



Chris (from left), Stephen, Kevin and Kent Corley all handle different aspects of their family-owned wine business.

## A CONVERSATION WITH

# The Corley Family

Four sons of founder Jay Corley manage Napa's Monticello Vineyards

By Laurie Daniel

When Jay Corley was studying for his master of business administration degree at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif., his thesis was about starting a vineyard and winery business. After spending a few years on successful business ventures in Southern California, he decided to put that thesis into practice.

He traveled to the Napa Valley in 1969 in search of land for a vineyard. Corley was interested in Burgundian varieties, so in 1970 he chose a site just north of the city of Napa—in what is now known as the Oak Knoll District—because it was cooler than spots farther up valley. (In those days, there weren't many vines farther south, in places like Carneros.)

At first, Corley sold his grapes, but in 1980 he produced his first vintage under the Monticello Vineyards label. A winery was completed in 1982, the same year that the

Corley label was launched. The Corleys have since become partners in two other vineyards and have established long-term relationships with two more.

Corley's seven children helped out when they were young, and four of his sons now work in the business. Kevin Corley, the eldest, joined the company in 1987; his titles are now winemaker and president. Chris joined the wine-making team in 1989 and was appointed winemaker in 2002. Stephen became director of sales in 1997. Kent is the most recent addition—after working in the securities business, he joined the winery in 2013 to handle corporate issues and special projects.

Jay Corley, who retired in 1996, died in 2016. But even as many of the valley's longtime family-owned wineries are being sold to outsiders, Corley's sons are determined that the winery will remain in family hands for the foreseeable future.

**Q** A number of California family wineries founded in the 1970s and '80s have been sold because the founder's children weren't interested in taking over. How did your family avoid that situation?

**Kevin Corley:** Our parents, grandparents and parents before them really set the stage for a great family environment, whether at work or in a fishing boat. For the most part, when our generation was growing up and thinking about future careers, most of us were thinking of the larger business world, and many of us went in the direction of accounting, banking and general business careers. This proved to be helpful, so that some years later, as Monticello was developing, a number of us were drawn to the winery estate in Napa Valley and could bring our perspectives from the more corporate world. The fact that there are seven siblings in our generation gave us a pretty good shot that at least some of us would like to be involved.

**Stephen Corley:** Our father had started or invested in dozens of businesses before he founded Monticello Vineyards, so his passion for farming and wine was always grounded with solid business practices. We are family-first-oriented managers, and that includes a respect for the fact that we are not really assuming control from the previous genera-

tion but borrowing control from the next generation. I believe that orientation keeps our eye on long-term success, keeps us patient and generally conservative in our management practices.

## Jay Corley's sons are determined that the winery will remain in family hands for the foreseeable future.

**Q** With four brothers working in the winery, how do you reach major decisions about the business?

**Chris Corley:** Each of us has a specific area of responsibility at the winery, each of which lends itself to the whole of the business. We meet weekly to discuss issues that are relevant to each of our departments, or where there is crossover of responsibilities. These weekly meetings also give us an opportunity to stay in touch with what each of us is working on, and that helps to avoid surprises. By maintaining a focus on keeping our long-term strategies in

alignment, we find that the short-term tactics tend to fall into place.

**Kevin Corley:** Our father's guidance early on, along with the fact that we make our wines from only vineyards that we own or have long-term relationships with, have served to set reasonable parameters to help guide our business. Mutual respect among all of our employees, including family members, has gone a long way to help us recognize in almost every decision that even if there are different approaches, we always have much more in common than not. As a result, there have been very few significant differences over the years.

We are very mindful that we are making an artisanal product and that it is created by an artisan and not by committee. The wines will always be representative of the particular *terroir* of our vineyards, but in terms of the details of the winemaking, the winemaker (Chris Corley) has *carte blanche* to create the finest wines from our Napa Valley estate vineyards.

**Stephen Corley:** Each of us has our sphere of influence—winegrowing, winemaking, sales and marketing, and administration—and decisions need to be made by the individual with the boots on the ground in that sphere, but with respect for the thoughts and perspectives of the others.

