

GENTRY

THE WINE ISSUE

FLAVOR FORWARD

Lohr, Melka, Beckstoffer,
Kenward, and more—the families
and figures behind the wine

✦ The Comforts of Home



THE HEARTS & MINDS OF SILICON VALLEY



The Rise of Tor Kenward

After a rapid ascent to the top of the Napa Valley wine and hospitality industry, Tor Kenward unveils his own label, TOR Wines, and reflects on his early roots.

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Tor Kenward's story is a rare one in Napa. It starts in 1977 with Kenward, a self-described wine geek, moving to the valley with little more than his clothes, some cash, and an old Mazda RX3. He camps out in Napa State Park until he lands a gig as media tour guide at Beringer and within two years is promoted to vice president, winery spokesperson. That meteoric rise is the start of an illustrious and seemingly magical career at Beringer, during which he pioneers hospitality and culinary programs still unheard of in a valley that had a fraction of the wineries it has today, one stoplight, and no destination hotels or restaurants to speak of. And that's not even where the story ends. The epilogue to Kenward's executive career is a second one as owner of the super-luxurious,

single-vineyard wine label, TOR Wines.

Before that story could come to be, though, Kenward was a young jazz club owner in his native southern California. Raised by bohemian-artist parents, he had recently returned from serving in the Vietnam War when his friends in the jazz scene introduced him to fine French wines.

"Wine changed my world," Kenward says. "I was a fanatic for art, taste, and smell. Wine pushed all my buttons of art and science." There was another element at play, though, too. When Kenward had arrived home from Vietnam, he had vowed to "... only do things with my life that I cared about." Wine captured that vow in full, and within a few years he was ready to take the leap up north.

When asked to explain his incredible

rise within Beringer, Kenward attributes it to that “wine geek” status, saying, “I was the guy who was reading all the reports and books about wine. I was spending all my time with winemakers.” His expertise and ability to connect with industry guests earned him a promotion to public relations director, and later, vice president and spokesperson.

With the promotions came an exciting new opportunity: travel throughout Europe to visit winemakers and their wineries. “It was the dream,” Kenward says. “I remember my first trip. I landed in Paris and I cried.” His first visit was to Moët & Chandon, where he stayed in a castle and enjoyed two- to three-hour lunches followed by equally luxurious dinners. The level of hospitality ignited a spark in Kenward. “I’m going, ‘What is all this about? We need to bring food and hospitality into the business. This is the future of Napa Valley,’” he recalls.

Kenward’s enthusiasm was met with envy-worthy, carte-blanche support at Beringer. “I can’t remember one program that they denied me,” Kenward says. “They were incredibly supportive.”

Some of those programs included, but were not limited to, establishing Beringer’s first library of reserve wines and creating a “vintner for a day” program for media guests. To recreate the magical hospitality meals he enjoyed abroad, Kenward established a chef residency program. That program, built around a temporary rotation of chefs, was only shut down for a very good reason: a young chef, Gary Danko.



PHOTO BY JIMMY HAYES

“He starts cooking, and I’m like, ‘What? This guy is on par with Michelin-star chefs!’” Kenward exclaims. He promptly stopped the rotating program and hired Danko full-time.

In 2001 Kenward was ready to retire from the Beringer executive team, but not from wine. Having earned degrees in viticulture and winemaking (yet another underscore of Beringer’s support and belief in Kenward), he was ready to pursue a new dream: making his own wines, under his own label, TOR Wines.

Known for its commitment to producing high-end, single-vineyard wines, TOR Wines has garnered a cult-like following of loyal customers. Kenward, who founded the label with his James Beard Award-winning wife, Susan, attributes this not just to the wines, but to the company’s business philosophy. “We’re straightforward,” he says. “There’s no smoke and mirrors, no deception. If we have our wines, we’ll sell you our wines.”

There’s more to it, though. Energy and excitement exudes from Kenward as he talks about the wines he and winemaker Jeff Ames are creating. It’s clear his creative and pioneering spirit hasn’t waned, something best captured

by Kenward and Ames’ experimentation with co-fermentation, the process of fermenting varietals together rather than blending after the fact.

“We’re pushing a new boundary ... It’s like going back to the ‘70s and ‘80s again, where we get to be cowboys,” Kenward says with a smile. There will be two co-fermentations bottled each year, under the sub-titled Pure Magic. It’s a fitting name, considering the magic Kenward has created and enjoyed throughout his career.

Speaking in late March as much of the world was weathering the COVID-19 pandemic, Kenward added, “Making wine, especially the great wines, is about relationships. We help each other in tough times, and this builds respect, teamwork, and community. Now is a difficult time, and all our employees and growers know we are here for them, them for us. No question. No layoffs or eliminated benefits. We’re all in this for the long haul, together. Since we’ve gone into lockdown I’ve been posting diary stories of this Napa Spirit I’ve experienced over my last 40-plus years as a vintner on our website. The response has been heartwarming. They’re reminders of our indelible community spirit.” ●