

## **Kapcsándy Merlot Roberta's Reserve and Cabernet Sauvignon Grand Vin**

BY STEPHEN TANZER | JUNE 26, 2019

On more than one occasion, I have singled out the Kapcsándy Family Winery's Roberta's Reserve as one of the world's greatest Merlot bottlings not made on the Pomerol plateau, and arguably the finest example from California. It's a Merlot with extraordinary depth of flavor and structure, and it appears capable of evolving in bottle for at least two or three decades. In some vintages the wine has even overshadowed the estate's Cabernet Sauvignon Grand Vin in the early going for its uncommon depth and perfumed complexity. But a stellar vertical tasting of these two elite bottlings side by side at the winery in March proved that the Kapcsándy family's outstanding Yountville site excels with both varieties. Their two flagship bottlings show remarkable density and refinement of texture, outstanding small-berry intensity and depth, and uncommonly suave tannins. If my scores seem ridiculously high, that's because the wines are ridiculously good—and far more impressive than wines from young vines (the oldest will be 18 this year) have any right to be.

The first Roberta's Reserve was made in 2005. This was also the first vintage from which the estate bottled a varietally labeled Cabernet Sauvignon—actually, "Grand Vin" was not indicated on the label until the 2007 release. In its first two vintages of production, the winery had offered just a single Cabernet-based proprietary blend, which included 10% Merlot in 2003 and 40% in 2004.



*The no-nonsense Kapcsándy winery*

### **The Origins of the Kapcsándy Project**

Lou Kapcsándy came to America from his native Hungary following the Soviet invasion in 1956, and quickly converted his degree in chemical engineering to an American one at the Polytechnic Institute in Brooklyn, going to work as a junior chemical engineer. He subsequently moved to California's Bay Area, where he worked in the petroleum and pharmaceuticals industries. In 1974, he relocated with his wife and

young son, Louis Jr., to Seattle, where he eventually ran a general industrial contracting company and was involved in the construction of a couple of wineries in Woodinville.

Throughout his adult life, Kapcsándy had been a wine lover, with a particular fondness for Bordeaux, but his involvement with wine would eventually become far more hands-on. Kapcsándy cited a long lunch with Château Léoville-Las Cases proprietor Michel Delon in 1999 as the trigger for his going into the wine business (one reason for this decision was so that he could buy Delon's wines). He established a small wine importing business, Grand Cru Imports, specializing in Bordeaux and Hungary's Tokaj wines.

Meanwhile, Kapcsándy was also thinking about buying a vineyard in Napa Valley as a retirement project, initially with no plans to make wine himself. In 2000, the State Lane Vineyard in eastern Yountville, about a half mile inside the Silverado Trail, came to his attention. This 20-acre site, owned by a retired California highway patrolman who had purchased it in 1993, had supplied Beringer Vineyards with a core component for its flagship Cabernet Sauvignon Private Reserve through the 1980s and continued to be used to make smaller-production vineyard-designated Cabernets in the '90s. Beringer had recently ripped out the vines due to the spread of phylloxera and had a plan to replant them. Kapcsándy had heard through friends that the site was available and he snapped it up. "I couldn't believe that Beringer wasn't all over it," he told me in March.



*The Kapcsándy vine rows are planted magnetic north-south*

### **The Early Years of a Great New Estate**

Inspired by the proven quality of the site, Kapcsándy decided to create his own wine estate in partnership with his son Louis, Jr., with the objective of making a first-growth style of wine in Napa Valley to compete with the finest wines of Bordeaux. The Kapcsándys quickly went to work replanting the vineyard to 15 specific blocks, mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. They brought in their friends Helen Turley and her husband John Wetlaufer to help them organize the new vineyards. Lou, Sr. credits Wetlaufer for convincing him to plant his vines using a magnetic north-south row direction, which was unusual at the time in Napa Valley but is increasingly practiced today. This approach is believed to offer the most uniform possible ripening of the fruit and to prevent grape sugars from racing ahead of phenolic ripeness. (As a long-time claret lover, Kapcsándy was intent on making wines with moderate alcohol



levels and sound natural acidity.) And in very hot years, the shading effect of the foliage on the west side of the vines can prevent the fruit from being burned by the hot afternoon sun. Wetlaufer also recommended vertical shoot positioning, using a double wire, which further protects the grapes against shriveling by creating a hedge row effect.

The vineyard was also planted at a very dense 2,600 vines per acre, common practice in Bordeaux but far tighter than most vineyards in California. (Previously, the State Lane Vineyard had been planted at just 850 vines per acre.) Thanks to the high-density spacing (1 meter by 1.5), the vines produce smaller berries with a higher skin-to-juice ratio, which in turn yield wines with more intense flavors and greater structure. Yields are quite low for vines on the valley floor, and especially low in terms of fruit *per vine*, with the Kapcsándys generally managing their vineyards to get between 3 and 3-1/2 tons of fruit per acre.

