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Wine Adviser

Northwest transplant is making beautiful Bordeaux-style wine in Napa

After a successful career in construction in the Pacific Northwest, Lou Kapcsandy headed south to the Napa Valley and bought himself a vineyard to pursue his passion for wine. Now he's making some of the finest wine in the valley — Bordeaux that is in the elegant style of French Bordeaux.

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LOU KAPCSANDY built a successful career in construction in the Puget Sound area, but his heart belongs to wine. In the late 1990s he started an import business, focusing on Bordeaux. As often happens, one thing led to another, and in May 2000 the classic "too good to be true" opportunity came his way, and he purchased one of Napa Valley's most historic vineyards, State Lane.

For some 25 years the fruit from this site had gone to Beringer. As early as 1979 and 1980 Beringer's Private Reserves were 100 percent State Lane cabernet sauvignon. But when Beringer's lease on the grapes expired, Kapcsandy (the c is silent) seized the opportunity and bought the vineyard.

On a swing through Napa this winter I looked him up, because I'd seen some phenomenal reviews of his wines. Within four years he'd garnered his first 100-point score from Robert Parker, no mean feat. Clearly, Kapcsandy had vaulted over the competition — and the competition in Napa is as fierce as it gets.

We walked the property, and the story unfolded. When Kapcsandy purchased it, Beringer had already ripped out the old vines, which had fallen prey to phylloxera, so the property was ready for replanting. He hired famed winemaker Helen Turley and her viticulturalist husband, John Wetlaufer, as vineyard consultants, and planted the 15 acres to a mix of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot.

"I've always been an advocate of owning your own vineyard," he told me. "It's what you have to do to control fruit quality — things you can only do in your own vineyard." Once the vineyard was in and thriving, a small but well-equipped winery was built in time for the 2005 crush — the first commercially available vintage.

Despite his genial demeanor, Kapcsandy is a man on a mission. He hires the best people he can; his current consulting winemaker is Denis Malbec, a University of Bordeaux graduate who spent a decade at Chateau Latour in Pauillac. There are no corners cut in the vineyard or after the grapes are picked. More than half the fruit is left either on the ground or under the sorting table.

"We want to make a cabernet sauvignon-based wine that will compete with any wine from around the world, especially Bordeaux," says Kapcsandy. His wines do not fit the standard Napa Valley

mold. They are elegant, stylish, polished — truly Bordeaux-like. It's what he likes to drink, based on a palate trained and refined during numerous visits to the great châteaux of Bordeaux.

Why make wine in Napa and not Washington? I wondered. "Eastern Washington is a desert," he explained. "Bordeaux is a cooler climate influenced by the ocean. Bordeaux soils are gravel, clay and limestone. Washington does not have that." Along with the cabernet, Kapcsandy believes he can grow "the finest merlot made anywhere in the world — the equal of Pétrus and Le Pin." That comment really set me back, until we tasted his merlot. The man is closer to that lofty goal than I would have believed possible.

"If we can't do that with this property," he continues, "I'll just sell it. And we will do all of this with 13.5 to 14 percent alcohol."

I know, it sounds like a boast, pure and simple. Yet Kapcsandy, Hungarian by birth, warm and generous by nature, does not come across as anything but dedicated to his goals. And he is making some of the finest wines from Napa I have ever tasted.

The winery tasting room is open by appointment (info@kapcsandywines.com or 707-948-3101). The tasting fee is \$50 per person.

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