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Vertical Tasting of Kongsgaard Syrah

John Kongsgaard had his Syrah epiphany in France. Kongsgaard, who first gained renown for the Chardonnays he made for Newton Winery in the early 1980s, and subsequently for his Merlots and Cabernets, visited Condrieu in 1986 with Peter Newton, who was very interested in Viognier. On the trip, Kongsgaard discovered Côte-Rôtie and got the bug for Syrah in an Old World style. “Before that I was a Bordeaux guy, but I was awestruck by the northern Rhône, especially Côte-Rôtie,” Kongsgaard told me during an epic vertical tasting of his Syrah in March. “I had tasted Syrahs from Australia and California, but the super-fruity version wasn’t so interesting to me. I gravitated to the northern Rhône’s leaner, minerally, energetic wines that were more about soil than fruit.”

Kongsgaard had worked with Lee Hudson ever since this outstanding Carneros grower started planting vines at the beginning of the ‘80s, but his involvement had been with Chardonnay and Bordeaux selections. (Kongsgaard purchased Hudson Chardonnay fruit for Newton in 1983, the first commercial vintage for Hudson.) But Hudson had also planted some Syrah vines at the outset and Kongsgaard bought two tons of Syrah fruit from Hudson’s Q block in 1996 and launched his own label. (That same year Kongsgaard and his partner Fritz Hatton established Arietta. Kongsgaard eventually sold his share of Arietta to Hatton in 2005, so that he could construct a winery and expand his eponymous label.)



Q Block - The Source for the Syrah Hudson Vineyard

From 1996 through 2000 Kongsgaard bought two tons of Syrah fruit annually, but after Jade Mountain, another client of Hudson’s, was sold, Kongsgaard was able to get all five tons of fruit from this 2-1/2-acre, southwest-facing hillside site, which Kongsgaard describes as “one of the rare instances in Carneros where the volcanics are on the surface.” Carneros, he explained, normally features ocean deposits of shale and clay from 20 million years ago. But during the volcanic period 6 million years ago, there were vents in the ground through which ash and lava flowed out. “So we have a very interesting combination of mineral content and cool conditions near San Pablo Bay,” he summarized.

The distinctiveness of the site, in conjunction with low crop levels and Kongsgaard's minimal-intervention winemaking, has produced what is arguably California's greatest single Syrah bottling. When the 1996 was released, it was also the most expensive Syrah in California—and intentionally so. “We didn't want to make Syrah unless we could compete at the world level, just as with Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa Valley,” Kongsgaard explained.

Harvesting strategy and vinification have been steady from the start. Kongsgaard normally picks his Syrah at the end of September, in most cases in a single day. Potential alcohol levels in the grapes are normally within a fairly narrow range. “The fruit is typically herbal, grassy and green well into September but suddenly, at 24 or 25 or 26 degrees Brix, it goes from tasting like a vegetable to tasting fruity. It begins to show an almost dessert-like character. And that always happens at a high pH [typically between 3.75 and 3.9 in the finished wine].”



Kongsgaard's cellar on Atlas Peak.

The photo of composer Gustav Mahler speaks to Kongsgaard's passion for classical music.

As the fruit comes in cold from the vineyard it normally takes four or five days to start fermenting with its indigenous yeasts. Kongsgaard describes his vinification as “fairly northern Rhône from the start,” noting that he “makes wine against the fruit.” He begins by destemming the grapes, explaining that “our wine is already peppery enough, with good color stability, and sufficiently tannic without the stems.” Total cuvaision time during the “medium-hot” fermentation is about three weeks, with two pumpovers per day at the beginning of the fermentation, then one a day for the second part of the process. “Then we simply keep the cap wet during seven days of post-fermentation maceration,” he noted. “There are never problems with the fermentation of Syrah and we always finish by Thanksgiving.” The wine spends about 20 months in 50%-new French oak barrels, mostly supplied by François Frères and Billon.

Of that first Kongsgaard Syrah from 1996, not a bottle remains. And the wine was not sold commercially in 1997, so my otherwise comprehensive tasting began with the 1998 release. Nowadays Kongsgaard normally has about 15 barrels of Syrah—with vine yields typically under two tons per acre. But in 2015 there were only eight barrels of wine, and in 2011, the only growing season that suffered from rot problems, Kongsgaard ended up making just four barrels of wine. Alcohol levels are virtually always between 14.5% and 16% alcohol and Kongsgaard has never acidified his Syrah. As a rule, the wines show excellent freshness and energy, which Kongsgaard attributes largely to the natural lift provided by the rocky soil. “The sparky, flinty minerality in the wine definitely comes from the vineyard,” he told me.

In the early years, Kongsgaard racked the wine twice, plus a third time for the bottling, which is done without fining or filtration, but nowadays he does four total rackings. He explained: “We discovered that the wines prior to 2006 needed 6 to 24 hours of decanting, so we thought we were cheating the wine buyer by not racking more.”