Helen Turley was responsible for making the 2003 and 2004 vintages: the '03 at Martinelli Winery, where Turley was also making her own wines at the time, and the '04 in a facility on Howell Mountain built by Bill Smith, then-owner of La Jota. The Kapcsándys' own small state-of-the-art winery, made without any wood surfaces, was finished literally a few days before the 2005 harvest; Denis Malbec, who was born and raised at Château Latour, where his father worked and where he later began his winemaking career, was brought on as winemaker. Malbec remained in charge of winemaking until his untimely death at the age of 46 in a car accident in the summer of 2016. Tony Arcudi was subsequently hired as his successor. But from the start of the Kapcsándy project, Lou, Sr. and Louis, Jr. have overseen all aspects of vineyard management. Lou, Sr. and his wife have a house on the property while Louis, Jr. lives close by, on the north side of the town of Napa.



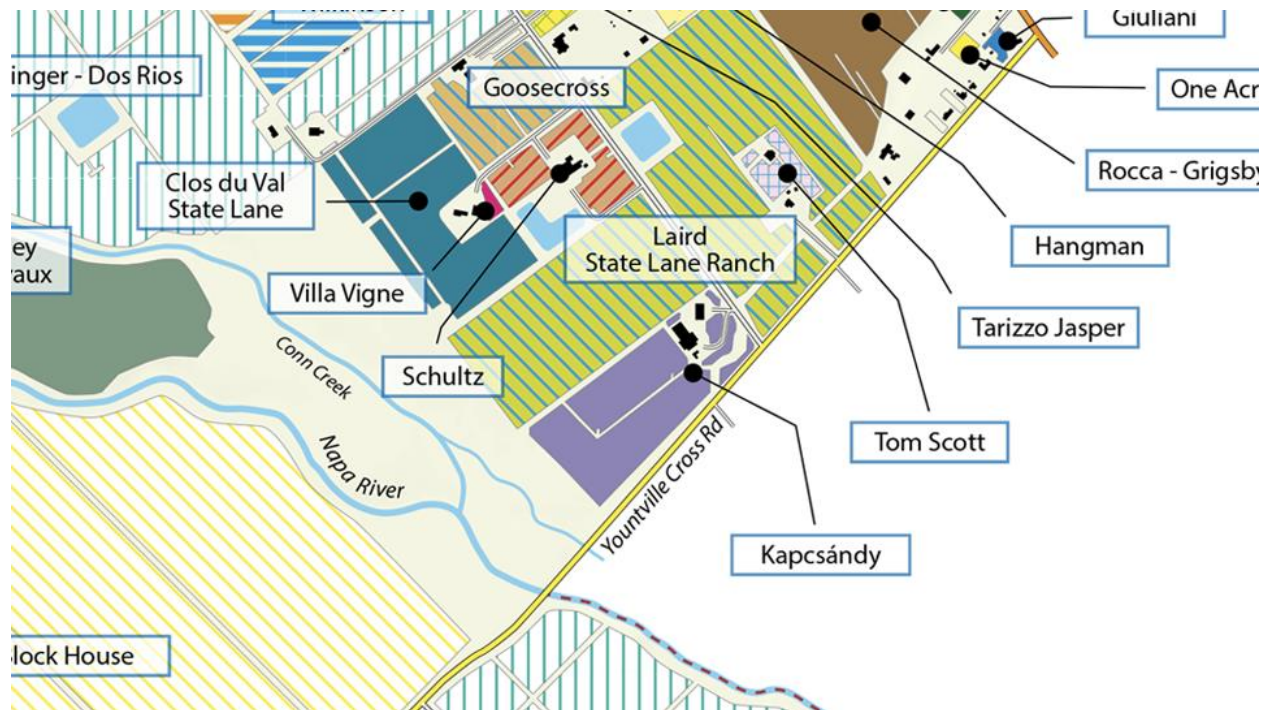
*Kapcsándy's Block 8 Cabernet Sauvignon*

### **Capitalizing on a Privileged Terroir**

A visitor to Kapcsándy Family Winery at noon on a summer day might be forgiven for thinking that this so-called valley floor site is a hot place. But in fact, cooling breezes coming up from San Pablo Bay to the south reliably arrive during the afternoon and temperatures routinely drop by at least ten degrees in a matter of an hour or two. Nights are normally cool here—Lou Kapcsándy told me that the hottest temperature he has ever experienced at this site was 119 degrees at 4:30 in the afternoon. But at 5:00

the next morning, he maintained, the temperature had plunged to 48! With pronounced diurnal temperature variation, the berries plump up at night and the increase in grape sugars—and the concomitant loss of acidity—is gradual in the weeks leading up to the harvest, which takes place on the late side. Through the 2012 harvest, the Roberta’s Merlot was picked in October every year except 2008, with the Grand Vin Cabernet typically coming in during the second half of that month. But picking times in recent years have generally been a week or two earlier. As Louis, Jr. explained, “in many vintages before 2012 sugars were ahead of flavors, thus delaying our harvest dates. But as the vineyard is maturing, phenolics are tracking more harmoniously with sugar loading, so we are now able to achieve optimum flavor at lower sugar levels.”

