



A 27-YEAR VERTICAL TASTING OF CORISON NAPA CABERNET - LET'S TALK ABOUT THE WEATHER

At the end of April 2017, I hosted a tasting of 27 vintages (1987-2013) of Napa Cabernet from the Corison Winery. Cathy Corison happened to be in the area for a charity event, and she was kind enough to join us and talk about the various vintages.

Since then, I've made several attempts to write up the tasting. Repeatedly, I've set aside my words to let the thoughts ferment, but my notes on the individual wines kept coming together into the same statement:

*Every bottle deserved a cozy evening of its own.
It felt tragic to swish and spit these wines.*

There. That sums up my tasting notes.

The format for the tasting: Since I don't have a huge collection of glassware, we did nine flights of three wines each, with a bit of a break for food after each three flights. The first flight was 1987, 1996 and 2005. Then 1988, 1997 and 2006 and so on, ending the tasting with 1995, 2004 and 2013. I arranged the flights this way to keep everyone alert and avoid contrast effect¹. A side effect of this was that it allowed us to imagine the wine evolving over a decade or two. This turned out to be a highlight of the event.

Don't try this at home, kids: Tasting twenty-seven wines in a single afternoon was too much for me, even with swish and spit. I will leave that to world-class professionals, like Jancis Robinson, in the future.

On the other hand, about a month later, I had a miniature version of the tasting that worked very well. I have a friend who did not attend the 27-year tasting because he categorically refuses to spit out any of Cathy's wines. We met for dinner with a few other friends at a restaurant and brought bottles of the Corison Napa Cabernet from 1994, 2000, 2006 and 2012. That single flight gave him an idea of how the wine might be evolving over the years. Also, we could notice how the wines changed in the glass over time. ("Try the 2000 again." "Neat!")

There is a factor that made the tasting and the dinner work particularly well with Corison. Cathy Corison founded her winery because there was a particular wine she wanted to make. A wine of power and elegance that expressed the Napa heartland. And that's the wine she has been making, heedless of shifts in fashion and reviewer preferences. The only variables have been her additional experience over the years and the weather for each vintage. (More about weather in a bit.)

Too old to rock 'n' roll: The vast majority of wine is sold ready to be consumed. Only a small fraction is meant to be aged. Jancis Robinson suspects that "more wine is drunk too late than too early"². On the other hand, some wines can age beautifully. Mannie Berk writes about a tasting of aged Barolo where one of the oldest wines, one they thought was over the hill, came around after a few hours³.

Something similar happened to me on the first flight of this tasting. Initially, I got nothing from the 1987, so I moved on to the 1996 and 2005. But after a while I checked the 1987 again and it had come around. It had that wonderful nose I associate with Cathy's wines, sometimes more floral, sometimes more spicy, depending on the vintage (and the age), but always something I could sit and smell all evening.

¹ <http://www.winetasting-demystified.com/errors.html>

² All quotes from Jancis Robinson's "The 24-hour Wine Expert"

³ <https://www.rarewineco.com/old-barolo-teachable-moment/>

Cathy herself remarked, that when she started in winemaking, there was a belief that California wines wouldn't age like French wines. But now, tasting her older vintages, she can't put a limit on how long they could go.⁴

Weather (or not) in California: An odd pattern I've noticed over the years was that whenever the newspapers would say that a particular vintage in Napa was "challenging," I'd later hear Cathy say "This may be the best wine I've ever made."

At the tasting, Cathy said that a difference between Bordeaux and Napa is that in Bordeaux one thing that distinguishes good years from bad years is if the weather will allow the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes to ripen. Napa has weather that is so uniquely suited to Cabernet Sauvignon that there is the opposite problem of the grapes over-ripening.

Similarly, Jancis Robinson writes of Napa: "Cabernet Sauvignon dominates plantings and can produce some of its most luscious examples here, often from grapes so ripe that acids and tannins are much lower than in Bordeaux and there is no need to blend in any softening Merlot."

Cathy thinks of herself as a farmer as much as a winemaker. It's all about the grapes that come into the winery. Sometimes the farming decisions are tough... but "If I can get Cabernet Sauvignon to fully ripen in a year like 2011, then I can do it any year."



(I had hoped to set up the tasting so Cathy could simply come in taste, talk and enjoy herself. She ended up personally decanting all the older vintages for sediment.)

⁴ I think this belief also made a subtle appearance at the tasting dinner hosted at the Corison winery to celebrate the release of the 25th vintage, in the Autumn of 2015. There the oldest five vintages (1987-1991) were poured from magnums. At the 27-year tasting, on the other hand, was all from 750's.