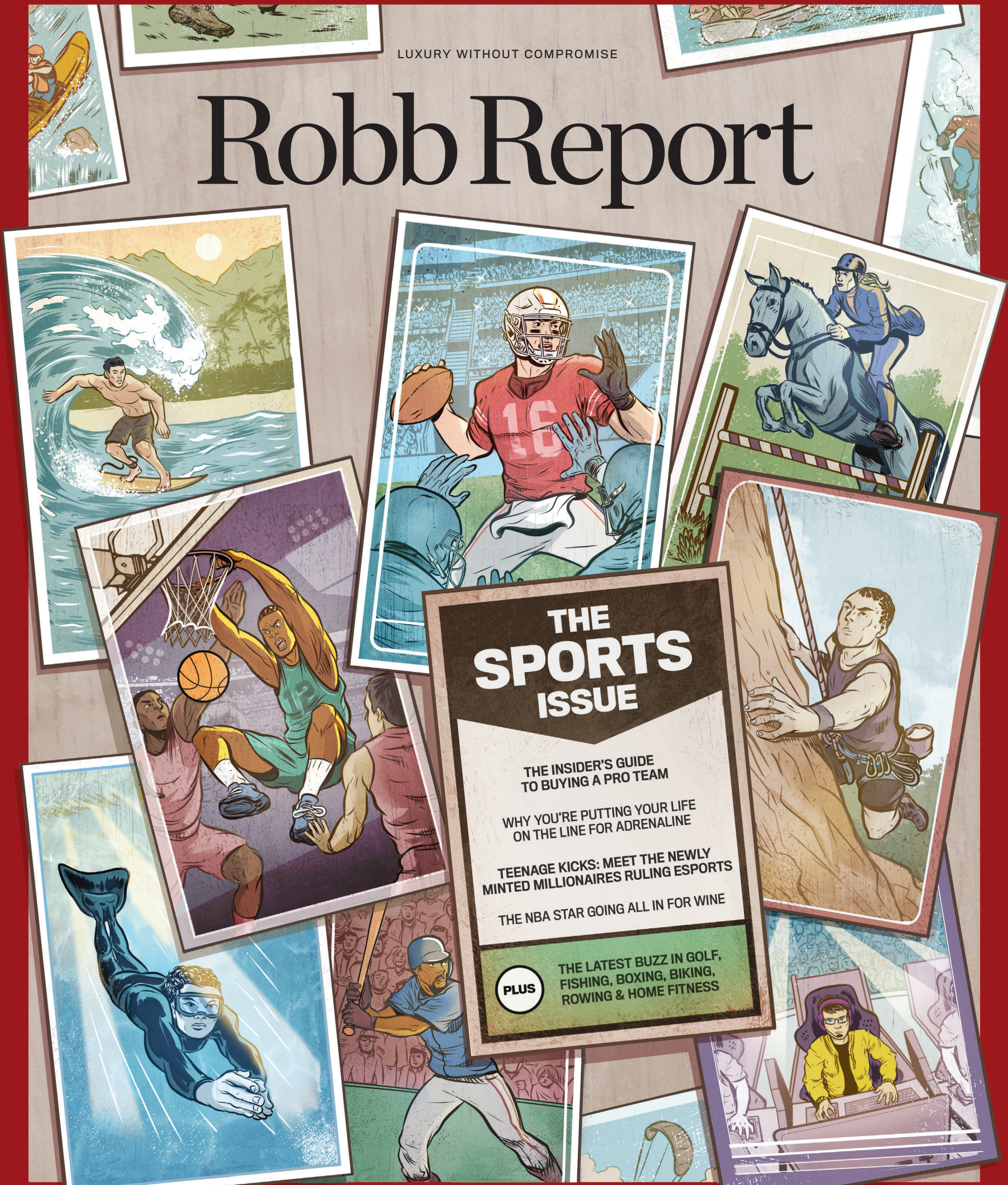


LUXURY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

Robb Report



THE SPORTS ISSUE

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CJ McCollum peers into a tank of Pinot Noir grapes at the Adelsheim Vineyard, where his McCollum Heritage 91 is produced.



CJ McCollum Is CRUSHING IT

With wine the NBA's drink of choice, the Portland Trail Blazers star is using his proximity to Oregon's best vineyards to develop his palate—and his own label.

By Jeremy Repanich

The NBA season was on the line.

