentino as the affable, sprightly 56-year-old darts around Orlando’s Orange County Convention Center. Is he this year’s hot new club designer? A swing guru, perhaps? Or a guy who can get tickets to the Masters? Actually, he’s a winemaker.

Cosentino oversees operations at several wineries in Northern California, including Cosentino Winery in the Napa Valley, the flagship for nearly 50 wines. Among these is his highly regarded M. Coz wine, a Meritage (a Bordeaux-style blend made from Napa Valley grapes). M. Coz, which retails for \$150, is a three-time Double Gold Medalist at the San Francisco International Wine Competition and received its Best Wine Award in 1994 and 2001. More recently, M. Coz earned special recognition at the 2008 Orange County Fair Wine Competition, where four judges independently recommended the 2005 M. Coz for a Gold Medal—a rare accomplishment.

Cosentino, a bachelor, puts his energy into two things—wine and golf—and often they’re intertwined. Every year he sponsors the M. Coz Invitational, a two-day tournament in Napa Valley for club

pros, the occasional tour pro and top amateurs. (Cosentino won the tournament in 2000.) Of course, the purse doesn’t approach that of a PGA Tour event, but the food and wine served at the winner’s banquet are hard to match.

Cosentino also produces beautifully etched commemorative bottles for equipment companies to present to players who win tournaments. He always preserves one for himself to put in the wall of fame at his Napa Valley winery. The collection comprises more than 100 bottles, all prominently displayed in the tasting room.

His latest golf-wine blend brings 15-time PGA Tour winner Fred Couples into the mix. In a program similar to Cosentino’s Legends line of wines, which he produces with basketball great Larry Bird, the winemaker has partnered with Couples to make two new wines.

A self-taught winemaker, Cosentino started dabbling in wine production as a wine distributor in the late 1970s. He proved a quick

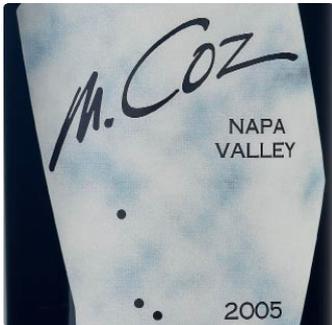


study with an extraordinary palate, and he was soon exchanging fermenting and blending tips with wine icons such as John Parducci; Myron Nightingale and Ed Sbragia (of Beringer Vineyards); and George Bursick (ex- winemaker at Ferrari-Carano and now the manager of winemaking operations at J Vineyards & Winery in Sonoma County).

Among Cosentino’s early success was his ability to lend a deft touch

to merlot wines, which had more established vintners asking him how he achieved his velvety texture without sacrificing complexity and intensity. At a charity function not long ago, Sbragia spotted Cosentino in the audience. “He pointed to me and said: ‘There’s the guy who taught me how to make merlot . . . and how to drink it, too,’” Cosentino recalls.

It’s not surprising that he finds parallels between his two passions. In his view, the subtle and sublime make all the difference in great winemaking and in a sweet golf



A sampler of Mitch Cosentino's wines, starting with his highly decorated M. Coz.



swing. “I have the God-given talent on how to put the pieces together to produce great wine,” Cosentino says. “You can’t just follow a recipe or even go by what tastes good in the barrel. In winemaking, two plus two doesn’t equal four. When you add something to the blend, you don’t always taste it, but it can make a big difference in the final product.”

Cosentino sees golf as a complex combination—a blend, if you will—of equipment, coordination, attitude and physical abilities. “Mentally, I really enjoy taking apart the game to its basic components,” he says. “Once you understand how each part functions, you can see how things interact and influence the others. More often it’s the least obvious detail that has the greatest impact.”

The winemaker struck his first golf ball in 1959. “Golf was hard,” he recalls. “But it was something I loved.” He played on the golf team at Cal State Sacramento University, where he graduated in 1974 with a communications degree. He gave lessons on the side and seriously considered a golf career after school. But even with an offer to become head pro at Manteca Park Golf Course near Sacramento, he thought otherwise. “One day I realized I just

didn’t have the skill, and I would always just be a field player,” he says. “Working on my game became drudgery. I was putting in the time, but I wasn’t making headway.”

Today he has no regrets. “When I decided I wasn’t going to pursue the game as a profession, it came back for me,” he says. “When golf isn’t everything, you begin to play better.” He now plays to a 0.4 Index at Chardonnay Golf Club and Eagle Vines Golf Club in Napa and the Golf Club at Ravenna in Littleton, Colo.

Like thousands of other golf enthusiasts, Cosentino comes to the PGA Merchandise Show each year to see what’s new and schmooze with old friends. “He’s such a club connoisseur,” says Jesse Ortiz, president and chief designer for Bobby Jones Golf Co. “He has seen so many designs over the years and has such a vast collection of clubs, he can pick up things right away, knows what will and won’t work. He’s a historian of club design. . . . Many companies run their designs by him because he has no ax to grind. He’ll tell you what he thinks, and he can articulate his ideas about angles, radiuses and materials. If he wasn’t making wine, he could walk into any clubmaker in the country and take over. He’s that good.”

Flattering as that is, Cosentino plans to stick with the wine business. “You work in the golf business, and it destroys the love for the game,” he says. “Winemaking, on the other

hand, is more of a lifestyle.”

His latest venture, with Couples, began last year when the 1992 Masters champion and several business partners approached him about the idea. Cosentino put together some blends for Couples to try. “Freddie flew into Napa straight from the Shark Shootout in December, and we had a detailed meeting and tasting,” he says. “I was able to fine-tune the wines we had with Freddie. After tasting with him, I knew we had wines that he had a hand in blending, but also wines that had a style that works artistically.”

One will be a Napa-based cabernet sauvignon blend (\$60) and the other a sangiovese/cabernet sauvignon made in a Super Tuscan style (\$30)—a tribute to their Italian heritages. The name of the wines and the labels, which will feature Couples and Cosentino, will be announced during Masters week.

“Stylistically, it will be different from any of the other wines we do,” Cosentino says. “It’s like a whole new start-up. It won’t be a line extension of our wines.”

It should make for an interesting Presidents Cup, he says. The two captains, Couples and Greg Norman, will have their own wines. “Maybe there’ll be a little wine competition,” says Cosentino.

Judging from his long list of gold medals, it would be unwise to bet against him. ■

IN THE BLEND

Mitch Cosentino’s 1986 Poet was the first “Meritage,” a word developed by American winemakers to indicate a blend using traditional Bordeaux varieties. Members of the Meritage Association require that red wines be made from cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot and malbec grapes, with no variety exceeding 90 percent of the blend.

Cosentino offers this primer on what each grape adds to the final mix, whether the wine is from Bordeaux or California:

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

It’s the king of the grapes and provides the most structure and intensity.

MERLOT

It provides finesse, elegance, spice and a velvety mouth feel.

CABERNET FRANC

I view it as the most important grape. It’s a key component for aromatic qualities. It is the spice of the wine. It also provides additional depth and complexity that the others don’t.

PETIT VERDOT

It helps set off the other grapes. It gives the wine a deep color, provides a tannic base, adds depth, but depending on the vintage and the vintner, it isn’t always needed or used.

MALBEC

It adds an additional spice component and tends to brighten the wine in terms of acidity. It sometimes can add a tart fruit component but is typically used in small amounts.

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