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Cabernet the Corison way **Longtime Napa winemaker bucks trend of making higher-alcohol, blockbuster wines**

By Dan Berger, Special to The Chronicle

With all the attention being paid to the ultraripe fruit used to make top-level red wines worldwide these days, notably with Napa Valley's cult Cabernet Sauvignons, those with a passion for wines styled as they were 30 years ago are decrying their lack of options.

Until they discover -- or rediscover -- Cathy Corison.

Which isn't all that easy to do, since Corison seeks no limelight, does not enter her wines in competitions, participates in few public events and has as understated a label as you can find.

Even visiting the Corison Winery tasting room on Highway 29 near St. Helena, on one of the most heavily traveled wine routes in the world, is a trek back in time to before tasting rooms sold more aprons, earrings and gewgaws than wine.

Another factor limiting Corison's visibility is that she makes predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon -- those looking for Chardonnay won't find it here -- and she hews to a style not seen 'round these parts in many a moon.

"I make wine for myself," says Corison simply, and the statement comes not as an arrogant claim as much as an explanation of why her wine is so styled. It's refined and calls for introspection, with the sort of character that once was mainstream California Cabernet in the 1970s and early 1980s, and which today is like wearing spats with formal attire: of another era.

It is a wine style that focuses first on lower alcohol levels. In a tasting of her wines, dating back a decade, the average alcohol level was about 13 percent; today's wines are a tad riper, hitting 13.5 percent. Moreover, they deliver a faint hint of the dried herbs and "dusty" component for



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Cathy Corison's specialty is Cabernet Sauvignon, made from fruit from her vineyard and those of her neighbors

which her ranch south of St. Helena once was prized.

A classic taste profile

It reminds one of the old Heitz Cellars Martha's Vineyard wines from the '70s, with their eucalyptus-tinged scent; or of Clos du Val's Cabernets from that same era, when winemaker Bernard Portet balanced tarragon scents with black cherry; and of the Chappellet Winery wines that Corison herself made for a decade, complete with a faint herbal note in the finish.

It is this herbal character that seems to be the bogeyman to so many of today's Napa Valley winemakers. Derived from the chemical methoxy-pyrazine that is a natural component of

Cabernet Sauvignon, the green, herbal notes that once were commonly seen in all great Cabernets have, during the last decade, become despised elements in even trace amounts.



Cathy

Chronicle / Craig Lee

Corison's

**Gewurztraminer and
Cabernet Sauvignon**

Many winemakers admit privately that they know the major wine reviewers dislike any trace of this herbal scent in Cabernet Sauvignon, and thus producers avoid it to make sure they get high scores, which lead to sales.

To wipe out all traces of pyrazine in their wines, most Napa Valley producers let their grapes hang on the vine until an ultraripe character takes over and the pyrazine is all gone.

Clark Smith of Sebastopol's Vinovation, Inc., a company that consults with winemakers who experience problems during production, calls this fear of the herbal "pyranoia."

By waiting to pick as long as they do, most winemakers in Napa Valley are harvesting many grapes, but primarily Cabernet Sauvignon, at 27 degrees to 29 degrees Brix (a measure of the percent of sugar). This usually results in wines having alcohol levels closer to 15 percent or higher.

Corison's wines are thus an anomaly in today's high-powered Cabernet world.

"I don't harvest by Brix numbers. I'm never sure what they mean anyway, and besides, things change from year to year," she says. "I guess you could say I pick between 23.5 and 24.5 Brix."

Corison says her wines "don't have 'green' flavors; I don't pick past that time when you have black-fruit flavors and you're into prunes. If

someone needs to wait to 27 or 29 Brix to get past the green flavors, then there is something wrong in their vineyard.

"I think the quest to get Cabernet in with high sugars is more about boasting rights. One guy says, 'I got 27 Brix,' and the other guy says, 'Yeah, well I got 30.' "

In her soft-spoken manner, she disputes comments she's heard from other winemakers that they are merely seeking "physiological ripeness" in the grapes when they harvest late.

Pre-prune ripeness

She lifts a glass of her 2000 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, with 13.5 percent alcohol, and says, "This wine was made from fully ripe grapes. If 'fully ripe' (to other winemakers) means prunes, then I don't buy it. A lot of my neighbors are making one-note wines. They have one single flavor.

"When you pick at 29 Brix, every red variety tastes the same when it gets that ripe. And you lose all the vineyard characteristics, too. I think there is room for lots of different styles, but I choose to make wines that are powerful but elegant and balanced at the same time."

