



Cathy Corison

## Nothing But The Best

*Cathy Corison crafts some of California's most compelling red wines.*

LARRY WALKER

In the past few decades, California winery architecture has gotten out of hand. Entirely. Drive up Highway 29 in Napa Valley and you can see some rather amazing exhibits of hubris run amuck. Let's not get into the wines, they seem rather beside the point. If modern retailing is all about packaging, then some of the wineries now seen or about to be seen supply the underlying narrative: bigger is better.

It must be refreshing to visitors in search of that elusive thing called 'wine country' to drive up the narrow and modest entry to Corison Winery just outside St. Helena, and find instead of a designer's fantasy of old world splendor, a barn. A barn containing a very functional 21st century winery which turns out nothing but outstanding Cabernet Sauvignon.

The barn was designed by William Martin, husband of winegrower Cathy Corison, a name that should be familiar to those who appreciate elegant yet powerful Napa Cabernet Sauvignon. Building barns is in the genetic makeup of Martin. His grandfather and great-grandfather were barn builders in upstate New York. The elegant and deceptive simplicity of the winery design is of a piece with the elegance of Corison wines. A good barn might look simple, but a working barn is a complex building with intricate layers of use, again like good wine.

Corison, who fell in love with wine while a biology student at Pomona College in southern California, is one of the few California producers who deserve to use the term winegrower. She knows her wine from the ground up. At the time she took a master's in oenology at U.C. Davis in the late 1970s, winemakers and viticulturists were kept in separate boxes. When she was at

Davis, the oenology and viticulture departments were even in separate buildings. "I wasn't required to take a single viticulture class to get a degree in oenology, but I took them all because I knew I wanted to be a *winegrower*." Her emphasis.

After graduation from Davis, Corison worked at several Napa wineries, including Spring Mountain, Chappellet, Staglin Cellars, Long Meadow Ranch and Fritz Maytag's legendary York Creek operation. She made her first Corison wine in 1987 and didn't find her present home until 1999 on a ten-acre estate, with eight acres of vines, planted on gravelly benchland soils. Corison says the exact history of the vines is hard to sort out. "They are planted on St. George rootstock, which is resistant to phylloxera. I think they were originally Syrah, but were budded over to Cabernet Sauvignon about 35 years ago," she said. That would make the vineyard one of the oldest Cabernet vineyards in Napa, due to the devastations of phylloxera in the early 1990s. St. George was the rootstock of choice for many early Napa vineyards. It does well in dry conditions, being very deep rooted, and is disease resistant. It does set a small crop, which led to it falling out of favor when the factory farming methods taught at U.C. Davis came into fashion in the 1960s.

The vineyard yields only one to 1.5 tons an acre, roughly half the average crop size in Napa. Following the European model, Corison replants one vine at a time as the old vines fall out of production. For example, this past year she planted fewer than 50 new vines, all on the original St. George rootstock. She is one of a small band of Napa winegrowers who are looking to the past to make the wines of today and tomorrow, not only by her

loyalty to low yielding old vines but by her sparing use of water. Her vines are very close to being dry-farmed. "When I took over the vineyard the vines had been very poorly irrigated. It was a struggle to get them to go deep for water," she said. The vineyard is also farmed organically.

**C**orison makes only three wines. The flagship Kronos is made entirely from Cabernet grown on the estate vineyards. Corison Napa Valley Cabernet is made from vineyards also planted on gravelly benchland between Rutherford and St. Helena. She also makes a few hundred cases a year of delicious dry Gewürztraminer from Anderson Valley grapes because she loves Alsatian wines. "The

whole winery smells like roses when the Gewürztraminer comes in," she said.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Corison for a ten-year vertical of her Napa Valley Cabernet. Taken together, the decade of wines were a supple and delicious homage to classic (pre-cult) Napa Cabernet Sauvignon. There is a tension in Corison's wines between power and elegance, an interplay that Corison is very aware of. "I walk that line," she said. "I want powerful wines but I also want balance." In general, her wines have an underlying spice and silkiness that is quite distinctive. They are lively and bright on the palate when young, but also age beautifully, taking on more depth and complexity, but always "walking that line."

## Tasting Notes

### NAPA VALLEY CABERNET SAUVIGNON

- **The 1989.** A very good wine from what is generally regarded as a poor year. The wine is not just "holding up," it is a deeply impressive example of Napa Cabernet. A thin thread of raspberry fruit knitting it together. There are dashes of dark spice on the long bright finish.
- **The 1990.** Regarded as a good if not exceptional vintage, this wine seems to be coy at first sip, holding something back that is only revealed after time in the glass. There is a spare intensity, a dark, almost brooding quality that keeps unfolding on the palate. It has years and years to go.
- **The 1991.** An amazing, classic Napa Cabernet from a controversial vintage and my personal favorite of the vertical. The fruit is still ripe and lingers into a long silky finish. A hint of chocolate laid over a basic underlying minerality.
- **The 1992.** Good acidity and structure, although the fruit may be starting to fade a bit. The wine has plateaued but should hold for a good while and is drinking beautifully right now.
- **The 1993.** A dark and complex layered wine, similar to the 1990 but not quite as focused. Fruit tends toward the black cherry side, with a touch of fennel on the finish.
- **The 1994.** A wine from a super vintage, it is still young, in an edgy adolescent

way. There is red cherry fruit with underlying minerality. You can drink it now, but I suspect in another five years, this wine will be superb.

- **The 1995.** A brilliant wine from maybe the best Napa Cabernet vintage of the 1990s. It is lean and spicy with a fine thread of fruit running straight through, looping back at the finish with a light layer of sage and thyme. Wonderful wine.
- **The 1996.** Lovely wine from a difficult vintage. It's all about blueberries deepened and rounded with a hint of anise. The finish is long and layered with a touch of chocolate.
- **The 1997.** An odd wine, it seems to lack structure in the opening sip but gains ground quickly after that, picking up authority and strength. Still, it seems a little out of focus in a lean somewhat herbal way. Although it is drinking nicely it seems atypical in a lineup of Corison wines.
- **The 1998.** This is a fairly poor vintage and once again, Corison has outperformed the field, crafting an intense, powerful wine, with intriguing hints of green tea, sage and Mediterranean herbs balancing out the wraparound fruit. Hold this one for a few years.

*(Of the older wines, the 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997 are available in 1.5 liter bottles. The 1996 and 1997 are available in 750ml bottles.)* ♪

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page 97  
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