

# Exclusive: Kathie Lee Gifford launches wine line

Olivia Barker, USA TODAY 5:22 p.m. EDT March 17, 2014

*'What took me so long?' wonders the (alleged) queen of the mid-morning quaff.*



(Photo: Brian Doben)

NEW YORK — Sitting down to a leisurely lunch with Kathie Lee Gifford means readying yourself for some rim shots: The kind she's been delivering since "I came out in the placenta." And the kind she's been seemingly imbibing on air for nearly six years, since she and Hoda Kotb turned the fourth hour of *Today* into happy hour. (Although those Boozeday Tuesday and Winesday Wednesday glass rims are certainly filled with far more than a shot of sauce.)

And often those two kinds of rim shots, shtick and swill, mix. "Would you like to order some lunch?" she innocently asks her midday date. "Because we intend to get you drunk." Ba-dum ching.

So it's chardonnay-clear why Gifford would want to bottle and sell her well-documented (if "highly, highly exaggerated") love for wine. Indeed, the key question is, "What took me so long?" she says, before breaking into song: "What kind of fool am I?"

Gifford, dressed simply, in black, is stationed in a Chianti-red vinyl banquette at Neary's in far east Midtown, for more than two decades her haunt for lunches of lamb chops and

wedge salads. Parked on the table are two of her latest gifts to culture: Gifford chardonnay and a Gifford red blend. The wine, \$20 a cork pop (er, screw top), officially launches Thursday.

But an unofficial tasting is afoot at Neary's. And the stuff, grown and aged at the Scheid Family Wines vineyard in Monterey County, Calif. (she plans on donating 10% of the profits to charity), is darn drinkable, no lamb required. "I don't like aftertastes and I don't like bitterness. I don't like acidity," Gifford, 60, says. "I don't want an interesting wine. I want an interesting novel. I want an interesting play."

Gifford already has cultivated fans among her famous friends. Kotb "loves" the red, as does Kotb's small-screen predecessor in goading Gifford guffaws, Regis Philbin. "Regis doesn't like wine. He drank three glasses" the other night, Gifford reports.

As natural as a union is between Gifford and fermented grapes, she does kvetch about "the image thing. Forty-five years in this business I've done everything in the world but porn, but I'm known as the woman that starts drinking wine with Hoda at 10 a.m.

"The reality of it is this is my first sip today," she swears. That glass in front of her on TV most mornings (which, nonetheless, is emphatically *not* grape juice)? "That sits as a prop basically which says, 'Party with us. Come join the party.' That's really what that's there to do."

But the toddies-on-*Today* trend "took on a life of its own. I mean, I don't drink at 10 a.m." A beat. "I do my heavy drinking at lunch. Just kidding!"

"The truth is," she continues, "if Hoda and I drank as much wine as we are teased about on *Saturday Night Live* or on Jimmy Fallon or Jay Leno, you couldn't function." In fact, she's cutting off the alcohol-fueled requests other talk show hosts make of her. (Remember that keg stand she performed in a cocktail dress on Leno a few years back?)

"It's one thing on our show. It's another thing for me to ... extend it beyond what it is. I don't want to reinforce the stereotype. It's enough."

Even though most of America seems to be in on the joke, "I don't want to be responsible for people drinking and driving. I don't want to be responsible for people's cirrhosis of the liver. I don't want to be responsible for anything like that. I want people to use good judgment just like I have to in my own life."

As her lunch companion puts rim to mouth yet again, Gifford can't resist yet another rim shot — the verbal, vs. varietal, kind: "We're certainly not encouraging people to start drinking wine at 10 a.m." A beat. "Wait till 11:15. Kidding!"