## WINES & VINES DIGITAL EDITION



View this issue on your tablet,  
smartphone or online

at [winesandvines.com/digitaledition](http://winesandvines.com/digitaledition)

Subscribe online at [winesandvines.com/subscribe](http://winesandvines.com/subscribe)

**WINES & VINES**

[winesandvines.com](http://winesandvines.com)



We don't find much disagreement on important matters, so that really hasn't been an issue for us. At the end of the day, Kevin as president is responsible for allocating resources, and as chairman he is responsible for the strategic plan, so the buck stops with him.

### Q How have you arrived at your various roles over the years?

**Chris Corley:** For me, it was based on a mix of intellectual and emotional interests. At a young age, I was very intrigued with the equipment. I loved driving the forklifts and flatbed trucks, rolling barrels, dumping the grapes into the hopper. The appeal of the mechanical aspects of winemaking developed into an interest in the winemaking itself, and eventually into a commitment to dedicating my career toward making wine for our family.

**Kent Corley:** We all grew up participating in typical ways kids would, like tying vines and hauling rocks out of the vineyards, driving tractors and helping in the cellar during crush. Dad hired great people; we did what we were told and learned along the way. The business today is diverse enough that we have been able to come back to it from school or other jobs and plug ourselves into positions that suit our talent and interest.

For example, Chris is a natural musician. That musical artistry directly relates to his winemaking. He has even taken it to another level by creating original music to describe our wines acoustically, and he performs live to audiences at the winery and other venues.

Kevin has the diverse business experience to run the company, and Stephen has an extensive social network and skills that lend themselves to sales, marketing and in developing the hospitality that we offer in our tasting rooms and throughout the estate.

**Stephen Corley:** We seem to have come by our positions very naturally. Kevin was the general manager and eventually president as we replanted our vineyards in the 1990s, so he ended up assuming responsibility for winegrowing. Chris worked his way through the cellar to winemaker and is extraordinarily well-suited to the creative demands of winemaking and the operational demands of wine production. I joined at a time of our father's retirement, so I hit the road to take on the selling responsibilities that Dad had covered and freed up time for Kevin to focus on the winegrowing and the business at large. Kent came at a time of what I might call administrative renewal, when we needed to update or refresh our administration of the business and our teams.

### Q What sort of succession plan do you have for the future?

**Stephen Corley:** The four of us will likely continue on in some version of our roles for the

## TWO BRANDS, TWO APPROACHES

The Corley family produces most of its wine under two brands, Monticello Vineyards ("our original wines," as Stephen Corley puts it) and Corley. The two brands are governed by slightly different approaches.

Winemaker Chris Corley says that the Monticello wines, which represent about 80% of the winery's 15,000-case production, "are crafted in a fruit-forward, balanced style that allows them to be food-friendly, but also are great wines to enjoy on their own, *sans* accompaniment."

The Corley wines, on the other hand, are "oriented toward small-production blends, single-vineyard wines, and block or clonal designations....They generally are wines that will have a longer aging window and lend themselves to longer term cellaring and collecting."

He adds, "We know which of our blocks and sections tend toward providing us the specific grapes we like for each of these brands."

Stephen Corley calls the Corley tier "our highest expression of winemaking," produced with long-term ageability in mind.



next 20-25 years, if needed. There are 12 in the next generation, ranging from ages from five to 25. They will likely have a variety of skills to offer and interests to pursue, so hopefully some will pursue it with us.

**Chris Corley:** In the same way that our dad created an opportunity for us, I think it is important for us to create that same opportunity for the next generation. When I started on the bottom rung in the cellar 27 years ago, our dad told me to keep my eyes and ears open, and my mouth shut. That as a young family member at the bottom of the business, I had to work even harder than expected to prove my value to my peers. I still consider that some of the best advice I've ever received, and I endeavor to pass that same work ethic along.

**Kevin Corley:** We've joked that there are enough siblings that if one of us was hit by a bus, there would be another one to step in. We do have family members in some key positions in the business, though we have a great team of non-family members as well. We continue to develop and grow the business mindful of generational sustainability with professional team members whether in the family or not to keep the business moving forward.

Q Monticello, like many Napa Valley wineries, had to replant in the 1990s because of phylloxera. Now you're replanting your vineyards in the Oak Knoll District again. Why are you replanting?

