

Fast food ... and wine: NASCAR star Jeff Gordon takes the pole position in the kitchen.

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Jun. 20--**Jeff Gordon** realizes he's a rolling contradiction. With a taste for gourmet cuisine, the famed race-car driver is a **wine** sipper in NASCAR Nation.

In a sport known more for beer bellies and tailgate barbecue than cabernet and fine cuisine, the Vallejo native expects to enjoy great **wine**, food and racing this week when he returns to his favorite stamping ground. On Sunday at Sonoma's Infineon Raceway, **Gordon** will try to defend his title in the Toyota/Save Mart 350, a race he's won a record five times.

Gordon doesn't limit his **wine** country pit stops to once a year. With homes in New York City and North Carolina, he can be tempted to fly back to California for a great meal with a favorite chef.

Not afraid of the kitchen, he filmed a cooking segment for the Food Network with Napa's Victor Scargle, the former dean of Julia's Kitchen who now owns Go Fish in St. Helena.

The four-time Nextel Cup champion even has his own **wine** label, the **Jeff Gordon** Collection released by August Briggs Wines in Calistoga.

"When I was a kid, we'd drive through Napa's **wine** country to get to racetracks, and I wondered what went on in those vineyards," **Gordon** recalled during a recent visit. "It got me curious. But it wasn't until I visited London on vacation that I learned to love fine **wine**."

"Through all my travels and great opportunities, I've tasted some really fine wines," he continued. "I like my race car well-balanced with smooth handling and a great finish. That's what I look for in a **wine**, too."

Gordon teamed up with the Briggs winery in 2004. Using Carneros-grown grapes, the first release -- a 2004 chardonnay -- came out in late 2005. **Gordon** toasted his 2006 victory at Infineon with

his own **wine**. His inaugural merlot and cabernet sauvignon, both 2004 vintages, debuted this month.

"I love food, and nothing complements good food more than a good **wine**," he said. "This is an outside interest of mine, something I enjoy."

As part of the upscale line, a merlot-cab blend named **Jeff Gordon's** Joie de Vivre will be released later this year, only in magnums.

Fans won't find **Gordon** wines at NASCAR souvenir trailers or local supermarkets. Distribution is very limited. In California, the wines are available through Buffalo's Shipping Post in Napa, (707) 226-7942 or www.buffship.com. The 2005 chardonnay lists for \$55 a bottle.

Although California sowed the grape seed of inspiration, **Gordon** began his real **wine** education in Europe.

"Here, I grew up in **wine** country, but I had to leave the country to appreciate it," he explained. "It was in London that my real love of **wine** first started. It was right after my first championship (in 1995) and we were celebrating at a fine restaurant. We went all-out and bought the best bottle of **wine** they had. That's when I got introduced to big bold reds and buttery white wines."

So far, the **Jeff Gordon** Collection features three wines: chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon and merlot. The first pinot noir will be released next year.

"It's a really small production," said Beth Adams of August Briggs Wines, which specializes in such limited releases. "We made only 200 cases of the (2004) chardonnay. It's very drinkable; light, spicy with great acid and citrus fruit."

Aged for 18 months in French oak, then bottle-aged another 14 months, the merlot is very big and oaky. According to the Briggs' tasting notes, the complex cabernet features an elegant blend of black currant, plum, raspberry and a hint of toasted oak with a creamy finish.

Said **Gordon**, "In NASCAR, there's no wimpy wines.

"Actually, I didn't want NASCAR fans to think we're marketing it to them -- this isn't a novelty item," he added of his wines. "My (**Jeff Gordon** 24) energy drink, on the other hand; that's different. You'll see a lot of that at races."

Introduced this spring, the tangerine-flavored "JG24" -- named with a nod to **Gordon's** No. 24 Chevrolet as well as nonstop schedule -- was created in collaboration with Pepsi for the booming NASCAR market, which counts more than 75 million Americans as fans. That includes an estimated 30 million women.

Targeting that audience, NASCAR recently launched a brand extension -- NASCAR Cooks! -- tied into more than two dozen major food companies that rank among the sport's many sponsors. On items ranging from Klondike bars to Ragu spaghetti sauce, the branding umbrella will make the NASCAR logo as ubiquitous in supermarket aisles as it is on superspeedways.

Gordon, of course, is his own brand as one of auto racing's most recognizable and marketable celebrities. Equally at ease behind a microphone or a steering wheel, **Gordon** often co-hosts "Live With Regis and Kelly" and is the only NASCAR driver to host "Saturday Night Live."

While in Sonoma recently, **Gordon** toured his old haunts with actor Patrick Dempsey for a TNT documentary to air in July. That included stops at local wineries and restaurants.

NASCAR's renaissance man, **Gordon** is enjoying his own renaissance with four victories this season and a runaway lead in the point standings for a fifth championship.

If life wasn't hectic enough, he'll soon be a father. **Gordon**, 35, and his wife, Belgian actress-model Ingrid Vandebosch, are expecting their first child, a girl, in early July. The couple announced their engagement last June -- at a **Gordon** family croquet get-together in St. Helena -- during NASCAR weekend.

"My wife is an excellent cook," **Gordon** said. "She makes the most amazing traditional Belgian food. But with the baby coming, I'd like to help out more in the kitchen, too.

"I do a little bit of barbecuing at the racetrack, but nothing fancy," he added. "I'm really looking forward to adding a dish and impressing my wife."

To that end, Scargle offered to teach **Gordon** a recipe -- halibut poached in grapeseed oil, served over a warm salad -- that could be equally at home in the kitchen or at a tailgate party, albeit with **wine**-country flair. **Gordon** flew to Sonoma after a race in Phoenix and donned a chef's apron to be Scargle's assistant for a special luncheon at Infineon Raceway.

A longtime NASCAR fan, Scargle proved a perfect wingman for **Gordon**.

"Cooking is like racing," Scargle said. "You put your head down and get the job done. **Jeff** has great, great hand skills; that's what cooking is all about. Coordination helps."

Tackling a new recipe can be daunting, **Gordon** said.

"(Rival driver) Tony Stewart doesn't scare me; this scares me," he said.

Scargle chose a recipe that showed off local produce. He picked out several unusual vegetables such as colorful graffiti cauliflower and romanesco broccoli for the warm salad, but baby carrots and summer squash could also work in this flexible dish. He used verjus -- unfermented grape juice -- instead of vinegar in the salad's vinaigrette.

Gordon prefers his food spicy. "I like pepper, lots of pepper," he said as he liberally twisted the grinder over the fillets.

For fans who want to try this dish during Sonoma's NASCAR weekend, Scargle noted that the halibut can be cooked in a single pan over a burner. This fish can tailgate.

"I'm going to impress my wife with this dish," **Gordon** vowed. "It looks very pretty with lots of color, and it tastes awesome and goes great with the **wine**. This is perfect."

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