

Magazine Archives: July 31, 2014



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Napa's Fortunate Son

How John Kongsgaard forged his own path to world-class Chardonnay

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In 1971 on a gray, rainy day in Napa Valley, Thomas Kongsgaard sent his teenage son John on an errand to fetch the family's annual allocation of Stony Hill wines, most notably the Chardonnay.

"I'd never been there," John recalls, as if it were just yesterday instead of 43 years ago, "so I said 'great' and drove up there."

Home on holiday break from university studies, the young Kongsgaard soon had his first introduction to Fred McCrea, the one-time advertising executive who had turned his hobby vineyard retreat into one of California's first boutique wineries. The maverick owner of Stony Hill Vineyard and his wife, Eleanor, had bought the property, in the hills northwest of the small

town of St. Helena, in 1943. Only years later did they decide to try winemaking, eventually creating one of Napa Valley's legendary wines, with a devout following. The McCreas made just 1,200 cases of wine a year, which they sold via mailing list.

Stony Hill Chardonnay was a pure-tasting and minerally expression that stood apart from the rustic whites of the era. It also aged amazingly well. Collectors typically cellared it for up to a decade, allowing it to flesh out and unveil its nuances. Thomas Kongsgaard, well into a long and storied career as a judge of the Superior Court of Napa County, was a keen student of the valley's wines and kept a cellar full of the local stars of the era, including Beaulieu Vineyard, Louis M. Martini and Inglenook. But Stony Hill was one of his most prized possessions. "He went bonkers over it," John recalls.

When John Kongsgaard arrived at the winery, McCreas was standing in his living room, leaning on his fireplace mantel, a glass of Stony Hill Riesling in his hand. McCreas was selling wine to his customers, and the 19-year-old college student was in awe.

"I want this guy's life," Kongsgaard remembers saying to himself. "How am I ever going to do this?" It was a moment of destiny. "I got the bug just like that."

Four decades later, Kongsgaard has realized his dream. He is the local boy made good, whose career in the Napa winemaking world has spanned the region's explosive rise in the latter half of the 20th century. Today, he makes two of California's most acclaimed Chardonnays, the products of a unique fusion of Napa's cultural heritage, time-honored Burgundian techniques and precisely farmed fruit. Kongsgaard has built his success one careful step at a time, first in his pursuit of great Chardonnay and now with Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.

When Kongsgaard was bitten by the wine bug, Napa was in the early stages of its transformation from a quiet rural district—where cattle ranked as the most valuable agricultural commodity—into a mecca for wine. In 1969, when Kongsgaard graduated from high school, there were fewer than two dozen wineries in Napa, with nary a hint of what lay ahead. "No one thought of going into the wine business," says Kongsgaard. But in a twist of fate, Kongsgaard caught the Napa winemaking wave at an opportune moment, right as the region was about to emerge as a contender on the global wine stage.

By the time he was in his twenties, he and his future wife, Maggy, had planted a small, mostly Chardonnay vineyard at his parents' home near the city of Napa. Called Stonecrest, the site allowed Kongsgaard to make small batches of wine, often with his father. Judge Kongsgaard loved wine but he wasn't a businessman. He was skeptical of the fawning and fussing over Napa wines and the rise of celebrity winemakers, in addition to what he considered absurd prices; years later he took a dim view of his son starting a winery. But Maggy had other ideas.

Early on, she envisioned owning a piece of Napa Valley with John, perhaps on the scale of Stony Hill. "She's the forward thinker in our family," says John, now 62, a year older than his wife. At 6-foot-4, with thick wavy hair and animated eyebrows, he has an imposing presence. He credits Maggy for the decision to strike out on their own. "She had the courage that I didn't have."

Altogether, it took 20 years to put all the pieces of the puzzle in place. Beginning in the 1980s, Kongsgaard gained winemaking experience and expertise working for a handful of wineries, at each stop refining his vision and techniques. Neither McCrea nor the judge would recognize the Kongsgaard Chardonnay, a rich Burgundian style, nor, likely, approve of its price. At \$175 a bottle, with 400 or fewer cases produced a year, The Judge—named in honor of Thomas, who died in 2001—is one of the most expensive U.S. Chardonnays at release. And while Kongsgaard still refers to the vineyard as Stonecrest, the wine made exclusively from its grapes is today known solely as The Judge.

A second Napa Valley bottling, made from grapes grown at Hyde and Hudson vineyards, in Carneros, is the winery's workhorse, with more than 1,500 cases. For The Judge, Kongsgaard uses techniques he first observed in Burgundy, including extended barrel fermentation (for more on the winemaking style, see "Patience and Low Yields Key to Quality at Kongsgaard") The most recent version of The Judge, the 2011, rated 94 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale. It's rich and creamy, with a core of lemon-citrus rind and honeydew melon flavors. The Napa Valley 2011 (94, \$85, 980 cases), comparable in quality, is a shade brighter, having spent less time in barrel.

