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NFL vet is Texas grapes' MVP;  
In a place known more for cows than cabernet, Alphonse Dotson's  
vines raise the industry's game

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As he strides through his vineyard wearing a wide-brimmed hat and tan coveralls, the years fall away so easily from Alphonse Dotson that, even at age 65, one can picture him lining up at defensive tackle for the NFL's Oakland Raiders.

While nearly 40 years have passed since Dotson was tossing aside blockers, he remains an imposing figure -- the result of 70-hour work weeks tending some of the most prized grapes in Texas.

His broad grin and outstretched hand belie his fearsome football image as he greets visitors to his 83-acre vineyard northwest of Austin. His handshake, which threatens, but doesn't crush, reveals the calluses that come from hard work.

Here, at Certenberg Vineyards, Dotson's grapevines -- some 1,800 plants in all -- have produced what some say are the best cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay grapes in the Texas Hill Country.

Wine is hot in Texas and the wine coming out of the Hill Country is winning numerous awards.

In January, *Saveur* magazine included Dotson and the vineyard in its 10th annual list of 100 favorites in the world of food.

As the market for peanuts dried up and cattle prices fell, some Texans turned to winemaking after discovering that the area north and west of San Antonio and Austin contains soil that grows excellent grapes. While Texas pales in comparison to California, the nation's top wine producer, the Lone Star state now has more than 150 wineries and Dotson predicts he will own a winery there too.

For now, Dotson and his wife, Martha, grow the grapes and sell them -- all of them -- to Fall Creek Vineyards, located near Llano. Fall Creek is the oldest of the Hill Country wineries and the state's third largest.

Ed Auler, Fall Creek owner, said wines made with Dotson's grapes have won major awards.

"Texas has got a lot of different soils and micro-climates and when you can match them up, you can grow some good grapes," Auler said in an interview. "Alphonse has demonstrated the ability to grow world-class grapes there. They are the best in Texas."

\ From gridiron to grapes

How does a native of Houston, graduate of Grambling University with a degree in fine arts and a career in the National Football League wind up growing grapes and becoming president of the Texas Wine and Grape Growers Association?

After hanging up his NFL cleats in 1970, Dotson played in the Canadian Football League, then worked variously as a concert and sporting event promoter, sports agent ("too much like baby-sitting") and rough-neck oil field trucker before taking time to travel to Africa, South America and Mexico.

In 1983, Dotson settled into a life of leisure in Acapulco. "I thought I would retire in the middle and work later," he says with a deep chuckle.

He fell in love and married Martha Cervantes and they started a family. By 1994, they were ready to leave Acapulco.

"I thought, I have to do something else," Dotson says. "What is it going to be? And I thought, I'm going to do grapes."

That wasn't a just a bolt from the blue -- as a youngster, Dotson had seen the grape arbor at the Houston home of his grandfather, Alphonse Certenberg. "I said to my grandfather, 'You can grow grapes in Houston?' And he just smiled."

Decades later, Dotson began to research grape-growing with a passion. "My mother told me, 'I used to worry that you might become a gambler and now you are taking the biggest gamble of them all,'" Dotson says.

Former teammates "told me I was crazy. I just told them I can read and I can learn," Dotson says. So he met with scientists at the University of California Davis' department of viticulture and enology (the study of grape-growing and winemaking), and winemakers in the Hill Country. He studied soil maps.

\ A winning streak

His search for land took him northwest of Austin on state Highway 71 (his NFL number) toward Brady, Texas -- where relatives on his mother's side had lived years earlier. He wound up 120 miles from Austin in Voca, an eye-blink town; population 50.

There, he found the red soil he had been looking for. And it was just about that time that he was handling the negotiations for his son, Santana Dotson, a defensive tackle for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers who had become a free agent.

When a deal was cut with the Green Bay Packers, Dotson used his commission to buy the 83 acres that now include 29 acres of grapevines. He and Martha left their four-story house in Acapulco for a 2,500-square-foot warehouse-style home with a concrete floor.

The first planting was on May 4, 1997, and four days later, 2 inches of rain fell. It was the beginning of a heady run for Dotson. In 1999, the vineyard produced nearly 25 tons of grapes. In 2000, the crop grew to 77 tons and the bounty topped 100 tons in 2001 and 2002.

Along the way, Martha worked side by side with her husband in the vineyard. "This is a labor of love," she said. "You come to love the plants like children and you realize that only God can make this so beautiful."

And then, "the Big Fella," as Dotson refers to God, "took me down." For three consecutive years he was hit by major freezes that damaged his vines and crippled his crop, cutting it to as low as 11 tons two years ago. Now Dotson says he has installed a sprinkler system to protect the grapes during freezes.

Dotson acknowledges that he has led a varied life. "And this is a good chapter," he says. "After being humbled by the Big Guy, I'm not taking things for granted. I'm working hard to be successful."

"Our goal is to work back to 100 tons and then beginning to set aside some to have our own winery and develop our own wines," Dotson says.

"Alphonse and Martha are about as conscientious and work as hard as any two people I know," Auler said. "And they have a world-class site. The grapes are a joy to behold."

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**GRAPHIC:** Photo: A longhorn cow wanders the rows of vines at Certenberg Vineyards, a Texas outfit owned by ex-athlete Alphonse Dotson.\

Photo: Alphonse Dotson and his wife, Martha, work side by side in the vineyard.

Photos for the Tribune by Brian Harkin

Photo(s)

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