

Wine Spectator

Working on a No-Spitter

Retired MLB pitcher Ron Darling makes Syrah to raise money for diabetes research

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It takes a lifetime to learn about wine, says Ron Darling. By contrast, when you discover that your child has a disease, "you learn about that disease in about an hour." Darling's son Jordan was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes 10 years ago, and in response the former MLB pitcher created the Ron Darling Foundation, which directs the majority of its funds to the Diabetes Research Institute in Florida.



Recently, in search of a fund-raising effort that could capitalize on Darling's longtime passion for wine, the right-handed starter—who played for the New York Mets, Oakland Athletics and Montréal Expos—teamed with Sonoma-based Donelan Family Wines to create Darling Syrah Reserve, comprising 150 cases in its debut 2010 vintage. The partnership has since expanded; as of 2013, it's producing a Chardonnay, too. The foundation will receive all profits from the wine sales. Over coffee in New York, Darling spoke with assistant editor Esther Mobley about charity, wine and baseball.

Wine Spectator: Have your tastes changed since you first started drinking wine?

Ron Darling: When I was a young man, living in New York, I liked French wine and Italian wine. Then I moved to California for 10 years and became a California guy. And now that I'm back in New York, I've realized how much I don't know about wine. I've seen my taste in wine go from casual and social to, "What will taste great with this food I'm having?" I don't know enough about [pairing] to do it myself, but wherever I go, the sommeliers will direct me the right way.

WS: Why create a wine label?

RD: Well, Jordan's a sophomore in college now. He's on his own. He's giving himself three shots a day, he's testing his blood a half-dozen times a day by himself. So my thought was, what small thing can I do to somehow feel like I'm helping him? The wine is not exactly an original idea. Whenever I've gone to the grocery store, I always bought Newman's Own. I'm a fan of Paul: When he was alive I loved his movies, and I thought [Newman's Own] was a great idea,

fantastic. My idea is that the proceeds from this wine go straight into research for Type 1 diabetes.

There's three people who put this together: myself, Paul Favele [of distributor HP Selections] and Steve McFadden [of McFadden's Restaurant and Saloon in New York]. So we have a wine person who knows wine inside out, a saloonkeeper in New York who's pushing it to all these people, and then my job is probably to go on Hoda and [Kathie Lee](#)'s [*Today*] show. [Laughs]

Paul helped me settle on Donelan. The Donelan family, they bought into the charitable part of it. They really wanted to be a part of that. They make great wine, they're a small company. It seemed like a very nice, symbiotic relationship. I got married in Sonoma, so it's got good karma.

WS: What does the Darling Syrah Reserve 2010 taste like?

RD: You really taste the Sonoma Valley *terroir*. The wine is strong without being overbearing, and what I love about it—I eat a lot of fish—is that you can equally drink it with a heavier meat dish, but also if you're having a Chilean sea bass or a strong fish, it goes well with that.

WS: Did you drink much wine with other ballplayers when you were in the MLB?

RD: All the time. We used to call it a "big-league dinner." Which meant that when we were on the road, 10, 12 guys would get together who were of that ilk—because some guys were of a different ilk—go to the fanciest restaurant we could go to, and because we were young and single and had money, we would try amazing wines and learn about them. David Cone, Ralph Kiner, Tim McCarver. I don't know if this means that I'm not evolving or I am evolving: I'm still doing the same thing.

[Rusty Staub](#) was my biggest mentor. You know how you feel really stupid around some people? That's how I felt around Rusty when he talked about wine. I'm doing this on such a small scale, but Rusty has devoted his life to good food, good wine and raising money for charity. His noblesse oblige is above any ballplayer I've ever been around. He's always wanted to give back.