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Patience and Low Yields Key to Quality at Kongsgaard

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It was on a 1988 trip to Burgundy that John Kongsgaard learned that Chardonnays from the region he most admired were fermented and aged a full 22 months in barrel.

At Coche-Dury and Domaine des Comtes Lafon, in Meursault, the wines took a year to finish fermentation, with malolactic fermentation sometimes taking place *before* the primary fermentation. The technique seemed counterintuitive to a winemaker from California, where most Chardonnays were out of barrel within 12 months and any malolactic followed primary fermentation.

When a Chardonnay spends extended time in barrel it develops myriad secondary flavors. In the case of The Judge, aromas of baked apple, candied orange peel, crème brûlée, toasted marshmallow and a briny mineral character are evident. The 2005, tasted at the winery earlier

this year, remains in pristine shape.

What allows a Chardonnay to benefit from two years in barrel starts with the vineyard, Kongsgaard says. Not all fruit can stand that much time in oak. The Judge comes from the family-owned Stonecrest vineyard, a site where yields are naturally low and the grapes are exposed to morning sunlight that causes the skins to ripen and thicken, so that the grapes develop tannins on the vine—a boon for ageability.

Kongsgaard's first two-years-in-barrel trial for Chardonnay took place at Newton in 1988. "The richest, most minerally lot in the cellar [at Newton] was from my Stonecrest vineyard, which then went entirely to Newton," Kongsgaard says. "Unless you have a vineyard with low tonnage and high tannin you just can't manage [extended aging]." The Wente clones Kongsgaard employs yield tiny "shot" berries, which add to the wines' concentration.

Stonecrest fruit was blended with fruit from Hyde and Hudson vineyards into the Napa Valley bottling until 2001; from then on it has been kept separate. With Chardonnay, the tannins make the acidity appear higher than it is, Kongsgaard says. Acidity helps whites, but can work against reds.

Red and white wines have similar tannin levels, the winemaker explains, but reds are macerated longer to extract color, flavor and tannins. Over the years, he's adjusted his fermentation times, particularly with Syrah, which he has made since 1996. "Syrah is a gnarlier wine than Cabernet," he says. His model is Hermitage, with its notes of rose petal, violet, black pepper, meat and charcoal. As Kongsgaard has worked with Syrah, he's picked at riper sugar levels and shortened fermentation time to get the aromas and flavors he prefers. His Syrah is grown on a 2.5-acre volcanic soil block of Hudson, which yields about 6 tons for a total of 300 cases. Although Syrah is popular among customers, he says, "I'm glad we make 300 cases, not 3,000."

For his Cabernet, he buys grapes from a property on Atlas Peak at about 2,000 feet of elevation. Tannins are consistently an issue, forcing Kongsgaard to work on texture and pick riper to avoid astringency. As a result of these practices, he has managed to make full yet well-structured wines without pushing the alcohol. The wines are balanced, well-centered and reward short-term cellaring.

Kongsgaard considers 2009 the ideal vintage, "born ready," with 2010 also strong. He is very pleased with his 2011s, and everything worked out in 2013 as well. "We're fanatically committed to low-crop vineyards. If we see a [bigger] crop, we cut it off. We go down, not up. All of our success is based on lower crops."

