

Forbes

\$100,000 Wine Gamble Turned Into 100-Point Scores From Top Wine Critics

By Cathrine Todd | May 14, 2022



Sitting on the back porch drinking a beautiful glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, the sunset painted the sky with colors of saffron and gold; there, a veteran wine producer in Napa Valley took in the recent catastrophe that destroyed so much of his community while he contemplated the luck of no loss of human life in the disaster, and less importantly, that five of his best barrels of wine survived. All of a sudden the song "That Old Black Magic" started to play in his head, and he knew "Black Magic" would be the perfect name for those special barrels of wine as it was a "black moment" for his winery as they lost a lot of wine yet at the same time those barrels have an "aura of real magic".

That moment happened after the 2014 massive 6.0-magnitude Napa Valley earthquake that violently destroyed wineries, structures and catapulted people out of their beds around 3 am. The victims were

randomly selected as "some wineries lost everything; some none," according to the description that is laid out in Tor Kenward's book *Reflections of a Vintner*. Tor, an iconic winemaker with almost 50 years of experience in Napa Valley, has witnessed Napa's modern wine industry from its beginning with less than 50 wineries in the mid-1970s to the over 400 that exist today that are open for tastings and around 1,700 registered wineries according to the Alcoholic Beverage Control of California.

After the 2014 earthquake, Tor was on his porch, processing disturbing images of the horrible events of such a natural disaster mixed with the heartwarming feelings of seeing the Napa community come together when he was inspired to label those surviving barrels of great wine from the 2013 vintage at his TOR winery, "Black Magic". Fate had undoubtedly been cruel as Tor lost 20% of his red wines during that vintage; that was compounded by the fact he didn't have earthquake insurance at the time, less than 10% of Napa wineries had it, according to Tor. The "Black Magic" wine comes from plots located in the Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard, on the southern border of western Oakville in Napa. The wine would eventually garner four 100-point scores for the 2018 vintage, becoming known as their 400-point wine.

Black Magic

Tor, who loves blending wine from an "exceptional" single-vineyard, was able to work with the extraordinary Vine Hill Ranch because of a relationship that spanned several decades and is how he gets most of his stellar Napa fruit. This particular vineyard has displayed its greatness in the past in Beaulieu Georges de Latour Private Reserve bottlings made by the legendary André Tchelistcheff.

The 2013 TOR "Black Magic" blend is comprised of 99.5% Cabernet Sauvignon and 0.5% of Petit Verdot because Tor likes the sexy "mineral" note and aroma of "hot, wet granite" that comes out of the more "fruit-driven" Cabernet Sauvignon when a touch of Petit Verdot is added to the final blend.

But for the 2016 vintage of Black Magic, Tor said that he and his longtime winemaker, Jeff Ames, decided to go into another unconventional direction with the wine, one that he labels as "a crime of the century". 2016 is considered by most wine critics, as well as Tor, to be one of Napa Valley's greatest. Serendipitously, the Cabernet and the Petit Verdot ideally ripened at the same time and so Jeff had the seemingly ludicrous idea to co-ferment together the Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot as it would fit perfectly into a four-ton tank and it might "be interesting", resulting in a 55% Cabernet Sauvignon and 45% Petit Verdot blend. This gamble, which was highly unorthodox for a few reasons – co-fermentation and such a high percentage of Petit Verdot was unheard of in Napa – and it involved gambling with grapes that cost "north of \$100,000".

Tor was afraid that it would be a Frankenstein sort of wine as he had never tasted another that tried such an unthinkable practice. Besides, being a small wine producer with no corporate money to cushion such a potentially expensive failure could be detrimental to his business. He also risked making a mess out of exceptional plots within a great vineyard, which could seem like a disrespectful act. Yet as other winemakers came to the defense of Jeff's idea, Tor finally caved, and conversely, it made a perfect wine in Tor's opinion and it changed the way they made wine at TOR winery.

The 2016 "Black Magic" was scored highly with 98-point scores from top critics but the 2018 vintage, a vintage known for its superb expression of terroir, received four 100-point scores from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate, Antonio Galloni's *Vinous*, Jeb Dunnuck and the International Wine Report; and many people have said to Tor that it is a fantastic way to end a journey although Tor feels like the journey is just beginning for TOR Wines.

Reflections of a Vintner

And one cannot help but marvel at Tor Kenward's journey when it is experienced through his book *Reflections of a Vintner*. He was born to bohemian parents who always had creative people who weren't

afraid to dream coming in and out of their Los Angeles house as his dad was a writer and his mom a painter. At one point, his family lived with the actor James Cagney (known to Tor's family as Jimmy) for a time after they lost their home "to fire and flood". Tor's name, as well as the names of his siblings, came from characters in a play that his parents loved and despite his father and mother doing little to shape their children's lives as adults, Tor felt the foundation for him had already been built by the amazingly passionate people who surrounded him very early in life. In many ways, he and his siblings had lived more life before the age of 18 than most people get to experience in a lifetime.

