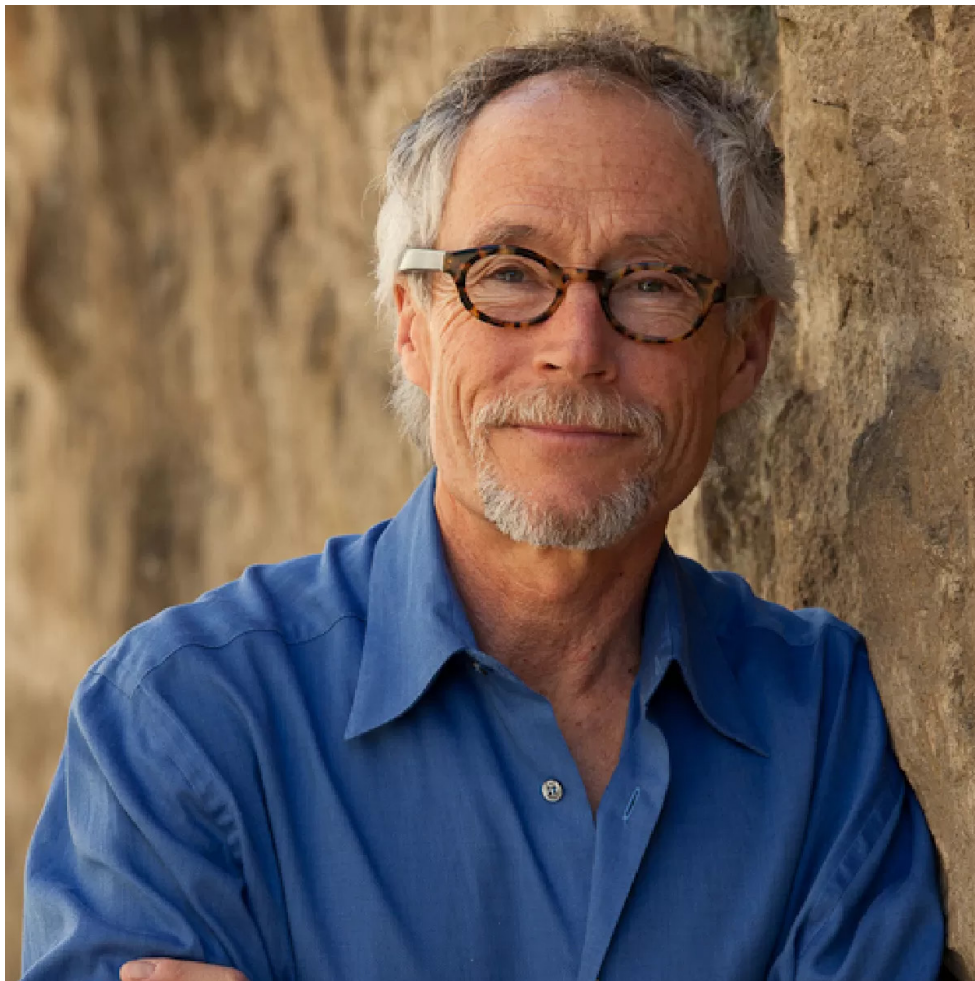


PROFILES, WINE COUNTRY, WINEMAKER INTERVIEWS — MAY 30, 2023

# Tor Kenward, Iconic Napa Winemaker

by LAURIE JO MILLER FARR

## If These Grapevines Could Talk



Tor Kenward (photo: Greg Gorman)

“It was 50 years ago when I first stepped foot on this fertile soil, and Napa Valley was a very different place,” Tor Kenward recalls. “There were fewer than 50 wineries where today there are more than 800.”

In his recently published book, *Reflections of a Vintner*, Kenward takes readers on a journey of “stories

and seasonal wisdom from a lifetime in Napa Valley.” There could be no better storyteller to share insider tales about living and working in Napa Valley — from the good old days through today and with an eye to the future.

Haute Living, San Francisco talked to Tor Kenward, the iconic winemaker whose coveted TOR 2018 vintage Cabernet Sauvignon received four perfect 100-point scores from leading critics alongside five 99-point scores and ten 98-point scores. TOR Wines recently took first place at the Judgment of Napa blind tasting by leading experts and sommeliers, beating out domestic and international peers.

“If ever there were someone with roots planted deep in the terroir of the modern American food and wine movement, it’s Tor Kenward.” — Danny Meyer, restaurateur; founder; author of *Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business*



Melanson Vineyard (credit: Bob McClenahan)

**HL: Why wine? What got you hooked in your lifelong work of passion?**

**TK:** Back in Southern California following service in Vietnam, I operated a jazz club on the beach in Santa Barbara where a group of friends were really into fine international wines. I went up to Northern California on a wine buying trip. There was a moment when I realized, “I need to know everything there is to know about this,” a path that led me to Napa Valley in the mid-70s. I became obsessed. This was everything I wanted in life at that time: amazing people, farmers, dreamers, chasing passions. It was a tight community: Everybody knew everybody in those days.

**HL: How might the changes you’ve seen in Napa over these past 50 years help to inform us about the future?**

**TK:** The battle over urban development began in earnest in 1965 with the formation of the 'Ag Preserve.' As early as 1975, there were tough conversations in Napa Valley about development that would draw the area away from agriculture. We are fighting those same battles today. My hope is that we are careful stewards of the land and resolve battles in favor of agriculture, not urban development.

People may not realize that Napa Valley is tightly defined and very small, it produces only about 4% of California's wine. We're only one-sixth the size of Bordeaux. Following Napa's huge expansion of the past half-century, we cannot plant much more, so stewardship is critical.

**HL: You've shared work and friendship with so many industry legends; could you tell us about a few moments that really stand out?**

**TK:** Yes, I've been truly fortunate to know and enjoy friendships with incredible people that I met through wine, including legends like Julia Childs who loved wine and the chef community; she taught me to embrace curiosity. I credit Robert Mondavi and André Tchelistcheff for changing and shaping my life as a vintner through their mentorship.

Looking back, I'd say that there were so many people on the sidelines making things happen — people that were very quietly doing great things. When I worked at Beringer, I recall occasions walking into André's office unannounced. There would be others there and I could sit in a corner listening to them talk. There was a combination of old-world wisdom seasoned with American ingenuity. In fact, the people in that room were the early founders of Napa Valley wine, the people that made Napa what it is today. They were so generous with their time; for that I am extremely grateful.

**HL: If grapevines could talk, what would they say right now?**

**TK:** The vines would say, "Remember who's boss." If we don't, it's our own loss because it's Mother Nature who brought us to the dance. If we don't listen to her the music will stop.

**HL: Finally, a word for winemakers of the future?**

**TK:** If I could give three words of advice to the next generation of winemakers, it would be this: Vision, patience, and stewardship. Have a huge amount of patience. When it comes to vineyard management and wine production, there is no instant gratification. Ten years is just a moment, an investment. Listen to the vines. Respect our natural resources and look after the land.

Importantly, this is an industry built on relationships. It's unique in that way. At the very highest level, integrity and friendship make all the difference. Lastly, have fun!