Kongsgaard Syrah Vertical

I tasted these exciting wines with Kongsgaard in his cave cut into volcanic rock at his home on Atlas Peak. While they are indeed "minerally, energetic wines . . . more about soil than fruit," consistent with Kongsgaard's objective, they are also wonderfully rich and complex, and are evolving at a deliciously slow pace.

2013 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(15.5% alcohol; 3.9 pH; 6.3 acidity): Bright medium ruby. Musky black raspberry, smoked meat, bacon fat and gunflint on the nose. Densely packed, classically dry and superconcentrated, conveying outstanding youthful energy to its sharply delineated flavors of dark fruits, spices, wild herbs and underbrush. Boasts an incredibly fine-grained texture and noble tannins, finishing with outstanding length and lift. This Syrah has all the elements for greatness.

Kongsgaard cited the vintage's "perfect combination of muscle and cushioning." 96+

2012 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(a rather low 6 grams per liter acidity): Very dark, bright ruby-red. Broad aromas of dark chocolate, smoked sausage, orange rind and flowers; smells a bit like young Hermitage. Fat, savory and very ripe; this is more about soil tones than primary fruit in the early going Very broad, chocolatey and sweet but a bit dumb right now. Finishes with substantial ripe, complex, fully buffered tannins. Kongsgaard compared this wine to a 1982 Bordeaux: "fleshy and forward early, with the fruit buried, but it has no shortcomings and will age very well." This wine will need at least four or five years to burn off some of its baby fat. 93+

2011 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(15.7% alcohol; 4.0 pH): Saturated bright ruby. Brooding aromas of deep black raspberry, dark chocolate and meat pie, along with cooler peppery and licorice notes; reminded me of a more rustic Cornas style of Syrah. Supple but a touch medicinal, with its combination of dried fruits and pepper suggesting a wide range of ripeness. A wine of moderate flavor development, finishing with dusty, slightly drying tannins. The leanest vintage of the range except for the 1998, this 2011 doesn't quite come alive. This was Kongsgaard's 40th vintage making wine in California, as well as the year with the latest start and finish. He described 2011 as "our coldest vintage of all: we picked our entire red crop on November 2. We just waited and it remained miraculously mild after the mid-October rain." He went on: "We kept throwing away rotten fruit along the way and harvested just before the big last storm that was predicted for November 3. We ended up with just two tons of Syrah instead of a normal six." 91

2010 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

Bright medium ruby. Classic, multidimensional Côte Brune-like scents of briary dark berries, mocha, licorice, black pepper, dark chocolate, soy, underbrush, campfire, salty minerality and smoked meat, lifted by an ineffable treble

note of blood orange. An essence of Syrah on the palate but still an infant, offering deep, imploded dark fruit flavors complicated by saline, gunflinty minerality. Most impressive today on the rising, downright bracing whiplash of a finish. Kongsgaard notes that this wine is "in an intellectual period" of its development. 95+

2009 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(16% alcohol; 3.9 pH; 7.2 TA; a vintage with a very small crop, according to Kongsgaard): Bright, saturated medium ruby. The nose reveals amazing high notes for a hot year, offering subdued but pure and complex scents of black raspberry, spices, pepper, herbs and flinty minerality; very northern Rhone in style. A superconcentrated, wonderfully juicy midweight on the palate, conveying a brilliant impression of energy and definition for such a high-octane, high-pH wine. Savory dark berry, licorice and mineral character carries through to a palate-saturating finish without any excess weight. The tannins show wonderful refinement. "This is fancy and delicate, while the 2008 is more brawny and grand," Kongsgaard offered. 94+

2008 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

Not quite as bright ruby in color as the 2007 but very dark at the core. Knockout nose combines blueberry, blackberry, flowers, caraway seed and pungent, high-pitched Moroccan spices, complemented by a subtle note of truffley forest floor. Offers a stunning combination of energy and thickness on the palate, with almost shockingly youthful flavors of dark berries and flowers dominating. Finishes with outstanding energy and length. This should be long-lived. "The 2008 rose up a year ago to out-energize the 2007," was the way Kongsgaard put it, noting that the quality and potential longevity of this wine was not apparent until a year ago. 94+

2007 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

Bright saturated ruby. Musky, balsamic aromas of truffle, meat and earth; closer to full maturity than the 2006 and 2005. Plush, fat and sweet, conveying an impression of baby fat. Doesn't have the acidity or lift of the very best vintages but very rich, ripe and approachable, offering flamboyant flavors of bacon fat, smoked game, mocha and black olive. This very plush, dry wine spreads out horizontally to saturate the palate, finishing with supple tannins and excellent saline length. 93