After Tor came back from the Vietnam War, working in hospitals, he founded a jazz club with a few other music fanatics that led to them hosting events at various locations throughout California with some of the greats and along the way, he was introduced to great French wine, which would have a lasting effect on his life, as well as the Napa new kids on the block. In 1976, one of the biggest upsets in the wine world, the Judgment of Paris where French judges in Paris picked Napa Valley wines over top French wines in a blind tasting, inspired Tor to follow his passion for wine. He could never imagine that 45 years later he would win the 2021 Judgment of Napa Tasting with his friend and iconic grape grower, Andy Beckstoffer, with their 2016 TOR Beckstoffer To Kalon.

Tor ended up working for Beringer for 25 years, and he relishes the time he spent with a "core group of dreamers" during those formative years there, and for the most part that group stayed intact. During that time, he took winemaking courses at U.C. Davis and he spent a lot of time with some of the best of the best in the wine and food world. Later in her life, Tor became the constant escort for Julia Child and he marveled at her continuous enthusiasm to continually learn as she was always picking the brains of passionate, younger people who had different viewpoints about food and wine. Like many other winemakers in Napa, he was greatly influenced by the all-inspiring Robert Mondavi who never shied away from exclaiming that Napa made wines that were just as great as some of the top wines of the world. Mondavi was a much-needed source of inspiration for Tor and many others as the Napa crew would get tons of negative pushback from European-centric wine-loving sommeliers in New York City when Napa was first trying to make a name for themselves.

One day in the late 1970s stands out in Tor's mind as being extraordinary, when he was invited to a lunch that included Robert Mondavi, Louis Martini, André Tchelistcheff and a few other experienced winemakers, where Tor kept his mouth shut so he could take in the wisdom. A debate started about which qualities make a wine great and give it longevity. Tor remembers words such as tannins (in the red wines), acid (in the white wines), pH, terroir and balance as being presented as answers in this lively discussion. But then, finally, André Tchelistcheff, known as America's most influential post-Prohibition winemaker, gently said with his Russian accent, "No, it is the flesh – it is the flesh in the great wines I have made that seems to give them grace with age." Tor gives the 1947 Cheval Blanc and 1959 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti and La Tâche (DRC) as classic examples of where he was able to experience wines that had "flesh" that assisted them in their graceful aging like André Tchelistcheff had said that day.

For decades, Tor had always admired how the greatest producers in Burgundy focused on particular blocks within a vineyard and he was lucky enough to drink a lot of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti to aid in his education. And so Burgundy was the model for his own winery, TOR Wines, which he started in 2000, and its focus has been on single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay wines with each bottling made in small quantities.

Fifty Years of Napa Valley in Two Hours

Back in April, Tor led a tasting for a small group in New York City to showcase his almost 50 years of being involved in the Napa wine world but he could not help but bring a few Napa gems from his cellar that went back to 1945 – a fiercely concrete way to show that Napa wines can have a long life. It

was a way to viscerally understand Napa's wine history and a glimpse into Tor's wine career with many of the wines associated with long relationships with winegrowers such as with the legendary Andy Beckstoffer.

Tor has known Andy Beckstoffer for four decades, and they share the mission of fighting the good fight of keeping agriculture at the center of Napa Valley. Andy has even set up his will so each of his historic vineyards can never be sold by family members and each vineyard can only be used for growing vines. Napa has changed dramatically since 1968, noted Tor, and he and Andy fight battles every year to keep shortsighted winery projects from taking away what is at the soul of great Napa wines – extraordinary vineyards.

Once everyone got to the 2018 TOR "Black Magic", 400-point wine, at the tasting he held in NYC, Tor prefaced the wine by saying that people either loved it or hated it. That may seem like an odd statement about a wine that garnered 100 points from four top wine critics but perhaps that is just a testament to Tor's gratitude for his life. Today, without significant financial backing, it would be impossible for someone to start any winery in Napa and have opportunities to buy some of the best fruit, let alone a winery focusing on small bottlings of single vineyards and with such financial backing comes limitations. The co-fermented "Black Magic" would have never happened if big corporate money had been involved because the board would have never allowed Tor to take such a gamble.

Tor has always gotten to be the dreamer he was raised to be and that is all that matters, so if someone comes along and negatively shoots down his "Black Magic" wine, he has already won at living... or maybe he just knows that it is an outstanding wine.