Inside the league's Covid-19 bubble last summer, the players gathered in a hotel ballroom at Disney World to debate whether to continue with it in abbreviated form or abandon the title chase entirely. As tension built before the heated deliberations, the reigning NBA Finals MVP, Kawhi Leonard of the Los Angeles Clippers—known as much for his off-the-court silence as for his on-the-court excellence—approached Portland Trail Blazers guard CJ McCollum and pulled him aside.

“Hey, that wine you gave me was good,” McCollum recalls Leonard telling him. “A lot of people don’t know I drink wine, and I don’t know a lot about it, but I know that shit was good.” This wasn’t some random bottle they were discussing. Leonard, like other select VIPs inside the bubble, had received the first vintage of McCollum Heritage 91, the Pinot Noir he was about to release in partnership with Oregon’s Adelsheim Vineyard.

“I’m just sitting there, and Kawhi is going into detail about my wine, telling me how he likes that it’s dry and fruit-forward,” McCollum says over Zoom, pausing to apologize to his dog Fiona for the whirring noise made by the electric wine opener uncorking a bottle. “This was happening all the time throughout the bubble. I shared it with people, and our GM shared it with other GMs, and then sometimes someone would randomly stop me and say thanks for the wine.” Some unlucky players started to wonder if their allotment would come. Others who did get a bottle wanted cases, and even total strangers tried to get their hands on McCollum Heritage 91.

As players, coaches and team staff relocated to Orlando last summer and secluded themselves from the larger public—including their families—in order to finish playing the season, wine helped them pass the time in their

months at Disney World Resorts. Armed with cases of not only his own label but plenty of other bottles, the 29-year-old McCollum became the bubble's unofficial sommelier. Quite the change for a guy who less than a decade prior didn't have much interest in drinking wine at all.

When he attended Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, McCollum and his girlfriend, Elise—now his wife—weren't exactly wine aficionados. "I didn't really like the taste of it," McCollum says. "My palate wasn't developed yet." After they turned 21, Elise's parents gave the two a bottle of Merlot, and a seed was planted. During their senior year, it grew a little, primarily at Elise's behest. "We'd go out to dinner and I'd order a glass and he'd go, 'Okay, I'll have what she's having,'" Elise says.

That changed after the Blazers drafted McCollum 10th overall in 2013. The 6-foot-3 guard from Canton, Ohio, headed west to live in a city that's near one of the country's great Pinot Noir-producing regions, and he would eventually take full advantage.

Across the Willamette River from the Moda Center, where the Blazers play their home games, RingSide Steakhouse has been around since 1944. It's the kind of place where even the mashed potatoes are made with lobster, bartenders wear bow ties and the wine cellar's inventory stretches to nearly 1,000 labels. After home games, McCollum would regularly cozy up to the RingSide bar, either with a teammate or by himself. In his second season as a pro, he was still new to wine, open to suggestions and happy to chat with his server about what he should drink. He had an affinity for laid-back, lighter-bodied selections, and one day in 2014 he came across Walter Scott on the list and thought he'd give it a try. It proved to be an epiphany.

"I'll never forget it. It shook my outlook on wine and what the vines could produce," McCollum says.

When he drank the Walter Scott Pinot from the Eola-Amity Hills sub-appellation about an hour outside Portland, he was taken with the smooth, elegant character of a wine grown in volcanic soil. His curiosity became an obsession. "That was when I started filling up my cellar, started understanding regions and started watching Netflix documentaries and going down a rabbit hole," he says, dressed in a crisp white Thom Browne dress shirt with its signature red, white and blue grosgrain armbands. His in-home cellar now has around 600 bottles, and he's looking for additional off-site storage as his collection grows. He has stocked up on his birth-year bottles from Adelsheim, some Screaming Eagle, a



1985 Chateaux Margaux and some "Super Tuscans," including selections from Solaia. Yet his heart is firmly planted in Oregon.

Early in his journey, McCollum became a fixture at tasting rooms in the area and joined so many wine clubs that his house was inundated with bottles all at once, to the point that he had to work with vineyards to stagger deliveries.

In the Oregon wine country, he found a group of people willing to feed his inquisitiveness. "There's not a sense of proprietary information here. I think everyone is very giving with what they've learned," says Adelsheim winemaker Gina Hennen. "I've not really come across that in any other wine region in the world."

Hennen herself came to wine as an outsider, leaving a career in micro-electronics engineering and returning to Oregon, where she went to college, to pursue a passion for winemaking. She loved applying her science background to something other than computer processors, instead turning grapes into wine while also embracing the artistry that couldn't be governed by science.

