

Kronos Vineyard

St. Helena, California

KELLI WHITE

AN ICONOCLAST DEVELOPS ELEGANCE AND BALANCE FROM NAPA CABERNET.

Kelli White began her career in the wine industry as the general manager and wine buyer for University Wine Shop in Harvard Square, Cambridge, Mass. She has since traveled to many of the world's wine regions and, following a stage in Burgundy, settled in New York City. There, she sold wine for Domaine Select for two years and later worked at the acclaimed Veritas restaurant, first as a sommelier and then as head sommelier. To focus more on her writing, she recently moved to Napa Valley, where she helps run the wine program at Press in St. Helena, Calif.

Corison

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In 1987, for the first vintage of Cathy Corison's eponymous Napa Valley winery, she knew she wanted two things: to make Cabernet Sauvignon, and to make Cabernet Sauvignon grown exclusively on Bale gravelly loam soil.

Bit by the wine bug as an undergraduate at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., Corison completed a master's degree in enology at the University of California-Davis. This was the mid-'70s, a time when you could count the number of female winemakers in California on one hand. Beginning with a 1978 internship at Freemark Abbey, Corison went on to work at Chap-

pellet (1979-1990), York Creek Vineyards, Staglian Family Vineyard, and, most recently, Long Meadow Ranch, where she continued to make wine through the 2003 vintage. All this experience gained at other people's wineries provided invaluable perspective when the time came to strike out on her own.

Bale gravelly loam is associated with, but not exclusive to, California's Rutherford Bench—an alluvial fan that hugs the Mayacamas range on the western side of the Napa Valley, stretching to include most of Rutherford and the southern end of St. Helena. The term "alluvial fan" refers

Cathy Corison in the Kronos Vineyard (left); Corison winery (right); harvest at Kronos Vineyard (bottom).

to the buildup that marks a river or stream's historical path down a hill or mountain to lower, flatter land. This deep, gently sloping soil tends to be nutritionally and minerally rich and interspersed with rocks of various sizes. Over time, as the water flow carries materials from higher ground to lower, the larger, heavier rocks will settle closer to the hillsides while the lighter-weight silt and sediment filter down. Along such a "bench," the collection of larger rocks provides crucial drainage, which is why alluvial fans are historically associated with wines of the highest quality: consider the sloping crus of Burgundy. Since Napa Valley contains a wider variety of soils than nearly any other wine region in the world, however, the Rutherford fan is anything but uniform. While drainage is always important, Corison knew that in Napa's dry summers, a high proportion of moisture-retaining loam would be needed to provide enough water for spring and early-summer growth.

In the 1930s, the U.S. government commissioned soil-survey maps, which Corison's husband, William Martin, used to cross-check Bale gravelly loam with available real estate. That's how they discovered Kronos, their current estate property on the southern end of St. Helena, just north of Rutherford between Highway 29 and the Mayacamas. The 8-acre Cabernet vineyard, now more than 40 years old, is entirely planted on old St. George rootstock. Prone to shatter at bloom, the shy-yielding St. George had been largely abandoned by Napa winemakers in favor of more vigorous and consistent rootstocks, most of which were decimated by phylloxera in the '80s and early '90s. Corison uses the rootstock's "disadvantages" to her gain—she loves the tiny, deeply flavorful berries, and the naturally low yield (1.25 tons per acre) helps her achieve powerful, concentrated, and phenolically ripe wines without blousy alcohol levels.

Shaggy, moss-covered trunks topped by spirals of thick, radiating arms, her untrellised vines stand in sharp contrast to the straight lines and military corners of the vertically trained vineyards surrounding the property. Corison affectionately calls it her "beautiful ugly" vineyard, and it certainly seems to harken back to a different time in a different era of farming. Pur-



chased in 1995 from an old man from St. Émilion who used to sell his grapes to the Mondavi family, the vineyard was poorly irrigated and nitrogen-deficient. Corison immediately began a transition to dry-farming, driving the roots deep into the earth, and applied organic techniques and an intensive cover-crop program to reintroduce nitrogen to the soil.

