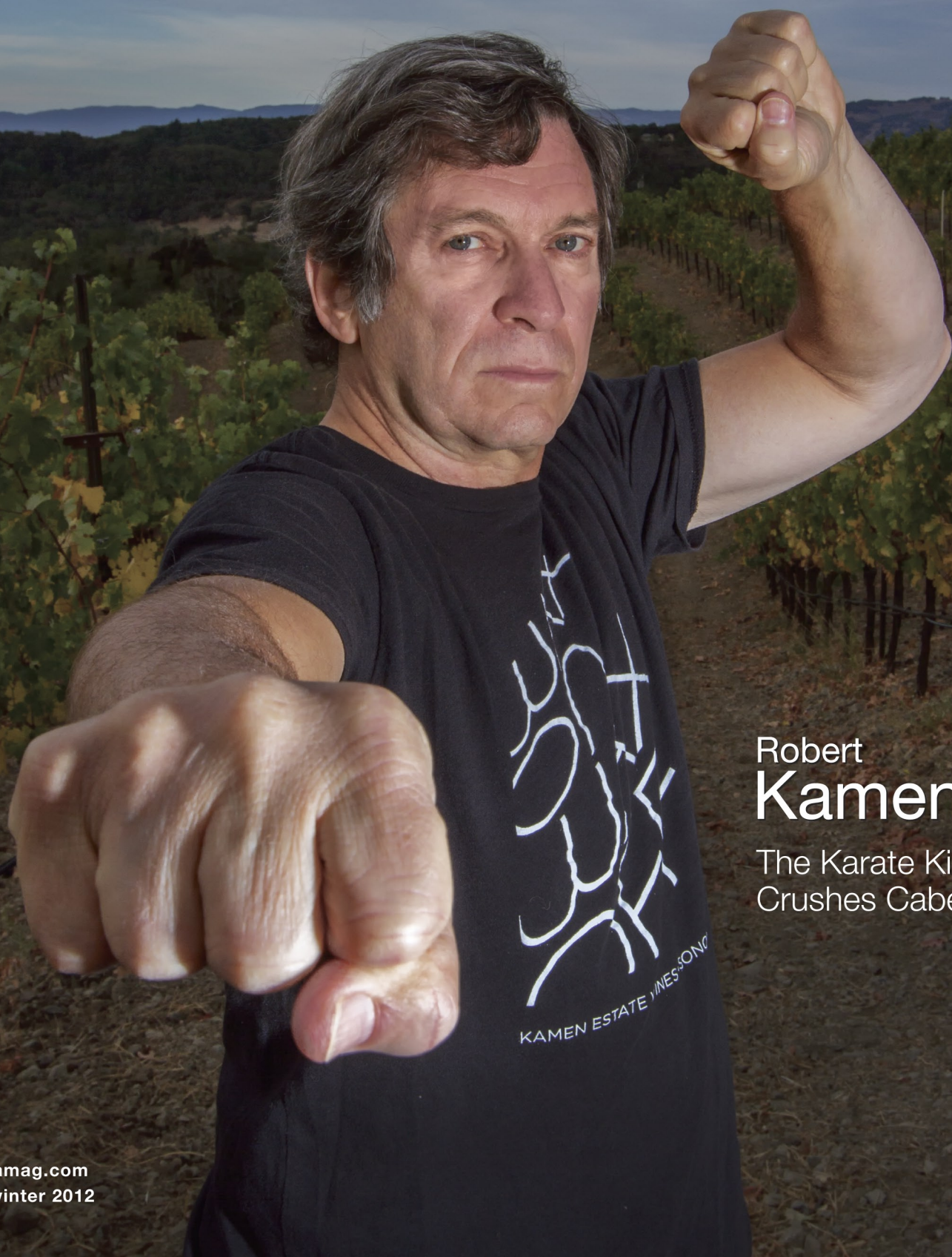


Getting High Over Wine Country | Moon Mountain | Vineyards of Salmon

SONOMA



Robert
Kamen

The Karate Kid
Crushes Cabernet



Kamen: from Karate Kid to Cabernet

STORY
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Without a map, or an airplane, or a family relationship generations deep, you would never know the land was there.

It lies hidden in a bowl, flanked by knolls and hills on one side of Moon Mountain, cloistered by the contours of the Mayacamas range, 300 acres, invisible from the floor of the trench that is Sonoma Valley.

