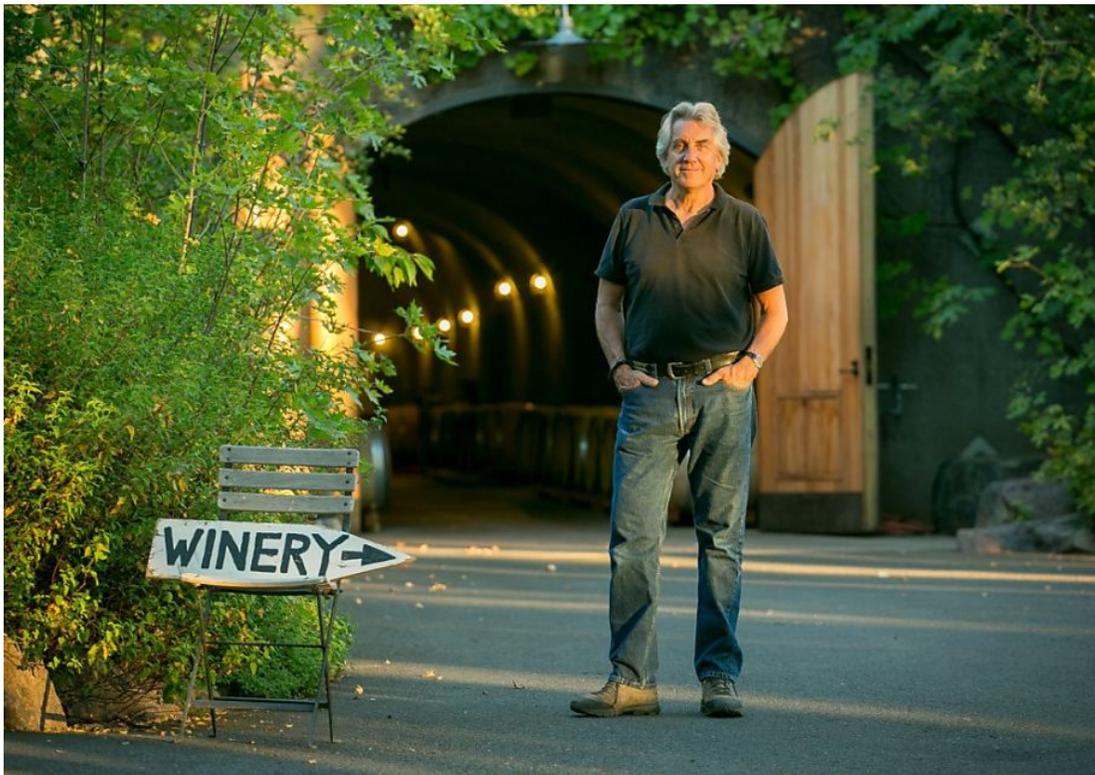


How John Kongsgaard rewrote the rules of white wine

Jon Bonné Updated 6:39 pm, Monday, July 22, 2013



John Kongsgaard in front of his winery in Napa, Calif., is seen on Wednesday, July 10th, 2013.

"The thing that's clever," explains John Kongsgaard, trying to describe the secret to his Chardonnay, "is being like Europe 50 years ago. This is the Burgundy time machine."

In his cellar high atop Atlas Peak, he is explaining his mechanics for producing what for three decades have been some of California's, and arguably the world's, most timeless expressions of white wine.

In that time, as winemaking has become competitive sport, Kongsgaard has shown a noblesse oblige: He has shared the secrets of his success time and again with a generation of students - a philosophical counterpoint to the technocratic practices of winemaking schools. It's no surprise that one of his most devoted students dubbed him "*il dottore*."

Along the way, Kongsgaard has proven his old-fashioned approach with a remarkable track record. His unfiltered Chardonnay at Newton Vineyard signaled the grape's full California potential in a way rivaled only by the 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting.