Current Release of TOR Wines:

2019 TOR Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley: Black cherry preserves balanced by pencil shavings and hot glowing wood embers that has tons of energy on the palate with layers of zingy red cranberry fruit combined with blackberry compote that has tannins with broad shoulders to support it. Only 375 cases made and suggested retail price of \$110 per bottle.

2019 TOR Cabernet Sauvignon, Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard, Oakville, Napa Valley: A pretty, perfumed nose with mix of wildflowers and baking spices that has notes of crushed rocks and fresh raspberries in the background that finishes with finely pixelated tannins. Really elegant! Only 250 cases made and suggested retail price of \$300 per bottle.

2019 TOR "Pure Magic" Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard, Oakville, Napa Valley: 60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Petit Verdot from Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard like the original 2016 "Black Magic". Broken earth and fresh tree bark immediately bring a strong sense of place to this wine with boysenberry fruit and dark chocolate notes coming after a few hours of decanting. The texture of these co-fermented wines are always a WOW factor as they have the right amount of flesh combined with elegantly structured tannins that give immediate hedonistic pleasure while also creating a drive and focus that refreshes the palate and makes it too easy to drink the whole bottle. Only 100 cases made and suggested retail price of \$350 per bottle.

The Fifty Years of Napa Valley In Two Hours Tasting led by Tor Kenward in New York City on April 13th, 2022:

1945 Beringer Estate Red, St. Helena, Napa Valley: Tree bark, thyme and marked acidity – light and nimble. Notes by Tor Kenward: "This wine came from plantings around the Beringer St. Helena property. Based on old maps from the 1940s, it includes Cabernet Sauvignon and mixed black grape varieties popular at the time. It was stored in a corner of the original Beringer caves for 40 years. We worked hard to find the wine's true identity – no one alive really knows. The Bordeaux bottle hints mostly to Cabernet Sauvignon."

1958 Louis Martini "Mountain Cabernet" Monte Rosso, Napa Valley: A beautiful delicacy to this wine with floral and raspberry aromas – a heady wine. The famous Monte Rosso Vineyard is in Sonoma Valley but back in the 1950s it was labeled as Napa. Notes by Tor Kenward: "This is my last bottle. I've enjoyed sharing this gem over the years. Classic "Martini" style – soft, good core of fruit, beautiful perfume. Excellent vintage."

1969 Heitz Cellar, Cabernet Sauvignon, Martha's Vineyard, Napa Valley: Mixture of eucalyptus and fresh sage with crunchy cranberry on the long, vibrant finish. Notes by Tor Kenward: "I bought this wine in 1975 on a trip to Napa. Joe Heitz wouldn't sell me the 1968. I never opened a bottle of Joe's Martha's bottling from the 1960s and 1970s that I have not loved. Martha May, owner, is a good friend."

1977 Beringer, Cabernet Sauvignon "Private Reserve" Napa Valley: Really nice weight on the mid-palate with silky tannins and blackcurrant leaves and a touch of black cherry. Notes by Tor Kenward: "This was the first wine from the Lemmon/Chabot vineyard, and it was Beringer's first Private Reserve wine. I was a judge at the Orange County Fair and I took shiners of the wine to see how it performed. My friend, Richard Arrowood, told me it was his favorite wine of the show. I went back to Beringer and encouraged the team to make this our first Private Reserve bottling. It was an easy sell."

1988 Kenward, Cabernet Sauvignon "Home Cuvee" Napa Valley: Lots of juicy black fruit with structure giving it shape and fresh finish. #1 Red Wine Winner at California State Fair (Tor's homemade). Notes by Tor Kenward: "From 1981 and for two decades, Beringer allowed me to make small lots of wine on the west side of the St. Helena property with equipment I bought and free labor – mostly friends, writers, trade, and dreamers. 1988 was a very good vintage, lost behind the legendary 1987, and with half the crop. I saved the California State Fair ribbon I received – a big ribbon saying, "Best Red Wine of Show." Friend and Congressman, Mike Thompson, sent me a congratulatory letter which I also saved."

1990 Kenward, Cabernet Sauvignon, State Lane, Napa Valley: Round tannins with ripe strawberry flavors and some baking spice with a touch of gravelly earth in the background. Notes by Tor Kenward: "This is our homemade wine from a property that is now owned by the Kapsandy family. The two vineyards that battled it out for the early Beringer Private Reserves were Chabot/Lemmon and State Lane. We marveled why the latter, near the Napa river, performed so well every year until we dug with backhoes and found more rock than rich alluvial soil."

1991 Kenward Cabernet Sauvignon "Chateau La Tor" Napa Valley: Savory rosemary with sweet stewed cherries balanced by upheaved earth. Notes by Tor Kenward: "David Abreu and I planted our property – a small vineyard with four different clones – next to his Madrone Vineyard. First vintage, great year for Napa. The vineyard taught me many lessons about grape growing in the Napa Valley: clones and plant material matter."

