

Decanter

Interview: Lou Kapcsandy

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Owner of Kapcsandy Family Winery in Napa Valley and self-proclaimed francophile Lou Kapcsándy discusses his thoughts and opinions on fine wine with Kyle Schlachter.

Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon is often thought about in terms of its power, concentration and extraction. **Lou Kapcsándy** describes his wines as being distinct and reserved in a sea of opulence.

He prefers to compare them to the great estates of Pauillac and Pomerol than to those of Napa. The self-proclaimed Francophile fled Hungary during the Revolution of 1956 and built a career as a chemical engineer in the United States.

In 2000, Kapcsándy and his family purchased the **State Lane Vineyard** in Yountville, long the source for Beringer Vineyards Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon programme. Kapcsándy replanted the vineyard under the direction of Helen Turley and Jon Wetlaufer with the goal of producing First Growth quality wine.

Kapcsándy Family Winery now employs wine consultant Denis Malbec, formerly of Château Latour, and has seen a rise in interest from consumers and critics from around the world.

How would you describe your taste in wine?

I'm a Francophile. I trained my palate on wines from Bordeaux. A large part of the collection in our cellar is from Bordeaux. I'm very respectful to the ancestry of the grapes. So, Nebbiolo or Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah do not come from California. No merlot, Cabernet Franc or Petit Verdot. They all come from somewhere else and in my opinion they need to be respected for what they are. When winemakers over-extract or over-alcohol the wine I dislike those wines.



What is the most exciting grape variety you work with, and why?

Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Napa valley is very heavy in Cabernet Sauvignon, and so are we, but those are the two grapes we feel we make the most incredible wine from. Merlot has had just a terrible reputation and had a misuse of process by winemakers. We are in the process of correcting that. We have a perfect soil in the location by the river (92% red clay and 8% volcanic rock) for Merlot. Roberta's Reserve is specifically intended to go head to head, in blind tastings, with Château Petrus, Le Pin and Masseto (from Tuscany) and any other merlot-based wine that people tout as world-class Merlot. We're happy to be put in a blind tasting and beat them.

What is the most difficult part of running a winery?

Generally speaking, the most difficult thing for anyone running a winery is to sell their products to people, and sell it at an appropriate price.

What makes your wines special?

We have a very special vineyard. It is unlike any of our neighbors, in fact the property next door has very little clay and is mostly sandy loam. Here, we have very heavy clay and our root systems are very shallow (only goes down about 32 inches). We can produce wine from extraordinary well-balanced grapes that are both ripe, in terms of sugars, and phenolically very mature.

Do old vines make better wine?

It all depends. This vineyard was originally planted in 1975. It already paid its dues when we replanted it in 2002. The 1979 Beringer State Lane Private Reserve bottling from young vines is drinking absolutely sensational after 34 years and only 12.5% alcohol. It still has more energy to keep aging. In California, there are no real old vines of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc or Merlot because they've been replanted starting in about 1992/1994. Most of the rootstocks were AxR1 and those turned out to not be phylloxera-resistant. And today, as you drive around, you can see big parcels being taken out.

What wines would you choose to drink if you were celebrating?

We drink anything from a good Champagne to start with, we probably would drink something that is a Bordeaux blend and then we might enjoy some Rhône Grenache-Syrah blend and then finish with a Hungarian Tokaji.

What is the single most memorable wine you have ever drunk?

1900 Château Lafite, because it was over 100 years old. It was absolutely spectacular. I actually still have four bottles left!

Are there any wines you've never tasted that you really want to try?

No, there isn't. I've tasted all the wines that I care to taste.

Is wine too expensive?

Wine is never too expensive. Wine is available all the way across the board from less expensive to enormously expensive wines. It depends on what category a person's palate and what their economic/financial conditions are and whether they can afford to or not afford to buy very expensive wines. If they don't have the palate, they're not going to appreciate it. It's been the better part of 40 years that I've been developing my tastes. In 1964, when I purchased my first fine wine, I was not buying overly expensive then.

What do you see happening with Bordeaux prices?

It depends on a lot of factors, supply and demand, overall economic conditions, will the current consumer base (my generation) be replaced with people with disposable income to make investment in wine. I think the Bordelaise will have to have a price adjustment down.

Do you make wine for consumers, critics or yourself?

We never make wine for critics. We make wine for ourselves. Hopefully, we will have a following of people that have similar tastes and like the profile of our wines. So far, we've been very lucky and very pleased that most of our wines sell out.

What is the most exciting wine region of the world at the moment?

I think Napa Valley; it has more potential for growing different varieties, climatic conditions and soil conditions that no other location in the world has. We can grow Pinot noir, we can grow Bordeaux varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and so forth, we can grow Rhone style wines with Syrah and Grenache. Some of the best Chardonnay can be made here and some of the best Sauvignon blanc. However, Napa Valley is fairly saturated and not much more opportunity to plant new vineyards. Now, there will be replants; people will take out one particular variety and replace it with something else. At the moment, there is a fair amount of interest in planting more Petit Verdot. People are starting to plant some Spanish varieties.

What is the one myth about wine that you would like to see buried?

We're interested in changing the entire attitude that fine wine based on Bordeaux varieties has to be high in alcohol. We dislike high-alcohol wines; I call them "Gasohol wines." We like wines that are very complex, have structure and are very elegant. Most of the wines we make have less than 14% alcohol.

What would you be doing if you weren't making wine?

Drinking it.

How is your winemaking different now from when you started?

We started with the very first bottling in 2003. It was a very small yield because the plants were so young. We only had 175 cases. That has grown gradually to now where we are probably going to bottle the 2011 vintage at around 3000 cases. Stylistically, we do have a bit of a change because the first two vintages (2003 and 2004) were made by Helen Turley. She is known to do some over extraction and her wines tend to be higher in alcohol. Both of her wines here were 13.5%. In 2005, we brought in a completely new team that actually has Denis Malbec as our winemaking consultant and his family is from Château Latour. So, we have gone to a completely different

cooperage regiment and the wines are much, much more Bordelaise than most people make here in Napa Valley. Blankiet is about the only other that might be similar; we happen to share the same winemaking consultant, so that might be an obvious similarity.

What is the worst mistake you've ever made?

We have yet to make it. We try to minimise the mistakes as much as possible, but this is an ongoing process. Winemaking is synonymous with manufacturing so many, many things can happen. Most of the mistakes, if you call them that, occur actually in the vineyard. We had done lots of investigations where we thought we had the perfect combination of rootstock and clone, but it turned out we were wrong. We had to replant a certain part of the vineyard.

Lou Kapscandy photograph taken from the [Kapcsandy Family Winery Facebook page](#).

<http://www.decanter.com/people-and-places/interviews/584200/interview-lou-kapcsandy>