Corison says many of the high-scoring, hard-to-find cult Cabernets have less complexity than she prefers. She's proud that her wines are totally dry, and notes that when grapes are picked at high sugars, rising alcohol levels can kill the yeasts before they convert all the grape sugar into alcohol.

"Many of those wines have residual sugar," she says. "Yeasts aren't happy in those (high sugar, high alcohol) conditions."

Corison earned a master's degree in enology from UC Davis and was one of the star students in the heralded class of 1978 that included John Kongsgaard (Newton Vineyard, Arietta), John Williams (Frog's Leap Winery), George Bursick (Ferrari-Carano Vineyards & Winery), John Buechsenstein (Fife Vineyards, Sauvignon Republic) and numerous others.

Her first position was as an intern at Freemark Abbey Winery in St. Helena. She worked for three years with Fred Aves at the old Yverdon Winery (now Terra Valentine) on Spring Mountain, and then 10 years as head winemaker



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Cathy Corison and her husband bought the land for Corison Winery in 1995

at Chappellet on the eastern hills of Napa Valley.

She has also made wine at Staglin Family Vineyard, York Creek Vineyards and Long Meadow Ranch Winery.

Her Corison brand began in 1987 with purchased grapes grown on the western side of the Napa Valley, but soon after that wine was released, Corison and her husband, William Martin, began looking for a small parcel of land to buy in the central Napa Valley.

In 1995, her current vineyard site became available and the price was good, but that was because its 8 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon were thought to be planted on AxR1 rootstock, which is susceptible to the vine-damaging root louse phylloxera.

"We thought we'd have to replant as soon as escrow closed," Corison says, but a fortuitous thing happened. Almost by accident, she and Martin learned that the vines -- more than 30 years old and not planted to the fashionable vertical trellising system -- were on old St. George rootstock, which is resistant to phylloxera.

Escrow on the property closed on Dec. 31, 1995, but it wasn't until 1999 that ground was broken for a winery (designed by Martin in the shape of an old Napa barn).

Meanwhile, Corison made wine from the vineyard, which she dubbed Kronos, and found that by picking grapes with lower sugars than most others, she could achieve the sort of classic character that once was a regular part of the Napa Valley scene.

Located in Cab Central

This vineyard, planted on bale gravelly loam with its gray-brown silt, was sitting in the

middle of one of the finest Cabernet Sauvignon areas in the country. She was already buying fruit from others just to the south, in Rutherford, with vineyard names like Morisoli, Hayne and Garvey Family. Of her two Cabernets, Kronos Vineyard is all from Corison's grapes. A Napa Valley blend is made from neighbors' fruit, and she always buys more than she can use, selling off the lesser "bulk" lots to other wineries.

"I find it funny that my bulk always goes into a wine that's more expensive than mine," Corison says.

The suggested retail prices are \$60 for the 2001 Napa Valley Cabernet, \$90 for the 2001 Kronos Vineyard.

It's important that Corison harvest the grapes at just the right time. Pick too early and she runs the risk of green, unripe flavors. Pick too late and the wine can show an ungainly, overripe component that some people say is akin to Port. She also makes sure the tannin levels in her wines are balanced to the weight of the wine -- never harsh or astringent.

Corison says that over time, as some wine reviewers warmed to ultraripe characteristics and disparaged the more herbal wines, those who made the latter style found that they got lower scores.

"I know of winemakers who are paid based on the scores they get," says Corison, wrinkling her nose at the thought. "But some of my (winemaker) friends from the past are going back, looking for more of the balance that we all once believed in."

Has it been challenging, staying the course all these years?

"As I said, I make wines for me, but I will admit that I've sure been stubborn," she says. "Still, there are a lot of people who like my wines."

At 52, Corison is content not to rock the boat; she won't talk specifics about the wines she doesn't like. She, her husband and their two young daughters lead a quiet life, and Corison prefers no controversy.

So she's silent on the heated issue of hang

time, the practice that has roused passions in Napa Valley. Many wineries like the bigger, richer, more concentrated styles of wine that later harvesting produces. Most growers are concerned that later harvesting costs them money because grapes dehydrate and weigh less -- and growers are paid by the ton.

All Corison will say is that she prefers her own style of wine and is pleased that "there are still a few of us who remember how Cabernet Sauvignon is supposed to smell and taste."

Devotees of that style say amen.



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Cathy Corison walks among the Cabernet Sauvignon vines of Kronos Vineyard with daughter Grace, 8.