Then transitioned into younger vintages, first starting with a couple of Chardonnay wines:

2020 TOR Chardonnay, "Cuvée Susan", Hyde Vineyard, Carneros Napa Valley: An enchanting nose of saline minerality and acacia with white peach flavors and hints of blanched almonds on the finish. Notes by Tor Kenward: "Our Hyde Cuvée Susan is from two blocks, one planted to the very shy bearing, shot cluster Wente – the other to the fuller cluster but aromatic Calera clone."

2020 TOR Chardonnay, Torchiana Beresini Vineyard, Carneros Napa Valley: Overall elegance with aromas of honeycomb and salty lemon confit with wet stones. Notes by Tor Kenward: "The Beresini vineyard is planted to another Hyde Wente selection that is planted in the mother blocks at Hyde and go into the excellent Hyde and Villaine Commandant Chardonnay. Steve Beresini's old vines are a testament to his farming, keeping these 30 plus year old vines alive and still producing a small but distinctive wine that has built a great following within our TOR circle."

2003 TOR, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cimarossa Vineyard, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley: Dominated by blueberry and plum fruit with hints of graphite and lilacs with a rich textured body. Notes by Tor Kenward: "Cimarossa means "red hilltop" in Italian and that aptly defines this special hillside vineyard. Elevation is 2,100 feet where the soils are predominately red volcanic rock and dust. This was our first vintage worked from three different blocks."

2009 TOR Cabernet Sauvignon, Beckstoffer To Kalon "Old B" Oakville, Napa Valley: Full throttle on the entry with lush cassis flavors and savory spice with complex notes of tar and smoldering earth with fine tannins and a pretty floral finish that was all finesse at the end. Excellent wine! Notes by Tor Kenward: "A coveted block in Beckstoffer To Kalon which Andy made available IF I picked at 24 Brix. Everyone in the vineyard picked much riper that decade, and Andy loved the old BV Reserves picked closer to 24 Brix. An anomaly for To Kalon, the vintage was excellent."

2016 TOR "Black Magic" Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard, Oakville, Napa Valley: First time Tor co-fermented a wine; 60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Petit Verdot from Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard. Deep ruby color with multi-layered black and blue fruit and hints of turmeric and curry leaves on the nose as it expands on the palate with blackberry liqueur and espresso notes... and what a great texture! Full body that has the right amount of tension balanced by, dare I say, flesh. Fantastic wine! Notes by Tor Kenward: "This was the first year Jeff talked me into co-fermenting our small Block of Petit Verdot with Block 7 Cabernet Sauvignon from Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard. It's unlike any wine we made up to that time and became a model for future Magics."

2018 TOR "Black Magic" Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard, Oakville, Napa Valley: 80% Cabernet Sauvignon and 16% Petit Verdot co-fermented and 4% Cabernet Franc blended. This wine got a lot of enthusiastic praise from everyone in the room as it is just a wine that blows one away. The wine seduces from the moment one smells it as it has lots of juicy and rich fruits singing and it is multifaceted in regards to complex flavors and textures; cigar box, exotic spice, stony minerality and hint of graphite with lots of energy, finely etched tannins and extraordinary length of flavor. Wow, wow, wow, wow! Feel lucky to experience it!! Notes by Tor Kenward: "A little bit of everything in our toolbox is in this wine. Co-ferments, best barrel selection, Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard, Beckstoffer To Kalon, and a dash of Pritchard Hill Cabernet. We worked on this wine to the very end when it "magically" came together. It garnered four 100-point scores from leading critics."

2019 TOR Cabernet Sauvignon, Beckstoffer Dr. Crane Vineyards, St. Helena, Napa Valley: A lovely floral quality to the nose intermixed with cumin seed and cocoa powder that has delicious cassis flavors laced with a minerality that was sustained across the long, expressive finish. Notes by Tor Kenward: "Our first ever from this iconic site was fermented in a single four-ton closed top tank for 20 days. We were offered blocks from this vineyard previously, but waited until a block next to the quarry nearby was offered. All Clone 6. Not a typical Crane, distinctive perfume, well worth the wait."

Myron Nightingale's Old Solera Sherry, St. Helena, Napa Valley: Golden apples and walnuts with touches of butterscotch and zing of ginger. Notes by Tor Kenward: "This was hand bottled by Myron Nightingale and given to friends in 1980 from one barrel saved in the old Beringer caves. Very old Solera Sherry whose "mother" might date back to the 1800s from a Palomino vineyard on Spring Mountain, St. Helena, planted by Charles and Olga Beringer."