For McCollum, the community drew him in as much as the wine. "Meeting some of the somms, winemakers

and people who love wine the way I love basketball, it was this whole new world that I was exposed to," he says with a reverent laugh. "There's a lot of parallels between sports and people in the wine industry

"It shook my outlook on wine and what the vines could produce."



the process and to work with us, and not just put his name on it—someone with a real investment and stake in what they’re doing,” Hennen says. She found that dedication in McCollum, who, like so many other NBA players, is determined to use his platform to build a business that will survive well past his playing days. In Adelsheim, McCollum saw a winery that would collaborate and teach him all aspects of the enterprise.

He visited the winery multiple times, touring the facilities and walking the vineyards, located about 30 miles outside of Portland. “It was like a crash course—a Wine 101,” McCollum says. “I always tell them to explain things to me in layman’s terms so I can understand, but then also give me the wine lingo you’d normally use with your peers.” It all led to a tasting at Adelsheim’s wine lab, to really suss out McCollum’s palate.

Hennen made eight sample blends from various barrels of 2018 vintage that were starting to take shape but were far from finished. As McCollum sipped each glass blind, he described their characteristics before sliding his preferences to one side. The trio he chose were the only examples made from vines planted in volcanic soil, the particular style he’d sought out since he had drunk that Walter Scott Pinot.

“He had interesting things to say with all of them, but he really gravitated toward certain wine styles,” Hennen says. “He was looking for more pristine red fruit and the elegant structure that you can often get from volcanic soil in the Willamette Valley. It was attention-grabbing. I was immediately aware of how invested and how serious he was in developing a wine.”

After consultations with McCollum, Hennen got to work selecting barrels from three contiguous vineyards in the Chehalem Mountains—Boulder Bluff, Quarter Mile Lane and Bryan Creek—to blend into the final wine. All three grow Pinot Noir in volcanic soil, but each contributes a different characteristic. From Bryan Creek she drew on the taut and structural qualities of the grapes as the backbone of the wine. Because up to 25 percent of Quarter Mile Lane is fermented whole cluster, the tannin of the grape is accentuated, giving the wine its subtle grip. Boulder Bluff provided rich, plush textures and deep red-fruit qualities. The wine aged for 10 months in French-oak barrels, with only 26 percent new, so as not to overwhelm the subtlety of the Pinot.

The team had a tasting together to finalize the formula, and then it was time to wait. “That’s the scary part,” McCollum says. “I’m tasting a wine that’s not done yet, so I’ve got to put my faith in Gina. I’m putting my name on this, so I want to make sure it’s right.” In the meantime, he dived into other aspects of producing his first vintage, speaking with people outside Adelsheim as well—such as

Lloyd Davis of the Sonoma winery Corner 103—to get advice, including on adding some personal touches to the branding. McCollum created a name that nods to his birth year and the street he grew up on in Canton, designed a label with an anthurium, Elise’s favorite flower, on it and planned marketing efforts around the wine’s rollout.

McCollum mapped out the release in his head more than a year in advance and targeted a date in September 2020, to avoid conflicts with the basketball season. “We had a black-tie affair [planned], events where we’d raise money for charity and a lot of other ideas for a rollout where I’d be present in Oregon,” he says.

Covid-19 scuttled any dreams of a big gala. But the entrepreneurial McCollum saw a different way he could show the world what he’d been up to.

The NBA bubble was a social experiment we won’t likely ever see repeated. Beginning in July, four months after Covid-19 had abruptly put a halt to the season, a collection of some of the world’s most famous athletes isolated together at Disney, where contact with the outside world was so verboten that one player had to spend an extra 10 days in isolation because he stepped out of the resort’s bubble long enough to accept his Postmates food order. No one was leaving; no one was getting in.

Without friends or loved ones allowed until August 31, after the second round of the playoffs had begun, the only companionship the players, team staff and league officials had for eight weeks was each other. The isolation was taxing, but for McCollum it afforded him time to block out the distractions surrounding an NBA player’s life off the court. “We’ll never forget that bubble experience,” McCollum says. “It’s the only time in my life where I had one responsibility. You don’t have to worry about tickets. You don’t have to take pictures or sign autographs. There are no appearances. You just play basketball and then you sit. And it’s almost like you sit in stillness.”

The players had to fill all that downtime somehow. There were cards games, people fished on the resort’s lake, Miami Heat forward Jimmy Butler became a barista and sold coffee for \$20 a cup, and there was wine. Lots of wine. The bubble turned out to be the perfect place for McCollum to promote his new label.

