

Corison: Not Just Any Napa Cabernet

By Gerald D. Boyd

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In 1975, Cathy Corison was a young biology student at Pomona College in Claremont, California, when she had the epiphany that all wine pilgrims experience. Shortly after enrolling in a wine appreciation class, Corison was captivated: "Wine just grabbed me and ran," she says, "and I knew that I wanted to make world-class wine on a small scale."

Imagine you are a young woman thinking of entering into a profession that, at the time, employed very few women. "I had no idea how unusual it was for a young woman to have that understanding about her future," recalls Corison. Undaunted, she headed north to the Napa Valley for a look around and then to UC-Davis, where she earned a Master's degree in enology.

Fresh out of Davis and back in Napa Valley, Corison heard that Larry Langbehn, then the winemaker at Freemark Abbey, hired a Davis graduate as a harvest intern each year and Corison was determined to get that position even though she worried that the physical labor of being a cellar rat might wear her down. "I looked like a 90-pound weakling and neither Larry nor I were convinced I could do the work." She could, it turned out, and was hired.

Now with her goal firmly in sight, Corison was hired on as winemaker at Yverdon (now Terra Valentine) on Spring Mountain and then as winemaker at Chappellet Vineyard, where she stayed for 10 years. In 1990, Corison left Chappellet to move closer to her goal of making her own small lots of wine, with stints as a consultant for Staglin Family Vineyard, Long Meadow Ranch and Fritz Maytag's York Creek. The collective experience she was gathering would be invaluable to Corison wines. Most important, she now had an intimate knowledge of the various sub-regions in Napa Valley, the soils, the microclimates, and the whole range of individual terroirs.

Vintage 1987 was the step-forward year for Cathy Corison. "By the time I made the 1987 Corison, I had been making Cabernet for a long time from grapes grown throughout the Napa Valley, so I knew which areas produced the grapes I loved most."

Then and now, the key difference that defined Corison's approach to winemaking was that she wanted to be a winegrower, not just a winemaker. That meant doing something that few winemakers practiced at the time: going out into the vineyards and working with the viticulturist to produce the best possible grapes. Today, with 18 vintages behind her, and operating from a new barn-style winery designed by her husband, William Martin, Corison is recognized among the wine cognoscente as a winemaker, even though she still thinks of herself as a winegrower.

Stated simply, Cathy Corison is dedicated to making Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. With unabashed regional enthusiasm, she says that Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon is as good--or better than--Cabernets from any other region in the world. And she backs up that claim by stating that the key is to know your vineyards and then go out and source the best fruit you can find.

Corison moves up and down the valley, mainly between Rutherford and St. Helena, looking for grapes that give her wines balance and complexity. The 10-acre organically farmed estate vineyard, with vines more than 30 years old, yields miniscule crops which Corison uses in the Kronos Cabernet Sauvignon. She looks to grapes from the Rutherford Bench for "deep plum, black cherry and blueberry fruit complemented by a soft, ripe structure." And from vineyards in St. Helena, Corison gets "blackberry and cassis concentration and lively natural acidity."

Of course, it's the skill, or "the hand" as Corison puts it, of the blender that brings all these components together. Commenting on how the concept of terroir defines her wines, Corison says, "The word *terroir* gets thrown around so much, and I'm not sure its meaning is fully understood. *Terroir* is not just the dirt or the place where the vine is grown, it's everything: the soil, the climate, the people who live and work on the land and, finally, the hand that makes the wine."

Corison Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon: Most of these Cabernets are finished with 12.8% alcohol and have between 2 and 3 percent Cabernet Franc in the blend. Production hovers at 2000 to 3000 cases. The 2002 is currently available, while the others are available through the winery tasting room or by select order from retailers. "I think



of these vintages as a string of lights, with different ones shining brighter at different times," says Corison.

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon 2002 (\$58): This lovely wine offers deep blueberry and spice aromas and very good texture, with ample ripe berry flavors, nicely integrated tannins, and good length through the finish. **90**

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon 1994 (\$90): Brilliant deep ruby color, with forward ripe blackberry aromas. The flavors are richly textured black cherry and spice. This is an elegant wine with great structure and depth of flavor. **95**

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon 1993 (\$80): Deep ruby color leads to a medium fruity aroma with traces of vanilla. There are ample dried herb notes in the flavors, with good supporting tannins, but the finish is a little short. **86**

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon 1992 (\$100): Medium-deep, bright ruby color. On the nose is a lovely blend of smoky oak, spice and ripe berry. The flavors are dry, full and fruity with a mineral note and great length through the finish. **89**

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon 1991 (\$80): Medium-deep ruby color. The nose is bright with berry and smoky notes. It has medium structure and flavors, subtle mineral lines, and brisk acidity. The fruit tends to thin out in the finish. **88**

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon 1990 (\$100): I found the bright ruby color and berry and spice nose attractive, but the flavors seemed muted at first. With a little time in the glass, the fruit plumped and the wine showed good structure and texture. **89**

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon 1989 (\$95): Lovely medium-deep garnet color. The mature nose is deep and smoky, with tobacco and tar-like scents. The flavors are elegant with cherry-berry notes and subtle dried herb back notes. It has good structure and length and it drinking nicely now. **92**

Corison Kronos Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon: These single-vineyard wines are all 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, with most finished between 13.6 and 13.8 percent alcohol. The 2001 Kronos is currently in the market and except for the 1999, the others are available from the winery.

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 2001 (\$90): Very deep ruby color and ripe dark fruit nose with a subtle vanilla back note. The complex flavors are full and juicy, with layered berry and spice notes, and very good structure and length through the finish. "I love the 2001 Kronos!" says Corison, and so do I. **90**

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 2000 (\$75): The color of this Cabernet is very deep and inky. Ripe blackberry and spice mark the nose and follow through to the flavor, which is supported by firm tannins and acidity. There's a touch of dried herbs in this wine, not seen in the other Kronos Cabernets, but it lends a pleasant complex note. **88**

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 1998 (\$75): Very deep ruby color with a dark center that leads to a deeply textured smoky-berry nose with subtle mineral notes. The textured flavors are juicy and full, with berry and spice notes, good length and structure through the finish. This was one of my favorites. **95**

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 1997 (\$100): This wine displays a deep ruby color with a black center. The aroma is bright with ripe berry and subtle oak tones. I found the structure of this wine excellent, with layered blackberry fruit and hints of toasted oak. This is a nicely textured wine that is holding up well. **92**

Corison, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vineyard 1996 (\$100): The color is medium ruby, clear and bright. The nose is fragrant with ripe berries, vanilla and a hint of sweet spice. There is length and structure to this wine and it shows layers of ripe black fruit complemented with spice. Thoroughly Californian in style with its muscular structure and layered fruit, this is a wine that's holding up quite well. **92**