The **Cabernet Sauvignon Grand Vin** comes from the 191 clone in Block 8, one of the original 2001 plantings, on heavy clay soil with volcanic rock, plus Block 5, which was originally planted to Merlot but was grafted over to Cabernet Sauvignon in 2012. (At the outset, the acreage planted in 2001 and 2002 featured about 33% Merlot, but today that percentage is more like 20%.) The Grand Vin blend routinely includes about 2% Cabernet Franc, which Lou Kapcsándy says brings “lift, tension, different tannins, more color and a hint of graphite.” Meanwhile, the **Merlot Roberta’s Reserve** (the wine was named after Kapcsándy’s wife) was planted in 2002, in heavy clay and volcanic rock on the western side of the property, next to the Napa River. Incidentally, through the years the Kapcsándys have dug dozens of soil pits on their property, and they have discovered that the topsoil never goes down more than two feet before hitting a mineral-rich “plastic” clay layer that the roots rarely penetrate. But the alluvial soil and clay are intermixed with a significant quantity of volcanic rock, and the Kapcsándys continue each year to remove rocks that work their way to the surface.



*Kapcsándy vineyards as seen in the Vinous Map: The Vineyards of Yountville, by Antonio Galloni and Alessandro Masnaghetti, © Vinous Media 2019*

The Kapcsándys have always been brutal about selection at the harvest, routinely carrying out what Louis, Jr. described as a triple sorting: leaving a good bit of fruit behind in the vineyard, removing “unacceptable” clusters as the fruit is carried by an incline belt into the destemmer, and finally sorting berry by berry on a conveyor belt. “We’re not competing with other California wines,” Lou, Sr. summarized. “We’re competing with Bordeaux and the other best wines of the world.”



Kapcsándy emphasized that Merlot is “a very difficult grape to grow and vinify,” adding that “most people don’t get that message.” He went on: “Great Merlot is finicky and temperamental. It likes heavy clay soils and it often has problems during flowering. It requires far more attention and care than Cabernet Sauvignon. In order to bring in uniformly ripe and balanced fruit, it requires a tremendous amount of sorting in the vineyard. The yields are low and the farming expenses are high. That’s why I affectionately call it “Merlittle” in Napa Valley. Merlot is a noble grape and it requires that it be treated nobly.”

“If our Merlot gets to 14.5%, we declassify it,” he added. “We’re not making California Merlot!” I asked Kapcsándy how his Merlot ages as slowly as it does. “It’s a combination of our special site and the fact that we craft our Merlot like the Delmases have done at Haut-Brion—to taste great when young but to age for a long time. Our best vintages will last more than 30 years, especially as the vineyard matures.”

Interestingly, the pHs of the Kapcsándy Merlot have routinely been lower than those of the Grand Vin Cabernet, and quite low by the standards of Napa Valley icon wines. The Roberta’s Merlot was typically in the 3.55 to 3.65 range through the earlier years, but has been more like 3.5—or even a tad below that—since 2013. In comparison, the Grand Vin Cabernet was normally between 3.7 and 3.8 through 2012 and has been around 3.65 since then. Lou Kapcsándy noted, though, that total acidity levels for the Merlot are not particularly high at harvest, “so we have to have the patience not to tweak the acidity during fermentation. We may have added acidity in 2009, 2012 and 2015, but very little.



*The vines in Roberta's Block 1*

### **The Making of the Kapcsándys' Flagship Wines**

Denis Malbec, whom the Kapcsándys hired as winemaker in 2005, helped them put their young estate on the world wine map during his tenure. Malbec quickly introduced a pre-fermentation cold soak lasting five to seven days, using a bit of sulfur as well as carbonic snow to delay the onset of fermentation. He also made more use of extended maceration than Helen Turley had done: following about two weeks of fermentation, he kept the wine on its skins for another seven to ten days. Malbec relied on a daily pumpover and the occasional *délestage*, eschewing punching down the cap.

According to Lou Kapcsándy, extraction during vinification has always been relatively gentle, “depending on the quality of the tannins each year.” But he added that “if we know we’re sitting on a great vintage, we might be more aggressive.” These days, the fermentation temperature is prevented from exceeding 86 degrees, although Kapcsándy mentioned that in a few earlier vintages Malbec allowed slightly higher temperatures. In the past couple of vintages with Tony Arcudi handling the winemaking, the cold soak has lasted three or four days and there has been very little post-fermentation maceration.