2006 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

Bright, moderately saturated ruby-red. Less expressive on the nose than the 2005 and 2004 versions, showing a distinctly balsamic quality to the aromas of dark fruits, rust, iron and olive tapenade, plus notes of chocolate and light-roast coffee that Kongsgaard described as "boring" and that reminded me a bit of an old Burgundy. Actually gained in lift with air as raspberry and spice notes emerged. A fruit bomb with lovely framing acidity, this wine seemed to go into a shell in the glass. At once opulent and bright but a bit out of joint at the moment and quite unevolved. Again, this is remarkably primary for ten-year-old North Coast Syrah. 92

2005 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(16% alcohol, 3.95 pH; 6.7 TA): Full medium ruby. Classic, multidimensional nose offers scents of black raspberry, smoked sausage, clove and truffle; tangy and still youthful. The palate delivers an exhilarating blend of sweet and savory elements and more of a primary fruit character than the 2004. A wine of outstanding texture and depth, not to mention balance. More treble than the 2004, with its dark berry fruit accented by Christmas spices and herbs. Begins with a powerfully sweet attack, then displays its firm acidity in the middle. The fruit here is bulletproof. This may ultimately surpass the 2004 in complexity. 95+

2004 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(15.5%; 3.93 pH, 6.7 TA): Bright ruby-red. Conveys a captivating smoky, roasted meat character, like wild duck hitting the grill, complicated by a brioche-like toasty note; reminded me of a Côte Brune style of Côte-Rôtie. Large-scaled yet somehow light on its feet, conveying a wonderfully fine-grained, plush yet reserved middle palate stuffed with dark fruits and smoky, meaty bass notes. Compellingly rich yet bone-dry Syrah with an extremely long, rising, saline

mineral aftertaste that saturates every square millimeter of the palate. The best Kongsgaard Syrah in the series--at least until the 2013. 96

2003 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(from an early, hot year; 15.4% alcohol; 3.9 pH; 7.0 total acidity): Bright ruby-red. Wonderfully primary, compelling scents of fresh black raspberry, flowers, bay leaf, black pepper, truffle and orange peel. Supersweet but pungent acidity keeps it fresh and light on its feet. Bright flavors of cherry, raspberry, black pepper and flowers are complemented by a sexy gamey character and savory minerality. A bit smaller-scaled than the 2002 and 2004 bottlings but this wine should still put on weight with further bottle aging and will be long-lived. Finishes fresh and firmly tannic, with outstanding lift and length. 93

2002 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(15.7%; 3.9 pH with 6.8 total acidity): Bright red-ruby. The nose shows an almost roasted ripeness compared to the 2001, offering deep, primary dark fruits, black olive, saddle leather, spices and a hint of truffle. Plush, sweet and deep; by far the richest wine to this point. Horizontal, tactile and very ripe yet bone-dry. This is remarkably young, dark and brooding and still a bit aggressive with alcohol. Needs to lose some of its baby fat. "Now we're into new wines that don't yet show any tertiary character," noted Kongsgaard. 93

2001 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(15.1% alcohol): Bright red. Great symphonic nose delivers all of the major northern Rhône food groups: raspberry, musky bacon fat, dried flowers, spices and roasted meat. A wonderfully intense midweight with terrific definition and grip owing to pungent acidity. With its outstanding energy and verve, this tastes like a much younger wine. And yet this was the first wine in the line-up that revealed even a bit of brick development at the edge. Classy, fine-grained Syrah with lovely energy and length. 94

2000 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(14.3%): Moderately saturated medium red. Musky, fairly evolved nose offers scents of caramel, truffley underbrush, sandalwood, and dark chocolate-coated orange rind, complicated by an intriguing balsamic quality. On the palate, surprising acidity gives the wine a slightly spiky quality today, with its red berry, cherry and candied orange flavors framed by substantial dusty tannins. This lively wine appears to be in an awkward phase today; I'd try it again in two years. 89

1999 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(15.5% alcohol, but with firm acidity): Bright ruby-red. At once riper and more evolved than the 1998, and far more expressive on the musky nose, offering bacon fat and smoked sausage, a whiff of caramel and exotic flowers. A distinct step up in texture and ripeness too, displaying terrific energy to the sappy flavors of raspberry and dried herbs. A wonderfully sweet, fine-grained midweight with considerably more stuffing than the 1998. 91

1998 Kongsgaard Syrah Hudson Vineyards

(alcohol in the low 14s): Healthy medium red. Aromas of sour cherry, raspberry, plum, pungent herbs and caraway seed. Juicy, savory and firm-edged, with very fresh red fruit flavors showing a distinctly herbal quality and slightly tart acidity. Solidly structured Syrah but with its strong energy and modest flesh it comes across as a bit screechy. Very savory, salty, rather lean wine. Kongsgaard noted that the maiden vintage, the 1996, included a bit of Viognier, but he quickly dropped that variety. "The wine is so deep that it doesn't need Viognier," he explained. "It didn't change the wine." 88