He continued that with wines made under his own name: Big and densely textured, they demonstrate the best of what California can do - a feat achieved through ripe, pristine grapes and archaic cellar techniques that beat up the wines through long fermentation and aging. More conventional winemakers might view these methods with suspicion - and they do involve risk - but Kongsgaard's success is unquestioned.

Even in Burgundy, there are few analogs for these wines. Those are primarily from Corton-Charlemagne, along with a handful from California like Hanzell and Mount Eden Vineyards.

"That's kind of the hallmark of John's white wine. If you close your eyes, it could be red," says Lee Hudson of Hudson Vineyards, Kongsgaard's key grape farmer and his friend since both attended UC Davis. "It's one thing to make big Chardonnay. It's another thing to make big Chardonnay that's light on its feet, and that's what John's Chardonnay does. It's athletic. It's got great abs."

But Kongsgaard's equal legacy is an impressive trail of former apprentices who have taken his lessons to heart and risen to California's top ranks. The forefront of California white wine has essentially become a game of six degrees of John Kongsgaard. "If I hadn't met him, I wouldn't be making wine. I think it's that simple," says Abe Schoener of the Scholium Project, a notable alumnus. "It really makes a big difference that you can see these wines made outside the orthodoxy, and somebody making a living."

Death, resurrection

What sets Kongsgaard apart is his "death and resurrection" approach.

It begins conventionally enough: Grapes are picked ripe and pressed, and at that point given a very small amount of the preservative sulfur dioxide - perhaps 30 parts per million, one-fifth what Kongsgaard learned to use in the 1970s. This keeps the juice healthy, but hardly stops what happens next: It typically turns dark brown from exposure to oxygen, a move that can diminish wine's youthful exuberance but arguably gives it a longer life.

Soon fermentation begins, entirely from ambient yeasts. Nothing else is added. This is a complete reversal of standard white winemaking, with its heavy reliance on sulfur and commercial yeasts.

Now comes death - or at least deep risk. Kongsgaard's fermentations can easily take a year, an eternity compared with modern practices that rarely last even a week. Barrels are stirred occasionally, but the wine often grows murky and dull.

Then, resurrection. In the course of nearly two years, the wine bounces back - turning a glinting yellow, shedding its yeasty character, revealing its sheer power. To fear the consequences would be to make a lesser wine. As his son Alex describes it: "It's a moment of faith."

The other major lesson of the Kongsgaard school: You can only make such dramatic wine with meticulously farmed, low-yielding grapes from vineyards you know intimately.

On this, Kongsgaard has been faithful. Nearly all of his wines come from a handful of sites in southern Napa Valley: his own Stone Crest vineyard on family land above the city of Napa, but more notably two Carneros sites: Hudson's and that of Larry Hyde, the two kings of Carneros.

Longtime partnership

Kongsgaard began buying their grapes in his first vintage at Newton three decades ago, and their long work together has spurred a mutual fame. Kongsgaard and Hudson's first acreage contract in 1987 introduced Napa to a revolutionary practice: Winemakers could pay for the farming methods they preferred.

This narrow, cool slice of Napa engenders the dramatic flavors found in Kongsgaard wines - an intense sensation of preserved lemon and gunflint, and what Alex describes as a figgy character. In no way does Kongsgaard flinch at a ripeness level above 25 Brix, a measure of sugar, but he tries to "stay out of the 26 Brix club."

Hence another Kongsgaard lesson: A key to ripening such golden fruit is to pull most of the leaves from vines early in the season. This exposes grapes to full morning sun - the equivalent of working a tan early in the season. It thickens their skin and makes them less vulnerable to weather. During the intense 2010 heat spells that fried many grapes, Kongsgaard's went unharmed.

Kongsgaard, 62, is a true rarity, a fifth-generation Napan. His father, Thomas, was a Napa Superior Court judge - which is why his top Chardonnay is called the Judge - and his mother's lineage traces back to Lilburn Boggs, the Missouri governor who came west and joined with Gen. Mariano Vallejo, and whose wife was a descendant of Daniel Boone. (Hence, yes, so is Kongsgaard.)

