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By Virginie Boone

Corison follows her own path Winemaker's patient, provocative style at odds with get-big-quick sensibilities

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It's not every day that winemaker Cathy Corison pulls out a 10-year vertical flight of her Corison cabernet to share.

But it's a very good day when she does, for it provides a sensory schooling in how beautiful and drinkable a balanced cab can be.

With Corison's wines, tannin and oak take on delicate overtones, played against pretty hints of plum, violet, blackberry, cherry and cassis, the aromatics eager to get out after having been bottled up so long.

Corison loves the way her older wines smell, how much the aromatics open up over time, and what they represent.

"I think of wine just like people now," she said. "A great wine is great all its life. It's young and stupid and then it gets into its peaks or one of its bottoms, and one day it's over the hill, but it's still interesting."

Corison makes wines to be great all their lives, a patient, provocative style at odds with our current get-big-quick sensibilities.

"Cathy is a good example for everybody because she has no regrets," said winemaker Mia Klein, who worked five years as Corison's winemaker assistant at Chappellet in St. Helena. "She has definitely bootstrapped her way all along her career. She's tireless."

Tireless is what it takes to compete in a landscape often dominated by big, ripe wines made to drink right away, wines that tend to wow critics in tastings.

But Corison also knows there exists a pendulum with wine: She's seen it swing back and forth between styles several times over her career. "Wine has fashion just like anything," she said. "Writers have come and writers have gone. It's important to have a real notion of what you're about."

Corison does, and as with anything consistently well-made, her wines have always had loyal devotees. Bottom line? She doesn't care.

"I make wine for myself, and I don't make a lot of it," she said. "It may not have been to my benefit to have been so stubborn, but I think the only thing we have to sell is integrity. I'm making wine that I believe in, regardless."

Klein agreed, adding, "When she changes anything, it's to her beliefs. Not what the hot new thing is."

Which is all well and good until one realizes how hard Corison has had to work to maintain it all. Corison's hoe-your-own-row ethic requires patience, long-term vision, sacrifice and frequent flyer miles. For every moment she's not making wine, Corison is criss-crossing the country selling her style and vision to the tastemakers who run retail stores and create restaurant wine lists.

"I take my wines very personally, so I want to be out there talking to people," said Corison, with the caveat that the grind can take its toll. "I don't get a lot of moment's rest, but I'm working on it. "Until I had my children, I never had bumped up against my own limits," added the mother of Rose, 12, and Grace, 10. "I've been exceeding them for a dangerously long time."

In her early 50s, Corison has reached one of those interesting career peaks, having made her own wines under her own name for almost 20 years. Corison came to the Napa Valley in 1975, after falling in love with wine as a biology student at Pomona College in Southern California. "That's when wine grabbed me and ran with me, as food and wine, but also as a life system," she remembered.

"The first wines I tasted were European wines, and I think that's always informed my sensibilities."

Her inspirations include the wines of Saint-Julien in Bordeaux. "I love those wines historically for the way they're built," Corison explained. "They're very pretty, but they're built to age."

She also loves Chianti Classico reserves "from before the Super Tuscan days, when that was their top wine and they weren't being cherrypicked for the Super Tuscans," she said.

"I love the way those wines are built, for their balance of power and elegance. Those are models for me, even though my wines - Napa Valley cabernet - will never taste like those wines, but the way they're built is inspirational."

After Pomona, Corison studied enology at UC Davis, then was hired in 1978 at Freemark Abbey to work her first crush, a groundbreaking opportunity. "That was my first cellar job, and women simply didn't work in cellars before that year," Corison remembered. "I looked like a 90-pound weakling."

After two years at Yverdon Winery on Spring Mountain, Corison became the winemaker at Chappellet, where she stayed for a decade. Along the way, she dreamed of making her own wines. In 1987, she finally did, the first vintage of Corison Cabernet Sauvignon.

It would take another 12 years - and several other winemaking clients, including Staglin Family, York Creek and Long Meadow Ranch - before Corison was able to build a winery of her own, on an enviable 10-acre plot along Highway 29 in St. Helena, already planted to cabernet.

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replanted (it didn't), which helped keep suitors away. There was also an old farmhouse on the property that the county had prematurely condemned.

Corison considers herself "the luckiest person alive" to have stumbled upon such a hidden gem, and still makes wine for others here and there, a financial imperative for having a place of her own.

In the end, it's her wines that provide the perspective and her own words that aptly describe how many feel about Corison herself.

"I think of the life of these wines as being a series of hills and valleys instead of one magical peak," she mused. "It's going to be fun to watch them, the way they're evolving in the glass today. They're not done yet."

Corison and her husband, architect William Martin, snapped the property up as quietly as they could. Many believed the vineyard would need to be