

# Cathy Corison: *the gypsy winemaker has a home*

Larry Walker

Ground was broken in the spring of 1999 for Corison Wines on Highway 29 in Napa. Cathy Corison, who calls herself “the gypsy winemaker,” said it still wasn’t really finished but “it worked.”

“It was supposed to be ready for the crush in 1999. We didn’t have water or electricity. We rented a generator and ran a hose from a house on the property,” she said.



Corison doesn't seem to worry about things like an unfinished winery. We were talking in her

office, which is tucked into a corner of the winery with a window facing the estate's Kronos Vineyard. Most of the room was filled by a long table. There were a few decanters on the table and a scattering of letters and other papers. There was a computer and a fax machine, a telephone and some bottles. It was an office to work in, not to impress visitors.



Cathy Corison



enology from UC Davis in 1978, said that at the time, Napa was “where it was happening” for winemakers. “That isn’t true now. There’s good winemaking everywhere, but in 1978, no one came close to Napa.” She discovered wine when she was a sophomore (majoring in biology) at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif. “After I took that class, “I never looked back,” she said.

She considers herself a Cabernet specialist, although she makes a small amount of dry and quite delicious Gewürztraminer from Anderson Valley (Mendocino County) fruit. “I love the dry Alsatian wines, so naturally, I make Gewürztraminer.”

Corison makes two

Cabernets, the vineyard-designated Kronos and a Napa Cabernet which is a blend of benchland Rutherford and St. Helena vineyards. Soils in all the vineyards are alluvial, with a lot of gravel. The Kronos vineyard is even more gravelly than the bench vineyards. “I could probably mine gravel out of here,” she said. Corison believes these soils and the growing conditions produce concentrated and superbly ripened fruit which leads to balanced and classic Cabernet.

The Kronos Vineyard wine is more brooding, with plum and blackberry flavors and silky mouthfeel. Corison said her goal with Kronos is to make distinctive wines to represent the site, the *terroir*.

Asked to describe her winemaking approach, Corison said, “I think of

myself as a very traditional wine-maker. I like to walk the line between power and elegance, approachability and aging. I want my wines, first of all, to be elegant, then aromatic and well focused. If they are handled right, Rutherford Bench wines have a wonderful perfume.”

Corison said she thinks of wine as a living thing, with various ups and downs. “My wines can fool people, because they are approachable when young and the tannins are soft. But they are built to age. Rutherford wines can be very long lasting, made the way I make them.”

She added that she had not bought into the ultra-ripe line of wine-making. “Over the years, I have learned to judge better when the grapes are ripe,” she added.

Corison likes to keep alcohol under 14% and wants a hot fermentation early for quick extraction. “I do some extended maceration, but that’s always a trade-off. With extended maceration you do lose fruit. There’s no recipe for it, maybe half and half for about 21 days.”

As for filtration, her philosophy is to filter as little as possible. “If a wine is properly made, it should be stable,” she said.

Production levels vary from vintage to vintage, but in general she makes about 3,000 cases of the Corison Cabernet and 400 cases of the Kronos. The Kronos has a suggested retail price of \$90, the Cabernet, \$50. (For tasting notes on Corison wines, see the WineBar at [winesandvines.com](http://winesandvines.com).)

“I have chosen over the years to keep it small. There is always the pressure to grow, but there are many reasons to stay small. I’m much closer to the wine. I don’t think I can work the wines right unless I stay close to them,” she said. “But in the end, I can’t make wine any better than the grapes that come in.”

*(If you would like to suggest a profile of someone in the wine industry, contact Larry Walker, associate editor of Wines & Vines, at [winewalker@aol.com](mailto:winewalker@aol.com).)*

She looked toward the vineyard. “I bought this place for the dirt,” she said. Growing in that dirt are 10 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, now 30 years old and planted on St. George rootstock. Corison smiled, “That vineyard must have every disease known to grapevines. The yield is about one-and-a-half tons an acre.”

Although this is her first winery “home,” the gypsy winemaker has been working in Napa since 1978, when she was an intern at Freemark Abbey. From there, she spent three vintages at Yverdon on Spring Mountain and a decade at Chappellet. She doesn’t like to call herself a consultant, but she has also made Cabernet at Staglin, York Creek and Long Meadows.

Why Napa?

Corison, who received an M.S. in