When Robert Kamen first saw it, hiking up from the end of Norbomm Road, there was no route, no path, no real sign of human development, just fields of volcanic rock, turrets and towers and buttresses left over from long-finished eruptions, a mountainside littered with the detritus

of an angry earth, thinly leavened with a layer of soil to cushion the blanket of cracked and broken stones.

Kamen was in Sonoma to visit friends and celebrate the sale of his first screenplay. That in itself was an improbable event. A child of New York City housing projects in the Bronx, he had attended NYU, gone to the University of Pennsylvania for a Ph.D. in American Studies—one of the less utilitarian career paths ever—and, along the way, had written a novel that he showed to a cousin, who knew a film director, who read the novel and thought it might make a good movie.

“He sent me three screenplays. I read

the screenplays, I figured out the form, I turned the novel into a screenplay and six months later, Warner Brothers bought it. First shot. One draft, that was it. I didn’t even know what I was doing. I didn’t even have an agent.”

Like a lot of screenplays, that one never became a film, but it put a chunk of money in Kamen’s pocket and that gave him some unexpected options.

When he got to the top of the land that fateful day in 1980, Robert Kamen saw a view that just stopped him cold. It stretched down to San Francisco, across the bay to Mount Diablo, out almost as far as the distant Sierra. It was above the fog,



Lines from some of Kamen's more well known scripts, including the *Karate Kid* and *Taken* adorn the tasting room.

almost at cloud level, 15 minutes from the Sonoma Plaza, and he told his guide, “My God, I could stay here forever.” And the friend said, “You can, it’s for sale.” And Kamen said, “Sold.” And he bought it.

At that point, Kamen had no particular plan, certainly no grand ambitions involving grapevines and wine. “I had the view in mind. I saw this view and I’d never seen anything like it. I mean, this is one of the most amazing views ever. The land is encircled by higher ridges, there’s an intimacy, it’s closed in, and then you have this opening. It just spreads out all over the place.”

More than 30 years after he first saw it, there is still romantic awe in Robert Kamen’s voice when he talks about the land. It’s like his mistress. He thinks about it at night and can’t wait to see it in the morning. And, while he owns a large apartment on New York’s Upper East Side, it is the land in Sonoma that holds his heart and focuses his passion, even as it cost him his wife.

“I gave up a marriage to move here,” he says a little ruefully. “A 23-year marriage. She wouldn’t move here. I don’t blame her. We lived in 6,000 square feet on Central Park.”

Kamen had not been in Sonoma long

when fate conspired to bring him Phil Coturri, who was already a visionary, organic vineyard evangelist, if not yet a legend. Coturri convinced Kamen that an organic, biodynamic vineyard was the thing to do.

“I was totally attracted to the organic nature of everything, because I was a child of the ’60’s and Phil looks like he came

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in second in a Jerry Garcia look-alike contest,” Kamen says laughing. “I was attracted to that and I was attracted to Phil’s passion. He was just so passionate about it and I respond really well to people

who are passionate about things. I had just sold the screenplay for *Taps*, so I had a bunch of money. Having never been one to think anything through, and operating purely on instinct and impulse, I gave Phil a quarter of a million bucks and he planted me a vineyard.”

For several years the grapes he grew went to make other people’s wine, but when Kamen had to replant much of the vineyard after a wildfire in 1996, he decided to make his own. He now has a tasting room on the Sonoma Plaza and is as serious about his estate cabernet as he is about any of his screenplays. And now, in concert with his neighbors around the flank of Moon Mountain at Repris Winery, he is waist deep in an effort to win approval for a new AVA that will recognize the unique terroir and climate of the mountain slopes flanking the east side of Sonoma Valley.

Kamen is deeply serious about the reputation of his wine and thinks Sonoma can create cabernet on a par with Napa. In five years, he insists, Sonoma “can be



a destination for high-end wine. I opened my tasting room because we need really good wine on the Plaza.”

Meanwhile, Kamen’s screenwriting career has been on fire. “In 1982,” he explains, “I wrote *The Karate Kid*. That more or less took care of the rest.”