Oenophilia had been sweeping the NBA for a few years. The league’s superstars, from LeBron James and Chris Paul to Steph Curry and Carmelo Anthony, transformed wine appreciation into a shared passion and a status symbol among their peers. “Now, no longer are people impressed by your finan-

because you want to perfect your sport, but it never truly happens. You get really good at it, but there’s still some things that you may not know. Wine is a similar thing, where you can learn a lot and still not know anything.”

McCollum noses a glass of his second release, a 2020 Willamette Valley Rosé, at Adelsheim.

The Blazers celebrated the team’s 50th anniversary in 2020, and to commemorate the milestone, the club partnered with Adelsheim for a pair of limited-edition wines. In the process of making them, Hennen and her colleagues heard that McCollum was interested in the wine business—and even in making his own someday—so they approached him about a partnership. Neither side wanted some hands-off licensing agreement.

“We were much more interested to work with someone who really wanted to learn



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: McCollum against the New Orleans Pelicans; with Adelsheim vineyard manager Kelli Gregory; Bryan Creek Vineyard, where some of the grapes in his Pinot Noir are grown.



cial portfolio or how big your house is,” actor Gabrielle Union, who is married to retired Miami Heat star Dwyane Wade, told ESPN in 2018. “Nobody talks about square footage. Nobody talks about cars or jewelry or whatever. It’s who can bring the best bottle of wine.”

Bubble life was no different. Players and coaches arrived in Orlando with prized bottles, and whether they were unwinding after games, having dinner or just relaxing, gatherings revolved around wine. “If it was my off day, I’d get the ice bucket and the bubbly by the pool, and I’d send some to other players and they’d send something back,” McCollum says. “We had some elite grapes there. One night, Dame [Damian Lillard], Melo [Carmelo Anthony], Terry [Stotts, the Blazers’ head coach] and our trainer Geoff Clark had some heavy hitters over dinner, including a 2014 Screaming Eagle.”

McCollum’s teammate Melo had a giant wine refrigerator delivered to his suite (“Let’s just say this wasn’t a 12-bottle fridge,” McCollum remembers with a laugh), but the lengths McCollum went to became stuff of legend in the bubble—and even surprised Elise. When ESPN reported that McCollum kept his room at a crisp 60 degrees to safeguard the wine he’d shipped to Orlando, Elise couldn’t believe it. “He hates the cold. I’ll walk into his hotel room in Miami and it’ll be 80 degrees,” she says. “I



THE COMPETITION

As CJ McCollum has shown, affection for wine in the NBA goes well beyond impressive home cellars and packing cases of Château Haut-Brion on team road trips. The stealth status symbol these days is a label of your own. Here are four former players who've traded the hardwood for French oak.

YAO FAMILY WINES Yao Ming

- It's probably safe to assume there isn't a taller wine producer out there than the 7-foot-6 former Houston Rockets star. Long before wine became the drink du jour in the NBA, the Hall of Famer was frequenting Texas steak houses in the '00s and learning about the best examples to pair with his meals. In 2011, the year he retired, he launched his eponymous winery in Napa Valley, which now offers multiple Cabernet Sauvignons, a dessert wine, a red blend and a sparkling.

D WADE CELLARS Dwyane Wade

- When Miami assembled its super-team in the early '10s, the Heat's big three of Wade, LeBron James and Chris Bosh developed their friendship off the court with a shared love of good wine. After a 2014 visit to Napa during harvest, Wade decided to get into the business himself, launching D Wade Cellars with vintner Jayson Pahlmeyer. The label currently features two Cabernet Sauvignons, a Chenin Blanc and a Rosé.

ALEKSANDER Sasha Vujacic

- While the Slovenian shooting guard was winning titles with the Los Angeles Lakers at the turn of the last decade, his parents moved to the States to start a winery with him. In 2009, they purchased a property in Paso Robles, Calif., and created the first vintage of their Bordeaux blend in 2010. Their latest reserve release is a 2016 aged for 42 months in Serbian- and French-oak barrels.

CHOSEN FAMILY WINES Channing Frye

- Retired NBA champion Channing Frye developed an affinity for Oregon wines while playing for Portland in the late '00s. Even as he changed teams, he and his wife made it their home base. After his playing career ended in 2019, he teamed up with L'Angolo Estate to produce a Pinot Noir, a Chardonnay and a Rosé, all of which sold out soon after their launch last fall. Another Pinot debuted in April, and additional varietals are planned beginning this summer.