The Kongsgaards have deep roots in the region; both John and Maggy are fifth-generation Napers. But they're not part of what is known in the area as the "lucky sperm club," referring to those born into the wine business.

Kongsgaard's mother, born Lorrain Streblov, came from a family that owned a huge quarry south of Napa's city limits, along with large tracts of grazing land for cattle. John, the "nature boy," rode horses from a young age and figured he'd end up working as a cattleman.

Thomas Kongsgaard came from Everett, Wash.; his father was a cook on a tugboat that hauled logs from Alaska to sawmills in Washington. "Dad grew up in immigrant poverty," says John, "and he was my teacher in all things." That made John as cautious as his father when it came to matters of money and business. "It would be too strong to say he had a disdain of money, but he definitely had a disdain of business. He was a simple guy when it came to money. He was a public servant." The elder Kongsgaard was widely admired as both a jurist and a pillar of the community.

Kongsgaard's parents met after World War II at Oakland Naval Hospital, where Thomas was recuperating; he'd had a leg blown off during minesweeper duty in the Pacific Theater. Thomas and Lorrain attended Stanford Law School together before marrying and settling in Napa. After practicing law there for a few years, Thomas became, in 1958, at age 36, the youngest Superior Court judge in California history. John, his parents and two sisters resided on Stonecrest Drive, 3 miles north of the quarry that Al Streblov, John's maternal grandfather, had purchased in the 1920s. The Kongsgaard residence was built on hard, rocky soil, at what had been the Streblov compound. The property encompassed 180 acres of rolling, hilly terrain dotted by towering trees.

The Kongsgaards "really were remarkable people, Blue Dog Democrats, liberal conservatives," says Lee Hudson, 62, of Hudson Vineyards in Carneros. Lee met John at University of California, Davis, in the 1970s and knows the family well. "The judge had great human skills,

great integrity, great intellect and a tremendous dedication to hard work. John shares that dedication to hard work. He likes to take things to the highest level of intent."

John's parents sent him to boarding school in Monterey for high school, believing he would be better off outside Napa and the presence of his father, the judge everyone knew. From there, John enrolled at Colorado State University at Fort Collins and envisioned himself becoming a literature professor—until that fateful trip to Stony Hill.

In the same year Englishman Peter Newton founded Sterling Vineyards—1969—Kongsgaard graduated from high school and began to notice the valley's changing landscape. The 1960s had seen the arrival of a handful of new wineries in the region, among them Mayacamas, Heitz and Robert Mondavi. In 1972 alone, more than a dozen new wineries would emerge in Napa, including Caymus, Silver Oak, Diamond Creek, Clos du Val, Burgess, Chateau Montelena and the two wineries from Stags Leap that share that name. Enologists were suddenly in high demand.

Kongsgaard quickly realized that his degree in literature from Colorado State wouldn't help him land a job at a winery. He took a year off to think things over, traveling through Europe and listening to live music.

He'd saved money pulling double shifts at The Christian Brothers winery, pocketing big overtime checks. Living in different cities abroad, he spent much of his time attending free concerts—everything from an organ recital in the morning to a matinee symphony to an evening performance. He stayed in cheap hotels and took odd jobs, attempting to live as frugally as possible. In total, he attended more than 270 performances during his time overseas.

The love of classical and chamber music he cultivated on that trip persists to this day. He and Maggy run the Chamber Music in Napa Valley organization, which hosts a dozen concerts a year, many at local schools. The musicians, who come from all over the globe, are paid in wine. The Kongsgaards even have one wine, The Fimasaurus, a Cabernet-Merlot blend, dedicated to classical pianist Yefim Bronfman. He in turn wrote a score, the "Kongsgaard Variations," dedicated to John and Maggy.

Upon returning home, Kongsgaard enrolled in Napa Valley College to undertake course work in chemistry—a prerequisite to applying to UC, Davis, the state's premier winemaking school, and a gateway to a career in wine.

"Physics for poets was the closest I got to science" as an undergrad, he recalls with a sly grin. But he was accepted to graduate school at Davis and, in 1975, he and Maggy planted Stonecrest, half to Chardonnay, half to Zinfandel. The couple had known each other since middle school, but didn't become friends until grad school, where they sat across from each other in the chemistry lab. They married in 1979 after both had graduated from the program, he with a degree in enology and she in plant science.

Kongsgaard was lucky to have two mentors early on, who shaped both his career and his way of thinking about wine. One was already world-famous—"this amusing Russian who lived down the street," says Kongsgaard. It was André Tchelistcheff, then winemaker at Beaulieu and the

man who had the greatest influence on California wine styles from the 1930s to the 1960s. Tchelistcheff lived on Stonecrest, at the foot of the hill from the Kongsgaards, and was a frequent visitor to their home.