**Kevin Corley:** Our oldest vineyard blocks are nearly 30 years old and may continue for a

number of years more. However, from a planning and financial standpoint, 20 years is a figure that we have in mind to at least be ready for potential replanting. Most of the current replanting work is for blocks that were planted between 1986 and 1993, (and) that provided some fruit for some great wines. They were removed due to a decline in both health and productivity.

Striving for balance in the vineyard and the wines is one of our guiding principles and leads us in terms of selecting varieties, plant materials, planting density, trellis systems and other planting decisions.

Q With each replanting, you changed which grape varieties are being planted in which places. What are some examples of these changes?

**Kevin Corley:** We make wines from vineyards in St. Helena, Rutherford, Yountville and the Oak Knoll District. The three up-valley vineyards are and always have been planted to Cabernet Sauvignon. We have a wider range of varieties at our Oak Knoll District vineyards. Based on the good results of other vineyards in the Oak Knoll District and Carneros with Cabernet Sauvignon, we began experimenting with small plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon in Oak Knoll in 2009.

In the current replanting efforts, we are not adding or subtracting any new varieties, but we are tweaking the mix. The excellent quality results with small plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon have led us to increase the planting of that variety. Within the next six years, the

percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon in the Oak Knoll vineyards will approach 50%. We also grow Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Syrah, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

We have made some small changes in terms of what is planted where. In the original 1971 planting, in which every block was planted in the same way, we identified certain farming blocks that became our favorites. However, after the replanting in the 1990s, each block became an equal contributor to our reserve offerings. This was accomplished because of the ability to design a planting plan for each block and through an overall improvement in farming techniques. We like to have each of the soil types represented in the finished wine. So in our current replanting of Chardonnay, for example, we are planting it on several soil types to take advantage of the complexity those differences provide.

**Q How about the changes you've made in things like clones, rootstocks, spacing and trellising?**

**Kevin Corley:** For each of the varieties we grow, we have used multiple selections of rootstocks and clones. Among the various vineyard blocks, we use the following rootstocks: 101-14, 420A, Riparia Gloire, S04,


5C and St. George. The only rootstock we have used that is not scheduled at this time for new plantings is 3309. As for clones, Cabernet Sauvignon Clone 337 represents the largest acreage, but we added Clone 4 and Clone 47 into the mix about six years ago with excellent results. We are likely to use

**Having better spacing between the clusters provides better sunlight and air exposure, which improved evenness of ripening and other factors that improve quality.**

additional clones, as well. We are only using certified nursery plant materials, and as a result we have discontinued using the remaining two clonal selections from the original planting in 1971.

In terms of other planting details, we have used cross arms in certain blocks since the mid-1980s and have found that they're a good

match for Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, so we are expanding their use. We are leaving adequate row widths to accommodate them in our current redevelopment. With other varieties, we will use a VSP without cross arms. We have some farming blocks using a divided canopy trellis, but for certain practical farming reasons we are not planning those systems in the future.

Forty years ago, the vineyards were all cane-pruned, and with the replanting in the early 1990s many but not all blocks were converted to cordons. In the blocks we converted, we found that having better spacing between the clusters provides better sunlight and air exposure, which improved evenness of ripening and other factors that improve quality. At present, everything planned in the next few years is for cordon pruning, based on these results. Having said that, we experiment with just about every facet of both grapegrowing and winemaking, and we will likely have more experiments in this area in the future. 

A resident of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Laurie Daniel has been a journalist for more than 35 years. She has been writing about wine for publications for more than 21 years and has been a *Wines & Vines* contributor since 2006.

## Large Paso Robles Winery Facility

Ideally-located winery facility well-equipped to handle high quality production, tastings and events at a large scale



- Large turn-key wine production facility with room to grow
- Unlimited use permit
- High-capacity tasting, restaurant & events venue
- Ample water + up to 37 vineyard acres
- Current short-term NNN lease preserves buyer flexibility
- Opportunity to acquire property at significantly below replacement cost



Contact Sean Maher for more information:

[smaher@aspectconsumer.com](mailto:smaher@aspectconsumer.com) • (707) 484-4604 • [www.aspectconsumer.com](http://www.aspectconsumer.com)