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Wine; A Wine of One's Own

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WHAT WITH HIKING, BIRD WATCHING, mushrooming, wine making, gliding and theater-going, Cathy Corison is a woman of varied and consuming interests.

Some are more consuming than others, but one alone stands out, and it isn't bird watching. Before everything else, Corison is a wine maker. She's been at it for 15 years now, working in the Napa Valley in California, but for the first time she may be on the verge of stardom, or what passes for it in the wine world. She has just released the second vintage of her own Corison cabernet sauvignon to enthusiastic reviews. Ah, then she must own one of those elegant Napa wineries? No. Then surely she owns some beautiful vineyards? No again.

Corison, who is 38 years old, is a new type of wine entrepreneur. Compared with the Mondavis or the Seagrams, she hovers somewhere just over the poverty line. She buys grapes from independent growers, rents a winery to make her wine, then rents space to store and age it. Her capital investment amounts to her car, some oak barrels, a few pumps to move wine from one place to another and the rubber boots she slogs around the winery in.

A native of San Jose who grew up in Southern California, Corison arrived in the Napa Valley in the mid-1970's with \$200 and the standard wine maker's credential, a master's degree in enology from the University of California at Davis. Earlier she'd picked up a degree in biology at Pomona College, near Los Angeles.

"My first job was as an intern at Freemark Abbey," she said during a recent interview. "I was a cellar rat." There are dozens of female wine makers these days. Zelma Long, who is president of Simi Winery, is the best known, but women can be found at all levels of the business. "It's been a wonderful evolution over the past 10 years," Corison said.

In January 1978, Corison took a job as wine maker at a now-defunct Napa Valley winery, Yverdon. It was a classic baptism by fire. "I made the wine," she said. "I answered the phone, I greeted visitors, filled out government compliance forms, bought supplies, did all the marketing and the selling. I put out 5,000 cases a year for two years, and I did it without any help. It was great experience, but I wouldn't want to do it again."

From Yverdon, Corison went to Chappellet Vineyard, a producer of top-quality wines high on Pritchard Hill, on the east side of the Napa Valley. There she replaced Tony Soter, who was moving on to Spottswoode Vineyard and Winery and at the same time creating his own label, called Etude.

For his highly praised Etude wines, Soter, like Corison, buys his grapes and rents other people's facilities to make and store them in. "We are custom wine makers," said Corison, who invested some of her savings and time in Etude and remains a partner.

Corison's formative years as a wine maker were at Chappellet. "I stayed there for 10 vintages," she said. "It's a great thing to be able to make wine from the same vineyard for so many years. You develop, and you watch the wines develop as well.

"The Chappellet tradition was based on French methods; we wanted the wines to be riper, to have more extract. At the same time, they were always mountain wines. . . . They were elegant."

Chappellet was a bigger operation than Yverdon. Annual production was supposed to be around 20,000 cases, all from the winery's own vineyards. "In 1982 and 1983," Corison said, "we had such big crops that we went to 30,000 cases each year -- one-third cabernet sauvignon, one-third chardonnay and one-third chenin blanc."

It was during the Chappellet years that Corison began to work on her longtime dream -- a winery, or at least a wine of her own. "Working for someone else means you have to give in on some things," she said. "I wanted to make wines without compromise."

Sounds good, but on a wine maker's pay? Good land in the Napa Valley -- and some not-so-good land -- can sell for \$50,000 an acre and cost another \$50,000 to turn into a vineyard. A modest little winery can go for \$20 million -- and that's with no helicopter pad.

Corison bought her first grapes in 1987, enough for 1,800 cases of wine, at just under \$2,000 a ton. She bought 50 new oak barrels and 50 used ones. The new barrels, from France, cost between \$500 and \$600 apiece, the old ones about \$150 each. She made some of her wine at Chappellet, some at the Robert Pepi Winery, on the valley floor. By 1989, she had moved to the new Robert Sinskey Vineyards, in the Stags Leap area of the Napa Valley, to make her wine.

Since Sinskey concentrates on merlot and chardonnay grapes, which ripen at different times than cabernet, Corison's only wine, she and the Sinskey crew don't crowd each other at harvest time. Corison rents space in the Sinskey cellars to store and age her wine. Like most new wineries, Sinskey overbuilt to allow for expansion and has plenty of excess capacity for her 100 or so barrels.

The first Corison cabernet, the 1987, was released last year to glowing reviews. The 1988 has just been released and would appear to be as well made as the 1987, with the black currant flavors characteristic of good cabernet. Only 1,500 cases of the 1988 were produced. There will be 2,000 cases of the 1989. "Two thousand was always my goal," Corison said. "If I go up, it will be no more than 100 cases a year." The 1987 was \$20 a bottle; the 1988 is \$22.

Finances are a bit easier now. She has a line of bank credit, based on her inventory, but almost everything still goes for grapes and barrels. "And bottles," she added. "I found these gorgeous new Italian claret bottles; unfortunately, they're a dollar apiece."

Some money comes in from a couple of consulting jobs. "I'll have to make wine for other people for the foreseeable future," she said. "It would be nice if Corison would support me, but I don't want to cut corners. I use 50 percent new oak barrels every year and pay top dollar for my grapes. It's difficult to keep expanding and keep those standards. This is artisan wine making, where you're involved in every step. I want to taste every barrel I make. I'm in this thing for keeps."