By that point it was clear something radically unusual was happening in Kamen’s life. Most screenwriters, even the really good ones, will knock out a successful script once every five or six years. And some will be made into movies and some won’t. For the past 32 years, Kamen has been averaging a film every 18 months, give or take. That comes to about 22 films—he’s not sure, he tends to lose track.

That’s like a baseball player hitting a home run, or at least a triple, every time he comes to the plate. “I’ve been very lucky for a screenwriter,” he admits. “A lot

of guys go through years between films.”

Of course, success begets success, but even with that given, Kamen’s record is startling.

“I keep writing, they keep happening. I get more good projects, especially things like *Taken 2*, and all of a sudden you blow up. A Hollywood genius equals how much money did you make for the studio. I just made the studio a shit-load of money, so I get offered good projects.”

Ask him the standard Hollywood metric—how much his films have grossed, in total— and he has to stop and think.

“It’s got to be over a billion dollars,” he muses, and then begins counting. “Let’s see, the first *Taken* was \$280, the new one is going to go over \$300, so right there, that’s over \$500 million. The *Karate Kid* movies, if you put all four of them together, that’s got to be \$600 or \$700 million, so there I’m over a billion. Two

Lethal Weapon movies at \$350, that’s \$700 million, so that’s a billion-seven. The *Transporter* movies did \$120 million each, so that’s \$360 million. It’s a ridiculous amount of money.”

Very quickly it becomes clear that, even with off-the-cuff accounting, Robert Kamen, who recently turned 65, has written more than \$2.5 billion worth of movies. And he’s nowhere near done. “It’s not going to end for at least two years because right now I have two years’ worth of work.”

That includes a movie to be called *The Sword*, about the most famous samurai sword in Japanese history. Then he’s working on a movie about mermaids who exact retribution on mankind for trashing the oceans. That’s another collaboration with French producer/director/writer Luc Besson with whom Kamen wrote *The Fifth Element*, and with whom he has been



Kamen spoke at a pitch panel at the Sonoma Film Festival and listened to panalists' pitches.



creatively partnered for the past 18 years. They are a uniquely successful odd couple. “He’s Shrek, I’m Donkey,” Kamen explains, only half joking. “He’s the creature that owns the swamp, I’m the little donkey that runs around and talks a lot.” Besson calls almost every day and they talk numbers for their films.

He’s also close to a deal on a remake of *Bloodsport*, a 1988 Jean-Claude Van Damme martial arts movie, and he’s negotiating a deal with Jason Statham, the *Transporter* star, for a film he’s already written, and he’s pitching a TV series called *Red Warrior*, based on a graphic novel.

Perhaps you see a theme here. Kamen seems clear about his own interior landscape. “I think we all have the childhood fantasy that there is somebody who is going to give us the answers. Somebody is going to be kind and gentle with us and teach us and protect us when need be, and love us unconditionally who can kick everybody’s ass. We’ve all fantasized about having that father or that mentor. I know for a long time a lot of my dreams and stories were all about mentor types.”

And does this theme show up in his work? “The hero stories, yeah,” admits Kamen. “I seem to have a knack for com-

mercial storytelling.” He also has a knack for martial arts, having trained in the discipline since he was 17. The story of how that started is like an episode from one of his movies. “I was at the World’s Fair in 1965, in Flushing. My friends and I were jumped by a bunch of kids. I got stabbed in the back with a letter opener. Some kid grabbed it off the shelf, he stabbed me and then they ran. I went into the New York State Pavilion and this guy, Ed McGrath, who was giving a karate demonstration, he was disarming a guy with a knife, and I said, ‘Sign me up.’ He had a school on Roosevelt Avenue and 74th Street in Jackson Heights. I would take the train every day, get off, go to the karate school, train for four hours, get on the train and go home. I did this seven days a week, four hours a day.”

The training came in handy when Frank Price, the chairman of Columbia Pictures, called Kamen up and asked if he could write a screenplay about a 9-year-old kid with a karate black belt.

“He said, ‘You know about this stuff?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ He said, ‘What do you think about doing a movie about this?’ I said, ‘This is all bullshit, a 9-year-old kid with



a black belt. I have a story if you want to listen to it. I told him the story of myself and my teacher. He said, ‘Can you turn that into a film?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ He said, ‘OK. I’ll give you a bunch of money, turn that into a film.’ So I did.”