He studied English at Colorado State University, then came home and took harvest work at Christian Brothers, and then at Stony Hill, where the McCrea family was perfecting its Chardonnay.

Chardonnay in mind

Kongsgaard began studying winemaking at UC Davis in 1976. On a break from school he apprenticed for Warren Winiarski at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, a connection that would later prove crucial to the school of Kongsgaard.

And white wine was already on his brain. As a young man, he befriended his family's neighbor, who suggested Chardonnay when Kongsgaard's family decided to plant grapes. That neighbor? Andre Tchelistcheff, the midcentury dean of Napa winemakers.

In 1983, the year Alex was born, Kongsgaard landed at Newton Vineyard, which Peter Newton had founded after selling Sterling Vineyards. Newton envisioned great things for Napa Chardonnay - "Peter was a real farsighted guy," Kongsgaard says - and sent his young winemaker to Burgundy for continuing education.

Kongsgaard finagled his way into three cellars: Coche-Dury, Bonneau du Martray and Comtes Lafon, all of which were making some of Burgundy's defining white wines at the time - mostly through the sort of care-by-neglect that Kongsgaard would import to California. When a top Burgundy negociant visited Kongsgaard's cellar not long ago and sniffed that the wines tasted "like Lafon in the 1980s," nothing could have been higher praise.

Their winemaking - or lack thereof - puzzled his Davis-trained brain. The wines appeared to be neglected. When he tasted them in the spring of 1986, they seemed oxidized and dull. But he returned during harvest. "They were brilliant. And then I figured out that you just let the wines rot in the cellar, and they'll be brilliant."

Dramatic results

He returned to Newton, his head abuzz. Soon he tried aging his Chardonnay for two years. He let malolactic conversion, which softens the wine, take place unchecked. This yielded Newton's heady Unfiltered Chardonnay, one of the first modern California whites released without filtration to stabilize it. The daring cellar work, and dramatic results, quickly drew attention. Kongsgaard was viewed as a radical actor - a successful one - among Napa's generally risk-averse crowd.

Newton proved fertile ground for the Kongsgaard school's early years. Among his assistants: Aaron Pott and Andy Erickson, who would become two of Napa's most successful hired guns, along with Andy's wife Annie Favia; Blair Walter, who would go on to New Zealand's Felton Road; Nick Peay, who would cofound Peay Vineyards; and vineyard manager Lupe Maldonado, who would found his own label with his son Hugo.

Despite his success at Newton, Kongsgaard and his wife, Maggy, wanted their own label. They borrowed \$50,000 in seed money, but in an era before winemakers could dabble in side projects, it became clear he would need to quit his day job. (For this reason, Kongsgaard encourages his apprentices to make their own wine.)

Through their work with a local chamber-music nonprofit, Kongsgaard had befriended a lawyer named Dick Lemon, who in 1995 helped broker the sale of Beringer to private investors. Lemon was founding a new label called Luna Vineyards, with a longtime wine executive, George Vare, and Mike Moone, another Beringer veteran. In 1996 they hired Kongsgaard as winemaker, with the proviso that he would have time for his own projects.

While Luna focused on Italian varieties, Kongsgaard debuted his own Chardonnay for an eye-raising \$50, and cofounded the Arietta label for red wines with auctioneer Fritz Hatton. Both were quick successes.

Luna's big hit was Pinot Grigio, fueled in part by the success of the Italian brand Santa Margherita. Kongsgaard wanted to better understand the variety, so in 1997 he and Vare planned a European research trip: first to Tuscany (Luna also made Sangiovese) and then a Pinot Gris rainbow tour - first Alsace, then the Italian regions of Alto Adige and Friuli.

Lessons from Friuli

In Friuli, the two visited several influential producers: Josko Gravner, Stanko Radikon and Giorgio Bensa of La Castellada, who not only revered the often debased Pinot Grigio but also such varieties as Tocai Friulano and Ribolla Gialla as base material for the most serious winemaking. In Friuli, white wine ruled. They discovered, as Vare described it to me in 2010, "a whole group there making wines the way John loved to."

