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**INTOXICOLOGY REPORT**  
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## The Man, the Myth, the McClelland

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There comes a time in the life of every curmudgeon, no matter how mordant or cynical or jaded, when he must—if only for a moment—wax a little sappy.

When confronted with a new, powerful wine created by a potent, old-school personality who witnessed much of California's wine history firsthand and who today remains that most elusive of viticultural species: A humble legend?

That qualifies as such a moment.

John McClelland, who I interviewed last year for *Starstruck in Lodi Again*, has a vinous pedigree to rival anybody in America still breathing oxygen: His sixty year career spans such milestones as running Geyer Peak, Alderbrook and Almaden, facing down mobsters in Las Vegas over wine lists and hobnobbing and bread breaking with every single big name from the California Vinicultural Pantheon. He's a treasure trove of treasured tales, and I defy any wine historian to find anybody more knowledgeable—or more accessible. Call the dude tonight and I guarantee you'll end up listening your ear off.



The label that displays his signature is a partnership between McClelland, Napa wine whiz Mitch Cosentino and Paul Scotto, wine and cider makers extraordinaire from Scotto Family Cellars.



When I stopped by his Sonoma bungalow last February, I described McClelland's physical presence this way: 'Big as a bear and bald as a billiard ball, hands big enough crack walnuts; he looks a little like Brando in *Apocalypse Now*'. Somewhere in his early eighties, and despite having been drop-kicked through some health issues, he retains a look of indomitability. When sharing a room with him, you tend to see more of the physical side, and lose sight of the gentle flow of affability that underscores his personality—on the phone, however, it's all homespun charm.

When he called last week to talk about his 2013, released last June and just now coming into its true splendor, I was treated to the disembodied John—a phone voice several thousand miles removed from the shot-putter's physique—and was thus reminded that his gentility is an equal and opposite side to his persona.

### CharacTerroir

A few years ago, facetiously, I talked about the human counterpart to terroir, the psychology of a winemaker that—like the climate—coaxes specific, often pre-determined qualities from a grape. But the more I considered it, the less facetious it seemed. Two winemakers, building a product from an identical harvest, will invariably come up with two different wines, and the singularity in each will arise from the personalities of the man or woman behind the crush pad.

In fact, it is very easy to state that, as a rule, an exemplary wine reflects the creator as well as the place of origin.

**McClellan Cellars Petit Verdot 2013 (\$40)** seems to embody that principal as succinctly as any wine I recall tucking into. Petit Verdot, once restricted to a blending grape in Bordeaux, is used rarely even in that capacity these days: It is a challenge to ripen it if springtime conditions are not optimal, even in the relative mild maritime climes of the Médoc.

In general, Petit Verdot requires more hang-time than France can provide, but in Napa, it has found a promised land, and when pampered through its fickle flowering season, it can produce plump, polished, powerhouse wines of the sort that many Napa disciples have come to expect.

The grapes that built this blockbuster were hand-harvested in early October, 2013 at (I'm guessing) optimum phenolic ripeness, hailing entirely from the Oak Knoll District in the southern end of the Napa Valley floor. Each lot was fermented separately and barrel-aged in French oak for 26 months.



The resulting wine—not to be too hokey, too odic or too gross—displays quintessential *characTerroir*, it is John McClelland in a glass.



It opens with a strapping presence, forceful and sweet, with an embrace like currant syrup—cool Oak Knoll, with its extended growing season, allows fruit to ripen without stewing. The concentration is remarkable, sapid and massive on the palate, but as cool as shade in the summertime. This is wine with a grip capable of crushing walnuts or putting shot, but offers enough subtle restraint to remain delightfully layered, big, bold, but not boisterous.

Like John.

Elegant wine? Not exactly, but there is an undercurrent of class and breeding that knifes through the potency; the flavors are rich cassis, blackberry, tarry licorice and some nice oak spice and smoke. Tannins remain grippy, but the structure of the juice is so firm and the fruit so pristine that the wine promises to have a career as storied as its

namesake.

Nature and nurturing have seen the remarkable John McClelland through eight decades: May his eponymous elixir show the selfsame spunk and longevity, even if neither he nor this sappy cynic are around to do the ultimate depth sounding.

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