

Finding the Hidden Gems of the Wine World

An Interview with Michael P. Votto, President, Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder, Votto Vines

EDITORS' NOTE As Chief Executive Officer of Votto Vines, Mike Votto is responsible for the strategic direction of the family business that he co-founded in 2009. Prior to transitioning to a full-time role at Votto Vines, Votto spent more than 10 years practicing commercial real estate and corporate law at two American Lawyer Top 100 law firms in New York City and Boston, and later served as Vice President, General Counsel and Chief Compliance Officer of an



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asset management firm with greater than \$25 billion in assets under management. Votto is a frequent lecturer and panelist at both investment and wine industry conferences. He also works with several technology companies as an advisor and angel investor, including venture-backed TruePic, a San Diego-based digital image and video authentication company. In 2013, Votto was selected as one of Connecticut Magazine's prestigious 40 under 40 business leaders and in 2014 was nominated for the Wine Enthusiast Wine Star Awards as "Innovator/Executive of the Year." Votto has been featured as part of Forbes' coverage of America's Most Promising Companies and was profiled in Michael Caldwell's book, The Corporate Wizards. In 2015, he was selected by Lawyers Weekly as one of the leading in-house attorneys in New England and in 2016 he was named one of the top middle-market CEOs in America by Axial. In 2019, Votto was a semi-finalist for the prestigious Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year™ award. Votto earned a bachelor's degree cum laude in European history at Union College where he was a member of the varsity basketball team and Sigma Chi fraternity. He also studied abroad in Florence, Italy during his undergraduate studies. He earned a law degree magna cum laude from Syracuse University, which he attended on a full scholarship as a graduate assistant for the Syracuse football program. At Syracuse, he was an editor of the Syracuse Journal of International Law and Commerce and a member of the Justinian Honorary Law society. Subsequent to law school graduation, Votto completed Wine Studies II coursework at the Boston University Elizabeth Bishop Wine Resource Center.

COMPANY BRIEF Founded in 2009, Votto Vines (vottovines.com) is a dynamic family-operated business headquartered in Connecticut focusing on the importation, marketing, and distribution of fine wines produced by leading vineyards around the world, as well as development of innovative private label and proprietary brands. Votto Vines has experienced rapid growth since its inception, and in 2014 Votto Vines became the first wine importing company ever to earn a spot on the INC. 500 as one of America's fastest growing companies. In January

2015, Votto Vines was named by Forbes as one of America's Most Promising Companies and in September 2015, Votto Vines was nominated by Wine Enthusiast as Wine and Spirits Importer of the Year. In October 2015 and again in December 2017, Entrepreneur Magazine named Votto Vines as One of the Best Entrepreneurial Companies in America. Votto Vines portfolio features some of the top-rated wines currently being produced in Italy, Spain, France, Portugal, New Zealand, Australia, Chile, and Argentina as well as craft spirits. Today, Votto Vines is an importing company with national reach and a regional wholesaler covering Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts via subsidiary Global Wines.



What was the vision for creating Votto Vines and how do you define its mission?

The vision for creating Votto Vines is and has always been to find the hidden gems of the wine world and bring those to the U.S. market. We are looking for wines that are authentic, original, and unique, but that also demonstrate exceptional price-quality for their appellation.

How has Votto Vines evolved, and will you provide an overview of the portfolio?

Votto Vines started out of the back of Nick Votto's Subaru, delivering cases by hand. In the first year, 2009, we sold about 1,000 cases, and now we move well over 200,000 cases annually. We sell nationally in nearly all 50 U.S. states and have established a solid base of customers and distribution partners.

The portfolio features wines from all over the world: Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, New Zealand, Australia, Chile, Argentina, and more. The most robust parts of our portfolio are definitely Italian and French wines, with Spain and Portugal close behind.

How important is it for Votto Vines to maintain an entrepreneurial spirit and to keep innovation at the forefront of the company culture?

I believe Votto Vines' entrepreneurial spirit is what makes us shine, as well as our



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out-of-the-box thinking. We're always workshopping new ideas and strategies to best position ourselves within the market and for the future. We are a group of dedicated, hard-working, and ambitious individuals, and that's what drives the business day in and day out.

What have been the keys to Votto Vines industry leadership and how do you define the Votto Vines difference?

We are still a small company by industry standards, but we aspire to grow more and more driven by our entrepreneurial spirit, our work ethic, and our ambition. We're out searching for authentic, affordable, and delicious wines every single day.

How is technology impacting the way Votto Vines operates, and the wine industry more broadly?

Technology has made an impact on the sales, marketing, and entrepreneurial world in all sectors, including the wine industry. Whether it's some of the newer online tools for importers and distributors, or our partnerships with e-commerce companies, technology has really allowed the business to flourish, especially during the pandemic. Online platforms that we work with made sure that people could still purchase wine without having to leave their homes.



Additionally, social media and the online aspect of selling wine has allowed us to expand the reach of our brands. While certain wines may not be available at your local liquor store, you can surely find them online and have them shipped straight to your house. The online wine market has certainly been a strong contributor to our business.

Where do you see the greatest opportunities for growth for Votto Vines?

With ongoing consolidation in the industry, there is an opportunity for small and midsize companies to continue being dynamic, entrepreneurial, and nimble to add value for both suppliers and customers. If we can continue to deliver great wines that allow our customers to make a healthy margin and also satisfy consumers, then we will have a great opportunity to continue our growth trajectory.

What has made the family dynamic at Votto Vines work so well?

I think this comes down to all of our diverse professional backgrounds. I have a background in law; Jeremy has a background in real estate; Steve has a background in the investment and asset management world; Peter is an engineer; and Nick is our resident outdoorsman, so everyone brings something unique to the table.

At the same time, members of the Votto family and the great team of employees we have behind us are all cut from the same cloth. We all want to work hard, sell wine, make connections, and see the business grow. With that kind of unity and teamwork, we are able to collaborate effectively to problem solve and get things done.

Votto Vines has achieved strong growth since its founding in 2009. Are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate what you have accomplished?

We have been fortunate to build a dynamic business. I'm grateful for that, along with our incredible team. We work hard and support each other. A lot is made of company culture these days, and I'm very proud of the friendship and camaraderie that we have. With that said, I do take a moment every so often to reflect on the business and what we have accomplished. There is always room for improvement and growth, but I am proud to be the leader of this organization. ●