Malbec typically aged the estate’s two top wines in 90% to 100% new oak. Helen Turley had preferred heavily toasted new Taransaud barrels, but Malbec quickly cut back on toast levels and brought on additional coopers beginning in 2005 (six were used that year). Kapcsándy noted that Malbec had already begun reducing the percentage of new oak as of 2013 and that this trend has continued, as the Kapcsándys do not want to make overoaked wines from Bordeaux varieties. “We’re also selecting our coopers and forests more carefully,” he told me.

The wines are racked after the malolactic fermentation, then by taste to avoid reduction. Normally that means three rackings in the first year, another one during the second November or December and then a final racking for the *assemblage*. Both the Grand Vin Cabernet Sauvignon and the Roberta’s Reserve are routinely bottled 20 months after the harvest (i.e., during the second May or June), without being fined or filtered. And, consistent with their distinctly French style, these wines are adamantly dry, typically finishing with under 0.6 grams per liter residual sugar. “Not one of them has as much as one gram,” said Lou Kapcsándy. Not surprisingly, the Kapcsándy wines enjoy a strong following in the U.K., with many additional bottles going to Sweden, Switzerland and Germany.

The Grand Vin and Roberta’s Reserve are expensive wines, with the former bottling typically retailing for about \$400 and the latter a bit less. But then there are only around 650 cases a year, on average, of the Grand Vin and about 300 of the Merlot, out of the estate’s total annual production of about 2,000 cases. Consumers who would like to experience the Kapcsándy style have some less-expensive options, since the family has introduced a number of additional bottlings over the years, both to showcase other varieties and types of wines (i.e., white, rosé and dessert wines) and to protect the quality of their two top bottlings. Their Estate Cuvée, first made in 2005 as an attempt to offer an earlier-drinking wine, began as a roughly equal blend of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon but steadily morphed into a classic Bordeaux blend based on Cabernet Sauvignon and frequently including small percentages of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. The Endre proprietary red was introduced in 2007 as another Bordeaux blend, at a much lower price than the estate’s other red wine offerings, but after vintage 2012 its production was discontinued as most of this fruit began to go into the Estate Cuvée. And the Rapszodia was first made in 2010 as a Cabernet Franc/Merlot blend. More recently it has become almost entirely Cabernet Franc. (One and a half of the estate’s 15.3 acres of vines are planted to Cab Franc.)

In 2011, the estate began making serious, powerful Rosé, using Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot and aging the wine in once-used barrels for 16 to 18 months. The estate also offers a dessert red blend called Vino del Sol, in recent years mostly from Cabernet Franc and Merlot, and a captivating dry Furmint (still the only one, to my knowledge, in Napa Valley), made in stainless steel from a 2007 planting of cuttings from a famous vineyard in Tokaj.



*A double vertical with Louis, Jr. and Lou Kapcsándy*

### **The Results of a Spectacular Tasting**

First off, when I say that the Roberta's Merlot is reminiscent of Pomerol, I'm not talking about a plump, jammy version from a fringe area of this small appellation. We're talking about a powerfully structured, deep, long-aging wine like Château Pétrus. (Lou, Sr. has sometimes mentioned Château Le Pin as another direct competitor for the Roberta's, but Le Pin is usually a bit more decadent in its youth—at least in the riper years.) Although some vintages of the Roberta's Reserve are distinctly easier to taste than the Grand Vin Cabernet, it's still typically an austere wine by the standards of Napa Valley Merlot. The wines show palate-saturating density and develop at a snail's pace. Even if some recent vintages are tastable owing to their fleshiness and sweetness of fruit, only the '07, '06 and '05 bottlings in my vertical were embarking on their peak-drinkability planes, and those wines have years of life ahead of them. Clearly, the Roberta's Reserve is not a Merlot that requires Cabernet Sauvignon for added spine.

Some vintages of the Grand Vin Cabernet are even more brooding and backward at the outset, but the Merlot in most years gives every indication of lasting at least as long—and that would be an extraordinary achievement. If anything, my recommended drinking ranges may prove to be overly conservative for these wines. Still, I wonder how many consumers will wait even 15 years to drink them.

Finally, and not surprisingly in light of the pedigree of the State Lane Vineyard, I was struck by the strength of site character, which expresses itself in both of these extraordinary bottlings. The Grand Vin Cabernet and the Roberta's Reserve are characterized by a combination of red, black and blue fruits, underlying stony minerality, notes of sweet tobacco, brushy herbs, licorice, violet and lavender, and an element of medicinal reserve, and by their combination of uncanny density and refinement of texture.