

WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

Chris is the winemaker. He's the one with the experience."

Stephen goes on to say that their father created an environment of mutual respect before they all arrived at the winery to work together. "If we were to get a lower score for a particular wine, we couldn't blame Chris because he wouldn't be alone in making that wine. And anyway, he wouldn't have intended to get a lower score. There's not a lot of time to be lazy around the winery. I wouldn't think back and say that he was a screw-up. He sets out to make the best wine that he can."

In 1970, their father Jay Corley purchased 80 acres in the Napa Valley while he was managing an insurance company that he owned in Southern California. While he was running the company, he earned an M.B.A. and for his thesis chose to design a business plan for a family winery. For ten years, the thesis languished in a drawer along with his diploma until he sold his insurance business in 1982 and moved to Napa. He had been selling grapes to local wineries, and when he saw that they were making good wine from his fruit, he decided to pull out his thesis and build his own winery. "To this day, what he wrote down is pretty much what we do," Stephen says. "It's remarkable actually."

The Jefferson House was part of the plan and was built in 1984. Loosely modeled after Thomas Jefferson's residence at Monticello, the house provides office space for the business along with a full kitchen and dining room, a smaller replica of Jefferson's own. Jay had become interested in Thomas Jefferson while he lived in Virginia, where Jefferson had built his Monticello estate. At the time, Jay Corley had worked for the National Security Agency as an Italian linguist and, through research, found

that the Corley family had lived in Virginia at the same time as Jefferson.

Jay retired as Chairman of the Board in 1996, and Stephen laughs that his father managed the winery by sweeping it from one end to the other and collecting information by chatting with everyone who crossed his broom. "By the time he was finished, he had talked to everybody on the staff. After he retired, it became management by phoning around. He'd call to check in, so if the bookkeeper answered, he'd talk to her, and then get transferred to the tasting room people and talk to them, and then he'd talk to maybe Chris or me and eventually to Kevin. By the time he was done, he had talked to everyone who had important information and accomplished the same thing that he accomplished with the broom. He knew how all the departments were doing." Stephen says that his father is an extraordinarily intuitive person. He might understand that employees were overly tired during harvest, or that someone needed help with a new piece of equipment, or that someone else was pregnant and would require a leave of absence.

The Corley family is currently engaged with converting its five Napa Valley vineyards to organic viticulture. The process requires three years of organic practice that must be carefully documented before certification is granted. But the family is concerned with other issues as well. "Organic is good and is a part of being a good steward of the land, but we consider sustainable techniques more important in the sense that you can farm organically, but you might be pouring oil into the river on your property. You're not using chemicals in the vineyard, but do you recycle your tires? What are you doing with the water shed in your area? We like organic, but we like the

sustainable umbrella better."

Recently, the family completed a water measurement study to determine how effectively they were using the resource, "testing how much water was going out, when, where, and how quickly it gets to the leaves," Stephen says. Essentially, the study confirmed that the way they had been watering for the past 20 years was correct. "We were glad to have the scientific evidence to support our plan and know that we were already doing the right thing."

While organic vineyards may have some undefined benefits in the market place, Stephen says that they made the conversion because they didn't want to expose themselves and their employees to toxic chemicals. And they all have children who visit the winery daily. "Having it be as chemical free as possible has been on our minds for ages. It's not like sending somebody in a suit to spray those chemicals where we don't go. We're all driving down the same road when we come to work. So I think it starts with what we're doing to ourselves, the realization that the fewer chemicals that we interact with the better."

In other words, family members are directly involved with everything that takes place at Monticello Vineyards instead of just managing the process. "I'm the one who's running around the country selling wine," Stephen emphasizes. "Chris is the one who's actually in the lab tasting the wine, and he blogs on the website, not someone from a P.R. agency. Kevin spends the majority of his time in the vineyards. We're actually the ones doing it, and the best way to promote our wine is to do it personally so that our customers can get the stories from us. When we say come to see us, you see us."



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California
Winery of the Month



Brotherly Love in Napa

Monticello Vineyards

Apart from state government, which prefers to spar instead of govern, California businesses and institutions like to think of themselves as innovators. The thrust in the wine business now involves conserving energy and water use with new technology, farming the land sustainably without toxic chemicals, and diminishing the carbon footprint of farming practices, wine packaging, and transportation. Monticello Vineyards is an active participant in this movement and is in the process of converting its five vineyards in four prime Napa Valley zones to organic viticulture. But other than its viticulture and superb wines, the area in which it may be far outpacing the competition is family dynamics. Jay Corley founded the business 40 years ago, and today three of his sons, Stephen, Kevin, and Chris run it. A long-time employee reported that in all the years she has worked for the family, she has never seen father or sons exchange even an angry glance let alone a mean word. No need to mention names here, but dysfunc-

tional families have contributed a huge amount of material to wine lore, especially in the Napa Valley. So how does the Corley family manage to avoid discord? Stephen Corley, head of sales and marketing, says it starts at the top with his parents and how they raised the children, "politely," he smiles.

But other than exercising good manners, each brother has responsibility for a particular area, Stephen for sales, Kevin for viticulture, and Chris for winemaking. Stephen says that this format mitigates conflict because while they all offer opinions, only the person in charge of his particular area makes the decision. "Kevin, Chris, and I are the blending team, but Chris is the winemaker. He gets a lot of feedback from us throughout the year, but what Chris wants to put in the bottle goes in the bottle. And there's no pretense that Kevin and I can hold up our hands and say, 'Chris, this is two against one. We need to go in this direction.' At the end of the day,

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