His other teacher was a shy grapegrower named Nathan Fay, who owned Fay Vineyard, in the Stags Leap District. Fay was avuncular and soft-spoken, with a round, cherubic face. Fay had planted the first Cabernet vineyard in Stags Leap in the 1960s, just ahead of the boom. He sold most of the grapes to nearby wineries, but he also made his own wine and set aside a "sweet spot" of the vineyard once Kongsgaard began making wine. The first wine the two made together was a Mead Ranch Zinfandel in 1975, followed by a string of Fay Cabernets, which they produced with some of Kongsgaard's UC, Davis, buddies beginning with the 1976 vintage.

Kongsgaard's first winemaking job came in 1980, with a start-up in Sonoma called Balverne. There, he helped oversee much of the operation, including planting a vineyard to a dozen different varieties and assisting in designing the winery. In 1983, he left to join Newton, where he began using his family's Stonecrest Chardonnay and tinkering with different techniques. Zinfandel had been pulled from Stonecrest, but Chardonnay stuck despite being rooted on a hard knoll of rocky soil, with huge boulders. Stonecrest, some 7 acres in size, yields a little more than 1 ton per acre, or about 400 cases.

The rocks that made it take forever for the vines to mature are now the property's secret weapons, says Kongsgaard; the site limits production, giving him wines of enormous concentration and density. It was with Chardonnay from the family vineyard that Kongsgaard began to develop his style, using the Stonecrest grapes for the Newton "Unfiltered" Chardonnay, an experimental wine that spent two years in oak and would later be renamed The Judge.

His tenure at Newton proved enlightening in other ways, too. Newton was a European wine connoisseur, sharing his wines and knowledge with Kongsgaard and encouraging him to study the great wine estates of the Old World. The European connection led to a meeting with renowned Bordeaux enologist Michel Rolland, who consulted for Newton and other Napa wineries beginning in 1983.

Today, Rolland is a controversial figure in many quarters. He is widely responsible for a sea change in viticulture and winemaking, persuading vintners around the world to limit or reduce crop yields and seek riper grapes to boost flavor and flesh out Cabernet's edgy tannins. "Michel taught us how to let grapes ripen from 24 [Brix] to 25," says Kongsgaard. "You can see how there is a dusty, unpleasant tannin in Cabernet [picked at lower Brix] that melts away with ripeness. Some years, you wish you could go to 30 but you have to pick before that to keep the freshness." Rolland also taught Kongsgaard how to blend. "He gave me French wisdom."

After Kongsgaard had spent a decade at Newton and done stints as a winemaking consultant elsewhere in Napa, Maggy sensed the timing was right for the couple to step out on their own. They made their first wine together in 1995, using the Stonecrest Chardonnay. "John and I assumed when we were married that we would start a winery together. It was just a matter of when," she says. She had worked in the wine business before John, first at a grapevine nursery, then at Beaulieu and Domaine Chandon.

The couple had already carved out their roles in the wine business. John would be the winemaker and figurehead; Maggy tended to the couple's young children, Alex and Helen. During the Newton years, the family resided on Spring Mountain, where they often entertained visiting wholesalers, retailers and restaurateurs; Kongsgaard even started answering the phone, "Maggy's Bar and Grill."

"This generated a lot of goodwill with the trade, and when we started Kongsgaard, a lot of those people were behind us," he says. "It was in this period where we first became involved with Chamber Music in Napa Valley and entertained many wine-loving classical musicians in our home as well—many have become our best of friends and wine ambassadors around the world."

The couple capitalized on the trend toward custom-crush facilities, where vintners shared the same equipment and aged their wines under one roof, thus realizing an economy of scale in the capital-intensive wine industry. Maggy set up the business, learning accounting and teaching herself spreadsheets. "I imagined a low-risk, small start, and then we would see where it went," she recalls. She has always been the winery CEO.

A pivotal year was 1995. Kongsgaard left Newton for Luna, a startup focusing on Sangiovese, Merlot and Pinot Grigio, where he could work one day a week on his own project and still earn a living. In 2000, the Kongsgaards set up shop at Chateau Boswell, outside St. Helena, using it as a winemaking facility. There, they focused on Stonecrest Chardonnay. They also entered into a partnership with auctioneer Fritz Hatton. Dubbed Arietta, the project strove to craft high-end Bordeaux-style wines made from Napa fruit. For a decade, Kongsgaard made a Cabernet Franc-Merlot blend and a Syrah for the label.