For a long time it didn’t occur to Kamen that the ease with which these jobs came to him was unusual. “I finished the first draft of *Karate Kid* in September and a year later we were in production. Wow. I thought this is the way it always happened. I sold a script. I got a bunch of money. I wrote *Taps*, six months later they were making a movie. I wrote another film called *Split Image*, they were making that. I thought that’s the way it always works. I was living in New York so I didn’t meet other screenwriters. It’s only when I started hanging out in L.A. with other screenwriters and talking to people that I realized some of them go six, seven years before they sell anything. They do wait jobs, they do bartending, they do undertaking, they do process serving, they do all this shit and then it’s like five years before they get anything made. I’m walk-

ing around saying, ‘I got this done and I got this done, and I got this done. After a while, people were sort of like, ‘SHUT UP!’”

Kamen still practices tai chi and does his karate forms on the deck of his writing studio, a small house perched like an eyebrow just below the crest of a knoll toward the top of his property.

Kamen still practices tai chi and does his karate forms on the deck of his writing studio, a small house perched like an eyebrow just below the crest of a knoll toward the top of his property.

The windows look out on the same

panoramic view that first seduced him and from his work station he can peer down on the top of the marine layer that frequently floods the valley like a sea of cotton.

The vineyards rolling away down the slope below his house show some of the signs of the Phil Coturri touch. Grape clusters are pared back to give each one maximum space and sunlight, insectories distributed around the property enhance the presence of beneficial bugs. A comprehensive vegetable garden covers a good half-acre, complete with fruit trees, including figs, apples and peaches.

The road to the house from the vineyard below could run straight, steep and very short, right up the side of the mountain. But it doesn’t. Instead, it winds circuitously up and around the edge of the vineyard, before topping out on the crest of the hill above the house, so that arriving guests, now facing back over the sloping mountainside falling away before them, are greeted with the full impact of Robert Kamen’s incredible view.

KAMEN
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"I love the road," he says. "Whenever I drive up this road from my gate, and come around that curve, my heart beats quicker. It's just beautiful. Once you're coming around the rocks, you come in and a world opens up. It's just...I can't believe I live here..

As often as not, when you arrive for a visit, he'll be visible inside, framed in a large window at his laptop, a phone in one hand, the other dancing across the computer keys.

Kamen works hard and long on his parallel careers, but he says he's never actually had a real job. "I got paid the first time for writing a screenplay in 1978. I have—and I'm very proud of this—never held a real job. I was never a waiter, I was never a bartender, I never went door-to-

door selling things. I was a newspaper delivery kid. And I worked for two weeks in a small electronics department store, but all I did was boost radios and stuff and throw them over the fence to my friends.

"I peeled shrimp for four days once at the Adventurers Inn, but my friends kept coming in and I kept giving them shrimp and that job ended abruptly. I taught karate when I was at NYU my last two years. That was it. Never a real job. My job now is making shit up. I sit in a chair and make shit up all day."

Kamen considers himself "a really lucky person. I don't do anything to promote it. A friend of mine once said, I'm like a hamster in a nature habitat. I go down a hole, I keep going; if there's food at the end of the hole, great. If not, I'll turn around and go down another hole. I don't try lots of things.

The things I'm attracted to instinctively seem to work out."

He says his life is pretty simple. "I don't have a wide range of interests. I'm really fairly limited to wine, the vineyard, martial arts and writing and cycling. Even that, I do it more recreationally than anything else. I'm not like one of these crazy pedal-heads that has to do 50 or 60 miles at a time and has to train and all that. I just do it because I kind of like the world going by at a slightly faster pace than if you're walking."

He has no interest in cars, even though he could buy any one he wants. He says Warner Brothers gave him a Mercedes 400E, 20 years ago, when he wrote *Lethal Weapon 3*, but it stays in New York and only has 70,000 miles on it. For Sonoma he has a Toyota SUV.

"I don't care if the car's clean. I'm at the car wash twice a year whether it needs it or not. Those things don't interest me. I sit there every day and write. Some days are better than others. I believe that you have to write every day. I usually work like 9:30 to 4, sometimes 5. I like to get out and ride my bike while it's still light."

And, at least once a day, he checks the Hollywood trades to see how his latest movie is doing at the box office.

When last we spoke, *Taken 2* was setting records. S

