



KAREN MACNEIL

N A P A

JANUARY 13, 2016

The Judge and The Master

“The clusters look like mice hanging upside down by their tails.”

This was John Kongsgaard, describing his chardonnay grapes which are denuded on all sides of their leafy clothing and left entirely naked and exposed before they are picked. Kongsgaard, a man who many (including me) consider the master of California chardonnay, is funny, erudite, artistic, handsome, and musical (he blasts Mahler’s 9th Symphony, among other classical pieces, to his wines in barrel). Visiting him atop his small, very remote mountain estate this past year (forget the GPS) I was also aware that he appears to be a man who could give a damn about marketing and pr.

Kongsgaard’s best known wine called The Judge (after his father who was a judge) may well be the only chardonnay in Napa Valley with a waiting list as long as the ones for the cabernet sauvignons from superstars Harlan and Colgin. A mere three hundred thirty cases of The Judge (\$175 per bottle) are made. The wine comes from a tiny vineyard in the volcanic hills on the cool southeastern side of the valley. The site, once a quarry, was purchased by Kongsgaard’s grandfather in the 1920s. It was the legendary Andre Tchelistcheff himself (considered the father of Napa Valley winemaking) who suggested the Kongsgaards plant chardonnay there.

Even though I tasted it when it was a baby, the 2013 vintage of The Judge is unlike any California chardonnay I have ever experienced. The flavor equivalent of a tightly woven golden-colored tapestry, it is a wine of unbelievable textural sumptuousness with long lines of intensity punctuated by pinpoints of what can only be described as energy. Comparisons to Montrachet float in the mind.

Kongsgaard, was the first American student of the now well-known French consultant Michel Roland. He graduated from the University of California at Davis with degrees in literature and music, ultimately returning to get a master’s degree in enology and viticulture. Before founding his own winery in 1996 with his wife Maggy and son Alex, Kongsgaard was best known as the creator of Newton’s Unfiltered Chardonnay, a wine that, when it was first made, rocked the whole notion of what California chardonnay could be.

The Judge is one of those wines that make such an impact on the senses that even after tasting it once, you can continue to taste it in your mind for years. I will not soon forget tasting it with John himself last year.