

Weir's new winery on old stomping grounds

Posted By MONIQUE BEECH , STANDARD STAFF

Canadian golf star Mike Weir unveiled plans on Monday to open a winery next to a Niagara Falls golf course, signaling a new start to his wine business.

The PGA Tour golfer will build his winery on a 15-acre parcel of land adjacent to the Whirlpool Golf Course. Weir has partnered with the Niagara Parks Commission, a self-financed agency of the province that owns the public golf course.

The building will feature a wine retail boutique, food and beverage area, grape-processing facility, and a Mike Weir gallery to showcase the sports star's golf memorabilia. Construction is expected to begin next summer.

Details of the building have yet to be finalized.

Weir, who has a lot of extended family living in Niagara, said he grew up playing the Niagara Parkway public course with cousins, uncles and his brothers, Jim and Craig.

"To have it right there on the parkway, with all the traffic that goes by there, it's just an ideal setting, really," Weir said after a news conference at Chateau des Charmes on York Road.

"It's kind of my old stomping grounds away from Sarnia," Weir said. "It's pretty neat. It's an opportunity."

Monday's announcement signals the next evolution for Mike Weir Wines.

The 2004 Masters champion launched his own wine brand in April 2005 in partnership with Peter Jensen and Laura McCain- Jensen, who own Creekside Estate Winery in Jordan.

In June, Weir ended his business relationship with the couple, who are also partnered with hockey great Wayne Gretzky in Vineland's Wayne Gretzky Estate Winery.

At the time, both sides said they had different visions for where the brand was headed.

On Monday, Weir announced a new winemaking partnership with St. Davids' Chateau des Charmes winery, a respected 30- year-old family-run institution in the Canadian wine scene.

Mike Weir Wines president Barry Katzman said the brand was looking for a consistent producer that can make a lot of wine at good quality.

Chateau des Charmes owns 270 acres of vineyard at four sites in Niagara-on-the-Lake and controls all of its own grape production.

All the grapes used in the Weir wines will come from the winery's vineyards.

Weir's former wine partner sourced grapes from many different growers.

"To have access to this quality and quantity from a single source will allow us to focus on our style, to get our volumes where we need them to be and never compromise on quality," Katzman said during the news conference.

"It will allow us to grow our brand nationally and around the world."

Paul Bosc Jr., whose family owns Chateau des Charmes, said the winery's job is to make consistently good wine, and let the Weir camp market its brand.

"Where they take the brand in the rest of Canada or the U. S., that's their job," Bosc said. "I'm not going to worry about that.... It could be a very good partnership because, on paper, we shouldn't be in each other's hair too much."

Weir's expansion plans may eventually include the vineyard-rich Okanagan Valley in British Columbia. Last summer, the golfer looked at potential sites for a joint winery and golf course. For now, Weir said his focus is on Niagara. "We're so glad since my ties are right here in Ontario to keep it here," said the 38-year-old Brights Cove, Ont., native.

"We don't plan on moving it anywhere. We want to be established here. If it takes us out west some day, that would be great, too."

Part of the proceeds from the wines will go to the Mike Weir Foundation, which gives money to several children's charities.

The Jensens retain rights to the Weir wine brand until the end of December and will continue to sell their inventory of the golfer's wines until then.

2007 Weir wines produced by Chateau des Charmes will be available in January. The wines will be made by Ontario wine pioneer, Paul Bosc Sr., who founded the winery.

The financial details of the winery are being worked out with the Niagara Parks Commission, said Jim Weir, the golfer's brother and business partner.

Mike Weir Wines will likely be a tenant of Niagara Parks Commission, which owns the property.

The winery will focus primarily on Chardonnay, Cabernet Merlot and Pinot Noir wines. About 30,000 cases will be produced from the 2008 Vintage.

The Weir brand can be found in the LCBO Vintages section.

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