Kongsgaard returned with deep respect for Pinot Grigio. Luna's early versions were made with utmost care - fermented in barrel with native yeasts a feat for 20,000 cases of an \$18 wine. He also reconnected with Winiarski over a mutual interest in St. John's College, the liberal-arts school with campuses in Annapolis, Md., and Santa Fe, N.M., whose Socratic teaching methods appealed to Kongsgaard's curiosity. Luna was a new home for the Kongsgaard school of winemaking. Here, the free-form pedagogy found at St. John's could translate to the world of wine.

In 2000, Kongsgaard was ready to leave. But Luna needed a winemaker: "I needed somebody who would be really fun for me to teach." He had been seeking someone to tutor Alex, who hoped to attend St. John's, and Alex's sister Helen. And he discovered a former Winiarski intern who had gravitated to winemaking after being a philosophy instructor at the college: Abe Schoener. The teacher became Kongsgaard's student.

A radical success

Vare continued the Friuli trips after Kongsgaard departed, expanding his group to include both Schoener and a young viticulturist, Steve Matthiasson, whom Winiarski hired as an adviser. But Vare, who died in April, was entranced less by Pinot Grigio than obscure Ribolla Gialla. Soon he smuggled over a handful of cuttings to plant on his property near Napa, and launched his own label, Vare Vineyards, to pursue what Kongsgaard describes as "everything that wasn't practical."

If Vare was the dreamer, Kongsgaard proved that well-applied radicalism in conservative Napa could earn you a living. It could arbitrage Napa's strange rules of supply and demand.

"John was the demonstration," Schoener says, "that one could stake out a moral position like George's and then succeed."

The alumni of what John dubbed the Schola Vinum Kongsgaardiensis, and of Vare's Friulian voyages, rapidly redefined what was possible for California white wine. Matthiasson unveiled his own dramatic white blend, combining Vare's Friulian plantings with Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon. Schoener soon acquired the mantle as California's wine provocateur with his Scholium Project label. (Go to: <http://is.gd/UGhX4k>)

After moving to Atlas Peak in 2006, Kongsgaard acquired other occasional students, including Duncan Meyers, who grew up near the Kongsgaards in Napa and cofounded the Arnot-Roberts label (go to: <http://is.gd/KBpfqs>) and Graeme MacDonald, who makes Cabernet from his family's plot near the famed To Kalon vineyard.

But primarily there has been Alex, who returned home to assist in the cellar when John needed time to help Maggy with cancer treatments. Alex has become his father's latest, perhaps ultimate, student.

Broader legacy

Kongsgaard's legacy extends beyond Chardonnay. His work with Merlot at Newton created some of Napa's finest examples - and the Kongsgaard name also adorns an opulent Syrah and a classically styled Cabernet.

Maggy and John took over Chamber Music in Napa Valley from Dick Lemon, and significantly expanded its operations. After they began offering a "wine honorarium" of top Napa bottles, they were inundated by offers from top musicians - everyone from Isaac Stern to pianist Yefim Bronfman.

And Kongsgaard's lesson plan is always expanding. He persuaded Hudson to plant six-tenths of an acre to the white grape Albarino, on an east-facing patch of volcanic tufa. The resulting wine diverges from the Kongsgaard model. Yes, it is fermented indigenously in old barrels with a smidgen of sulfur dioxide, but here aging takes just a few months and the wine is filtered. It speaks of immediacy, which isn't the most comfortable place for Kongsgaard.

But that's part of the Kongsgaard school. We try a glass of his 2012 Chardonnay, still dominated by a yeastiness - what he calls "that four-in-the-morning bakery smell." It's far too early to taste, really: The muscular structure is just beginning to appear. But we've caught it in its infancy, somewhere between death and resurrection.

"You can't have sophistication without this wild-oats period," Kongsgaard suggests, "where it's wandering off."

-Jon Bonné

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