Today, none could argue that Corison's keen eye has rediscovered one of the great single vineyards in Napa. "It's the combination of the gravelly loam alluvial fans and the climate between Rutherford and St. Helena that works the magic," she explains. "Cabernet is one of the latest varieties to ripen, and it needs a lot of heat. With



the fog coming up from the bay every morning, and the temperatures plummeting into the 50s every night, acid is preserved and color and flavor production are promoted. There are very few corners of the world with that huge diurnal temperature range. I get juicy, ripe flavors with good, snappy acidity.”

Corison pushes convention in other ways as well. In a region where harvesting at 28° or even 30° Brix is de rigueur, Corison never picks past

24°. In her opinion, if she can’t achieve phenolic ripeness at that level, she needs to reconsider her farming practices or, perhaps, plant to a different variety. Over the years, her Cabernets have ranged between 12.7% and 14% alcohol, depending on the vintage, yet are never green or underripe. Additionally, finding that sulfur dioxide is as powerful a solvent as alcohol, Corison refrains from introducing sulfur until after malolactic conversion. This can be risky—most vintners use sulfur during fermentation to prevent spoilage by lactic bacteria—but she feels her wines are less susceptible to such spoilage because of their lower sugar levels. Using squatter tanks for more passive skin contact and “sprinkling” instead of pumping over are other strategies she uses to create complete, complex Cabernets without massive extraction.

In addition to Kronos, Corison continues to bottle a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon sourced from fruit on the Bale gravelly loam soils of the Hayne, Morisoli, and Zuntz vineyards. Wine professionals seeking a lighter, fresher, more “old-fashioned” style of Cabernet have learned that it still exists in the heart of Napa Valley. Unmoved by the whims of fashion over more than 30 years of winemaking, Cathy Corison continues to bring elegance and balance to a region and a grape that sometimes lack both. 🍷

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Corison Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 1996 \$200

Elegant, but with a power so intensely focused that the wine initially tastes tight. After some time in a decanter, the roasted coffee, cherry, and mint aromas come out. The tannins are long and lean, with bright, vibrant acidity to match. This wine still has years ahead of it.

Corison Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 1997 \$200

Here, the fruit is more immediately apparent and warmer—more cherry pie than fresh cherry. The tannins are firm and fine, and there is more cushion to the mouthfeel. Although gorgeous now, the wine needs more time in the bottle to reveal itself.

Corison Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 1998 \$150

Drinking this wine is like a sneak preview of where the '96 and '97 will be in 10 years. Abundant, cheerful aromas of flowers, spice box, fresh red apple, and cassis are followed by a soft, seductive mouthfeel, with velvety tannins and a fresh acidity that carries the finish out for minutes. Utterly balanced and complete, this wine is a joy to drink today.

Corison Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 2000 \$125

Soft and elegant, this Cabernet whispers its flavors of cedar, plum, coffee, and winter-mint. There is power in the palate, however, leading to a lovely, long finish. Very enjoyable right now.

Corison Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 2002 \$125

The '02 is playful, charming, and bountiful—its aromas of cassis, lead pencil, vanilla, brown spices, red-apple skins, and warm black cherry spill out of the glass. Ripe tannins and ample acidity provide structure for the juicy texture; while the wine is powerful, it never loses its light touch and timeless elegance.

Corison Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 2003 \$125

This is another powerful wine, but the contrast between ripe black- and red-fruit flavors and fresh minerality is enjoyable to observe. Intensely concentrated, it maintains a high-toned acidity. Cherry, violets, chocolate, cedar—this complex beauty goes on and on.

Corison Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 2004 \$125

The warmth of the vintage is reflected in the fruit—blackberry, black cherry, boysenberry—yet the alcohol level stays below 14%, so one can enjoy all those lovely currant and spice flavors without getting fatigued. A gorgeous wine, fun to drink now, that will live on for years.

Corison Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 2005 \$98

This is a serious, classic Cabernet Sauvignon. The tannins are long and deep, the acidity is firm and fresh, and the palate is coated with a lovely mouthful of blueberry, graphite, nutmeg, purple flowers, green olive, cassis, and a little leather. Should age forever.

Corison Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 2006 \$98

Deeply intense, the wine begins richly, but finishes with a clean sweep of acidity and a tannic tickle. The fruit, more black than red, is peppered with a grocery list of baking spices. Seductive, serious, complex, yet never heavy (this is Corison, remember), it's one for the ages.

Prices are current estimated retail.