In 2004, the Kongsgaards used \$2 million they earned from selling their half of Arietta to Hatton to purchase 150 acres on Atlas Peak, near the crest where they reside, and built their winery cave into the hillside. It is an inspiring locale, a mix of rocky, volcanic soils atop a jagged landscape about 5 miles up a winding road from Stonecrest. With views of Mount St. Helena, San Pablo Bay and Mount Tamalpais in the distance, their property sits above the fog that often shrouds the valley floor, staying both cooler in the summer and warmer in the evenings and winter.

The winery tunnels into the hillside and is the perfect size, Kongsgaard says, with room enough for two vintages and manageable by him and son Alex, 30. A philosophy graduate from St. John's College in Santa Fe, N.M., Alex, who is muscular and sports short-clipped hair, lives near the Stonecrest property.

"No one touches the wine but Alex and me," says Kongsgaard. For several years Alex was "one foot in, one foot out" of the family business, says Kongsgaard, but he joined the winery full time in 2009 when Maggy became ill and had to step back from day-to-day activities. Daughter Helen, 31, is also a graduate of St. John's College, this one in Annapolis, Md., and has a second undergrad degree in fine art from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is currently getting her master's degree in landscape architecture from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard. Both Kongsgaard children were home-schooled by their parents.

Two of Alex's friends also make wine at the property. Evan Frazier, the winery's general manager and the only employee outside the family, releases an Albariño and a Tempranillo under the Ferdinand label. And Graeme MacDonald crafts the MacDonald Cabernet from his family's vineyard in Oakville.

In a good year, John and Alex make a little under 3,000 cases, mostly Chardonnay: 400 cases of The Judge and 1,500 of the Napa Valley, in addition to 400 cases of Cabernet from a neighboring Atlas Peak vineyard, 300 cases of Syrah from Hudson, 100 cases of Albariño, 75 cases of VioRous (a Viognier-Roussanne blend) and 75 cases of The Fimasaurus, a Cabernet-Merlot blend. They hope to eventually use their own Cabernet to anchor that wine. In 2005, after a decade of not making Cabernet, the Kongsgaards bought fruit from three sites in the heart of the valley—Madrona, Thorevilos and Cappela—for the 2005 to 2008 vintages.

Having Alex join the company has proved especially gratifying for the Kongsgaards. John finds himself in the role of mentor for the next generation of winemakers, including some who age their wine in his cave. "Having Alex at my side is changing my life," says Kongsgaard. "He's been riding around in a Jeep his whole life." Moreover, discussing the winemaking methods, from vineyard to bottle, has forced Kongsgaard to review everything he's learned over the years. "I'm obliged to look at every step of my past." So far, they've planted 5 acres together, encompassing Cabernet, Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc, Viognier and Roussanne. And Alex manages The Judge vineyard, which now has a half-acre of Viognier.

As the family plant scientist, Maggy is in the middle of every viticulture discussion. She is the heart of Kongsgaard's hospitality, and leads all aspects of sales and marketing. "She has both the long-range planning view and is the master of all the little details that keep the business in order," says Kongsgaard. "Most of all, she had the guts to get us to take the plunge into our own business in the first place."

Kongsgaard still finds time to help Hudson with his line of wines. John "crosses the world from down-to-earth to very sophisticated very successfully," says Hudson. "When I moved to Napa, in '81, we had dinner at home one night, a delicious meal, plenty to drink, and it was midnight," he recalls. "In those days when you [sulfur] dusted your vineyard you used a hood with a respirator. He went up to dust Stonecrest at one o'clock in the morning, wearing a bandana and a pair of goggles."

The next big phase for the Kongsgaards revolves around their estate-grown grapes, some of which were planted in 2010, with the first crop coming in 2014. It may cover only 5 acres, but the results will be telling; Kongsgaard is awaiting a verdict before planting the next 10 acres, which he plans to begin clearing this summer. By the time the vineyard is maturing, Kongsgaard will be close to 70. "Our only regret is we didn't start earlier," says Maggy.

The errand run to pick up his father's Stony Hill Chardonnay 43 years ago inspired John's journey. In many ways he's been able to replicate Fred McCrea's life at Stony Hill, working with his wife and son in a small winery driven by his family's Chardonnay vines and selling most of what he produces through a mailing list. "If you want your kids to have [the winery], it can't be too big or you'll need four guys in suits flying around to sell it," he says.

"This is what two guys can do. This scale fits the romance, fits the finances. It's totally fun. I'm in it for the romance. Both Warren [Winiarski, of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars] and Peter [Newton] said, 'Don't get bigger than what you start with. As soon as you hit a plateau you can live with, resist, resist, resist expansion.'"

So far Kongsgaard has. Three thousand-plus cases, 60 tons of grapes, all under one roof in a cave on Atlas Peak. "Alex and I can do that, keep the books on the back of an envelope and sell the wine in a month," he says. "You can do that and have a blast."