FaceTimed him when I read that and said I wanted to see his thermostat. I was shocked. I was like, 'Wow, you really love your wine, to store it at the optimal temperature.'"

He was protecting precious cargo, after all. Along with other favorites from his cellar, he brought more than 100 bottles of McCollum Heritage 91 with him to the bubble, where he could hand them out to friends around the league as sneak previews. The hope, of course, was that they'd like it—and post about it, giving his budding brand a boost.

"I'd get the ice bucket and the bubbly by the pool, and I'd send some to other players."

Because players had to quarantine when they first arrived, McCollum couldn't traipse around Disney World dropping off bottles at all the hotels. So staff from the league office stepped up to help, shuttling wine to McCollum's roster of VIPs. Of course, he had friends on that list, like Victor Oladipo and Michael Carter-Williams. But he also thought carefully about getting bottles in the hands of people he knew loved wine.

The list included Jimmy Butler, an Italian-wine devotee who traveled to Tuscan in the 2018 off-season because of his love of

Sassicaia. Another recipient of Heritage 91 was New Orleans guard JJ Redick, who is known for his enthusiasm for Barolos and Burgundies and receives a bottle of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti from his wife on each birthday. Redick has turned other players onto Burgundy as well, including Josh Hart, a Pelicans teammate. Hart, who scored a Heritage 91 too, first fell in love with wine when he played for the Los Angeles Lakers and LeBron James would serve up Mouton Rothschild on the team plane. Hart has become a big fan of Napa and Bordeaux while also dabbling in northern Rhône. He even has a dedicated Instagram feed (@JHartCellars) to show off prized bottles he's drinking, such as a Château Latour 2009 or a Domaine Jean-Louis Chave 1995 Hermitage. Hart has become so devoted to wine that he helped fundraising efforts for disaster relief after the 2020 Napa fires and partnered with Wine Access and the Napa Valley Wine Academy to fund scholarships to increase diversity in the wine business.

So McCollum was well aware the men tasting his bottle knew their stuff—and he was ready for criticism. "NBA players are blunt," McCollum says. But praise came at even the most unexpected times, as with Kawhi Leonard ahead of the vote on whether to continue the season, or during the first round of the playoffs—and not just in passing by the pool.

On the court, the Blazers went on a

tear inside the bubble, with McCollum averaging 21.9 points per game, to squeak into the playoffs. There they faced the top-seeded Lakers. "It was game one or two, and we were winning at the time," McCollum recalls. "When you're playing, you're locked in. You may say, 'What's up?,' at the beginning of the game, but you don't really talk." That game mentality was in full force that night, until McCollum lined up next to Lakers star Anthony Davis while another player attempted free throws.

As McCollum remembers it, Davis leaned in. "Hey, bro, I meant to tell you, thanks for the wine."

"Did you like it?" McCollum replied, a little surprised by Davis's choice of timing.

"Yeah, that was good," Davis affirmed.

Remembering the moment when one of the world's best basketball players wanted to chat about his wine amid the heat of battle still makes McCollum crack up. "He told me that during a game!"

But the overall reaction McCollum received isn't a surprise, considering the quality of wine bearing his name. The Pinot has a backbone of acidity that gives it structure without overwhelming the palate, and it's balanced with a slight cherry sweetness.

McCollum still had 40 bottles of his cellar stash left when the eventual-champion Lakers bounced the Blazers out of the playoffs early. Yet the bubble was far from a total loss for McCollum. All the promotion worked. When the 133 cases produced went on sale in September for \$50 per bottle, they were gone in 45 minutes.

With the success of his first vintage, McCollum is contemplating his next move: scale up and release more, change the price or expand into other varietals? His 2019 Pinot Noir is currently bottled, awaiting a fall release, and his new Rosé was set to drop in April. "He's expanding his portfolio and really building a sustainable business," Hennen says. The creative outlet and business challenge wine presents are different from the lightning-fast decision-making on the court, and that is half the appeal. But there's more: He wants to make wine approachable to more people, starting at home.

"One of the things I like the most about being here is that when family comes, we can take them to our favorite spots, and I can get my mom, who is more into whites, to drink reds, and my dad to try wine instead of beer. It's a challenge to me," McCollum says. "Wine can be confusing and overwhelming sometimes—it took me years of watching documentaries and harassing somms and winemakers to get where I am now—but if you embrace it, you allow yourself to try new things." 