



A 35-year friendship with Silver Oak founder Justin Meyer paid off for Lou Kapcsándy, who has been a soccer player, boxer, chemical engineer, and now winery owner.

By [W. Blake Gray](#) | Posted Thursday, 03-Apr-2014

Lou Kapcsándy dropped the bomb at a Beringer party. State Line Vineyard, one of Beringer's favorite sites was off limits: he'd bought it. Some guest.

On that evening back in 2000, Beringer's director of vineyard operations told Kapcsándy that if he had known the property was up for grabs, Beringer would have outbid him – and any other interested parties – to secure the vineyard.

That would have been prescient. For the past 14 years, it's been Kapcsándy's estate vineyard, his Cabernets and Merlots cost \$350, and two of them have received 100 points from [Robert Parker](#).

Kapcsándy's came late to the winemaking game and his path to the [Napa Valley](#) took many turns. As a teenager, he was on [Hungary's](#) national under-19 soccer team, but he fled the country after the 1956 revolution, leaving his family behind. He spoke no English but got a night job at a bakery in New York while studying for a degree in chemical engineering.

In 1959, he applied for official residence in the U.S. and was promptly drafted into the army. To get out of guard duty and peeling potatoes, he took up boxing, because soldiers in the athletics program were excused from

most chores. In the early '60s, some professional football players were in the army on 90-day call ups; they played football to entertain the troops.

"I was walking by one day and a ball came bouncing up," he said. "I picked it up and punted it. A big booming punt, very easy for a soccer player to do. A coach said: 'If you want to get away from army duty, you should come kick for us.'"

Soon he was invited to the Washington Redskins' training camp, but "a guy missed a tackling assignment and broke my leg." Kapcsándy moved to California when he got out of the army. But he missed playing sports, so he went to the San Diego Chargers' training camp. In another stroke of misfortune, he was injured in an exhibition game and never played a regular-season pro football game.



This was when Kapcsándy started drinking Napa Valley wines and befriended many of the winemakers. 35 years later, one of those relationships paid off in an unexpected way.

Silver Oak founder Justin Meyer contacted Kapcsándy when he heard State Line Vineyard was for sale. The owners had bought it in 1993, just before phylloxera started killing the vines. In 1999, the 20-acre plot yielded less than a ton of grapes and were

hamstrung by a lease agreement with Beringer dating back to 1975, according to Kapcsándy.

The owners were quietly looking for a way out.

That's where Kapcsándy comes in. He had been a chemical engineer for the previous 17 years running a construction company in Seattle. During that time, he had been involved in building wineries for Chateau Ste. Michelle and Columbia Crest but was first keen to turn his attention to the vineyard.

He worked with John Wetlaufer and Helen Turley to replant the vineyard. They dug 34 pits, each six feet deep, to study the soil. And he paid NASA for a satellite-illumination study, looking for a way to get a shadowing effect on the vines.

"It was expensive, but that was the best investment I've ever made," Kapcsándy says. "The rows run from magnetic north to magnetic south. That was so unusual when I planted this. By planting in this direction, it cost us two acres of plantable vineyard. It's an expensive proposition."

But he gained two key cooling effects: shade in the afternoon, and a clear path for the afternoon breeze to come through from San Pablo Bay.

"We get a lot of heat coming up from the soil," he says. "If we planted in a more normal direction, we would be suffering a lot more sunburn and raisining. We would join most of the Napa Valley Vintners in the 16-percent-alcohol range."

He built the winery in 2005. It's not a showcase and is not open to the public. There's a food-grade polyurethane floor, all stainless steel fermentation tanks, and no wood other than the barrels used for aging.

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The winemaker is Denis Malbec, who was actually born at Château Latour, where his father worked, and was winemaker there from 1994 to 1999.

At harvest time Kapcsándy uses 18 people on the sorting table and he says: "The only thing that can go into our tanks are perfectly shaped grapes, like blueberries." They don't punch down on the cap of grapeskins in the tank because "we want wines that are very elegant and finesse-y. Not just big brute force."

He is as proud of his \$350 Merlot-dominant Roberta's Reserve wine as he is of the Cabernet.

"We make this in competition with Petrus and Le Pin, he says. "Nobody else in Napa Valley or Washington makes this quality of Merlot."

Parker gave the [2010 Roberta's Reserve](#) 97 points, calling it "luxurious, voluptuous and in-your-face." I much prefer the [2011](#), which Parker called "reserved and austere," for its exquisite tannic structure. The difference in taste is similar on the 2010 and '11 Cabernet Sauvignon; Parker gives the "full throttle" 2010 96 points, while I much prefer the elegant, pure 2011. Perhaps time will tell which vintage matures better.

Jesse Rodriguez, former head sommelier at the French Laundry, who now works at the Montage Laguna Beach, says: "Those Kapcsándy wines are considered the Grande Dame, Grand Cru wines of the Napa Valley. They're silky, they're elegant. Those are great for people who have the income and want to try these great wines. They're tried Abreu, they've tried Harlan, they've tried all those, and they want to try something new."

As a tribute to his homeland, Kapcsándy grows the only [Furmint](#) in Napa Valley, and makes 25 cases of a lively \$20 white wine with juicy guava notes and good length. "I brought these vines out myself from Tokaj," he says.

If you want to try the Furmint, about the only way is to drive to the winery and taste it. Just turn north on State Line Road from the Yountville Cross; it's the first winery on your left. You have to know it's there, though. Kapcsándy has lived a colorful life, but the only sign at the gate of his crowning achievement reads: "This is not Goosecross Cellars."

<http://www.wine-searcher.com/m/2014/04/from-hungarian-soccer-player-to-100-point-napa-vintner>