



Posted by Alder, September 19, 2006

CORISON WINERY, NAPA: CURRENT RELEASES

It's hard to get attention in the world of wine. Many wineries and winemakers struggle their entire careers for recognition, both deservedly and some not quite. In the days of big marketing budgets and cult wines that are only figuratively on everyone's lips (and on the actual lips of very few), it's easy to overlook wineries that have, quietly, been doing their thing for decades.

I can't tell you how many times I've driven by the understated Corison Winery on Highway 29 without ever going in. The number must literally be in the hundreds now. While I've still not actually stopped to pay Cathy Corison a visit, I've had a chance to taste her wines on several occasions and under different conditions, from barrel samples to cellar aged verticals, and it's clear that for being in prominent plain sight amidst all the vanity wineries in Napa, she is one of the more underappreciated wineries in the valley.



Cathy Corison fell in love with wine as an idealistic and romantic college student in Biology at Pomona college. Fascinated by the "living" microbiology of wine, she went on to get a degree in Enology in the hollowed halls of U.C. Davis. After graduating in the Seventies and starting her career in winemaking at a time when Napa was just coming into its own again as a major wine producing region, she worked at a number of major wineries in the valley, including York Creek Vineyards, Yverdon Winery, Chappellet Vineyard, Long Meadow Ranch, and Staglin Family Vineyards.

Getting started in winemaking at that time afforded Cathy the opportunity of realizing a dream that many new winemakers who share the same dream will never achieve: to own their own vineyard in Napa. It took her 12 years, but eventually in the late Eighties, Corison Winery was born. Since its first vintage in 1987, the winery has been a labor of love and life's work for Cathy and her husband William Martin, who wears most of the hats that Cathy does not, including barn builder, back-office manager, and system administrator.

Cathy Corison's roots in Cabernet Sauvignon run deep. Inspired by the old world wines of Saint-Julien, Bordeaux, she has spent decades learning everything there is to know about growing and making Cabernet in the Napa Valley with a single-minded quiet intensity. Apart from a small production of Gewurztraminer, and occasional dabblings in other varietals for second labels, Corison winery makes only two wines, both of them Cabernet Sauvignon from her 10 acres of alluvial vineyards on the sloping west side of the Napa Valley between Rutherford and St. Helena.

Even at a time when it was harder to find reasonably priced land in Napa, the Corison property was a diamond in the rough. In a recent profile of the vineyard in the San Francisco chronicle Cathy relates that the property was passed over by many buyers because of an old condemned farmhouse on the property and a Cabernet vineyard that most believed needed to be ripped out and replanted. It turns out that neither was quite true, and both the farmhouse and the vineyard continue to fulfill their original purposes today.

Cathy's Kronos Vineyard, as she named it, has been dutifully producing her vineyard designate Cabernet for almost two decades now. I have had the good fortune to taste nearly a full vertical of the last ten years of this wine and I find it one of Napa's most expressive

single vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon -- expressive of both its individual vineyard characteristics, but also of the particulars of the vintage. In an age when technology and vineyard management practices allow winemakers to make highly polished wines that are remarkably consistent between vintages, Corison and her wines seem bent on expressing a bit more of the personality of the vintage than many of their neighbors.

Not unrelated to this expressiveness, I find Corison wines undergo quite an evolution in the bottle over time. In short, they seem to age incredibly well, developing wonderful aromatics and more finesse over time. Quite possibly the best Corison wine I have tasted was a sample of the 1996 Kronos poured at a public tasting 18 months ago. I had appreciated the Kronos vineyard before that taste, but I had not taken it seriously enough. Corison's wines, like the ancient pottery shards that grace the labels, are of another time and place, even as they are firmly and undeniably some of the best of Napa.

2002 Corison Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa

Medium garnet in color, this wine has a lovely cherry perfume with slightly darker and savory aromas of soy sauce and dry earth. In the mouth it is nicely balanced and soft, with nearly imperceptible tannins that wrap around a core of cherry fruit edged by a slight greenness that never crosses the line into unpleasant. The wine has a definite presence in the mouth, with an excellent length -- both on the palate as well as into a very nice finish. Score: **9**. Cost: \$55.

2001 Corison "Kronos Vineyard" Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa

Medium garnet in the glass this wine has a gorgeous nose of cherry, violets, and uncharacteristically (for Napa) the pungent bouquet of mixed herbs that the French refer to as *garrigue*. In the mouth the wine has excellent balance and an acidity that makes for extremely juicy flavors of Bing cherry and notes of plum. The tannic structure is smooth and subdued and carries the red fruit aromas through a substantial finish. Score: **9/9.5**. Cost: \$80.