

Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

Kongsgaard Vineyard St Helena, California

It's the biggest controversy in wine today: Finesse versus power, complexity against the fruit bomb. But for those who have tasted the best in wine, these elements aren't necessarily contradictory. Such tradeoffs lie in the province, so to speak, of lesser wines. In the top wines, finesse and power are often combined, and hedonistic elements can easily coexist alongside more complex, cerebral ones.

An ideal wine presents a combination of sensory elements in such a way that the taster is able to derive intellectual as well as physical pleasure from it.

Enter John Kongsgaard. This 5th generation Napa Valley resident and former Newton Vineyards winemaker released his first proprietary label in 1996. Since then, with uncanny frequency, **Kongsgaard** wines have received perfect or near perfect ratings from top critics.

John is part cult winemaker and part concert impresario—he and his wife have staged chamber music events in and out of the valley for years. It isn't surprising, then, for a guest to discover that he approaches winemaking like an artist or a composer, developing creative notions in his head before testing them out in reality. This is a painstaking craftsman who is also highly articulate, a lover of music who also concocts flavor symphonies... inside wine bottles.



John Kongsgaard

Certainly the land is part of the story. The vines are mountain-grown on “austere rocky soil,” John told visiting **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors. “The wine shows the nature of the rock.” Another ingredient of success is, of course, his phenomenally small yields—yields so strict they rival those of Burgundy's Madam Leroy.

The **2002 Viognier/Roussane** is as exotic a mouthful as you are ever likely to taste. Here the blender's instinct reveals itself in a fine sense of proportionality, tempering Viognier's light floral temper with the rusticity of Roussane. “It is the vulgar and the ethereal together, the chunky lifted by the ethereal,” John told us. **[Rating: 94]**

In the Arietta **Variation 1** we find an unusual 60% Merlot/40% Syrah blend. The merlot contributes an element of stability while the syrah provides the flair—tropical spice, in this case; this dense purplish wine offers up seductive hints of cinnamon and nutmeg. **[Rating: 93]**

His **2002 Chardonnay** has a deep funky nose that's certainly more typical of *Grand Cru* Burgundy than of California. The unfiltered white is priced at around \$75 to the mailing list, but very little of the 1600 case annual production is sold retail. In it we noted the *richesse* of fresh cream over toast, with the rather forward taste spectrum perked up by a citrus zing that leads into a powerful, persistent finish. (“There's a definite personality to this,” says John.) **[Rating: 92-94]**

The vineyard-designated **2001 Syrah** (\$125) has an immensely rich, peppery nose that hints at the *Hermitage* after which it has been consciously modeled. “This is as thick as wine can be without being jammy or syrupy,” John told us. The wine shows plenty of muscle as well as globs of fat, and there’s a touch of underbrush here along with something frankly animal and wild. **[Rating: 95+]**

The \$100 *Arietta* **H-Block** is a “classical homage to Bordeaux wine,” a 70% Cabernet Franc, 30% Merlot offering that takes *Cheval Blanc* as the model. The 2002 reveals finely textured tannins, layers of dark plummy fruit and a gorgeous fleshiness that never turns flabby or drifts over the top. **[Rating: 92]**

And just what will these immensely impressive wines turn into with further cellaring time? Some are more precocious than others, but “where they go after 5 to 8 years is up to them,” says John with an indulgent smile.

This article was written by Jeffrey Riggs, Senior Contributing editor to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.

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