

A QUEST FOR THE
HIGHEST QUALITY
OF CORKS
by Jodie Morlet

L WELCOME TO THE FAMILY

Last month, Luc and I celebrated our twentieth wedding anniversary. As I looked back on the past two decades, I remembered our honeymoon. We had already enjoyed Seattle, toured the Butchart Gardens, and were planning to spend the last few days in Vancouver, when we received a panicked call from the proprietor of Newton Vineyard telling Luc that the grapes seemed ready! As you might be aware, 1997 was the earliest harvest in California to that date. So, we swiftly packed our bags, left Canada and headed back to the Napa Valley. I learned a valuable lesson early on in our marriage: The grapes would always come first! (I won't even begin to explain what my life was like when our son was born on October 18, 1998 and our daughter arrived on October 15, 2000!)

In 2011, Luc's brother Nicolas, Winemaker at Peter Michael Winery, married a young doctor. Natalie, just like me, had no prior experience in the wine industry before falling in love with her husband. For their honeymoon, they visited our relatives in Champagne and went sightseeing in Paris. In addition, they spent three days at a cork forest on the island of Sardinia, just off the coast of Italy, because Nicolas wanted to see firsthand the source of the wine corks. Upon their return, Natalie showed me pictures from their honeymoon, remarking that she had been quite surprised to have had to spend three days in a forest. I immediately declared, "Welcome to the Morlet family! It will be all about wine from here on out!"

As fifth generation vintners growing up in the Champagne region in France, the Morlet brothers were taught that the utmost importance be given to every aspect of the winemaking process, including anything that has contact with the wine.

Only barrels from artisan coopers working with the best forests are to be used for aging. Glass bottles must be UV



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Beginning with the 2014 vintage of our red Bordeaux varietals, all Morlet Family Vineyards corks are tested One by One™ which is noted by the "1 by 1" branding above the winery's name.

resistant to protect the wine from the harmful effects of light. And, of course, the corks must be sourced from the highest quality of material possible.

BETTER THAN WOOD

It is widely known that Dom Pérignon is credited as being "The Father of Champagne," but in addition to perfecting the art of capturing bubbles by the *méthode Champenoise*, many believe that he was instrumental in the use of corks in the bottling of wine. During the Champagnization process, bottles would frequently explode. When

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a bottle remained intact, its wooden stopper often popped out, due to the pressure formed by the sparkling wine in the container. The Benedictine monk is thought to have replaced these wood stoppers with cork ones, and before long, cork stoppers became essential for wines.

Prior to the innovation of wine corks, this durable material had been widely used in the making of ships, buoys, fishing nets, wall and ceiling insulation, benches, trunks, bowls, vases, dishes and footwear, because it would not rot when exposed to water. In the early 1800's, skilled workers arrived in Portugal, and over the course of the next century, Portugal became the world's leading cork producer.

AN IDEAL CLIMATE

The cork oak is part of the *Quercus suber L* species, and is the only type of *Quercus* tree to produce cork. These trees favor a Mediterranean climate characterized by dry summers and cool winters, with sandy, chalk-free soils (pH between 5 and 6). This tree thrives in areas with an average rainfall of 15–35 inches and temperatures which do not fall below 41°F or exceed 100°F. Portugal is one of these ideal locations, with five main regions in the center and southern portions comprising 87% of the country's cork oaks.

The primary root of the tree grows straight and deep into the soil, anchoring the tree. Secondary roots grow laterally to great lengths. These root hairs absorb mineral salts in the soil dissolved by water. Thick roots also grow above the surface. The area separating these above ground roots from the trunk is called the *colo* in Portuguese. While the trunk is short and thick, the branches spread high and wide.

A cross-section of the trunk reveals three main sections: A middle portion called the xylem, the inner bark and the cork. The xylem is the most voluminous, containing thin channels which carry sap

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A trunk's cross-section showing the xylem, inner bark and cork.

from the root hairs to the leaves. The tissue of the inner bark is darker in color and carries food produced by the leaves during photosynthesis. The inner bark is surrounded by the growth layer, which is the cork itself.

CONTROLLED FARMING

Portuguese laws heavily regulate the thinning of forests, pruning of branches and stripping of cork bark. Young trees are pruned to form tall, straight trunks on which linear cork planks will grow. The cork is formed of dead cells; however, great care must be taken during the removal of this protective layer, so as not to permanently damage what lies underneath. The phellogen, or part that separates the cork from the inner bark, as well as the inner bark itself, generally heal within three months of cork removal. However, if the deeper cambium layer is compromised, the wood may begin to rot, leading to hazardous conditions for the tree.

Virgin Cork may not be removed from a sapling until it reaches a girth of 24 inches, which occurs when the tree is 25–30 years old. Used for industrial purposes, this cork is hard and irregular in structure. Secondary Cork is harvested nine years later, and although less rigid than Virgin Cork, it is primarily granulated for agglomerated cork



The 2016 Démasclage (cork harvest) in Montado, Portugal.



Left: Virgin Cork, middle: Secondary Cork, right: Reproduction Cork.



The “6” on this tree denotes that reproduction cork was harvested in 2016. The next harvest for this tree will not be until 2025.

to return to its original shape after being subjected to the pressure needed to insert it into a bottle. Over the course of a 200-year lifespan, a cork oak tree will be harvested 14–17 more times. A Portuguese proverb attests to the longevity of this tree, “Those who care about their own grandchildren plant a cork oak.”

Furthering the sustainability of this natural product, once a wine cork has been removed from a bottle and the wine fully enjoyed, the cork can be recycled. Although it will not be remade into a stopper for wine, it can be repurposed into numerous industrial and decorative uses.



Claire Morlet stands in front of sorted cork planks.

CAREFULLY CRAFTED CORKS

A meticulous process results in the ultimate quality.

Step 1: After the *démasclage*, or cork harvest, the planks

are initially sorted into different grades to determine their future uses. They are then placed in piles outside up to six months for weathering.



The pallet of planks on the right is being raised out of M. A. Silva's Dynavox® cleansing system.

pressure and scorching 220°F water cleanse the bark and naturally eliminate microorganisms from the innermost part of the cork. This process improves the cork's overall thickness and elasticity, and the planks become smoother as they dry.

Step 3: The corkwood planks are then categorized into their final quality grades. The top grade is called “Flor” which is the only grade from which Luc will allow our corks to come.

Step 4: The cork plank is hand sliced into even strips and then punched to give it the shape needed to be a stopper for wine. The portion not used for wine corks is recycled for other uses.



Steel safety gloves are required when operating the cork puncher.

Step 5: The corks are graded into various categories. Any corks with visual defects are rejected and will be recycled for other uses.



Luc and Claire with a pile of planks that has been assigned a final quality grade.

Step 6: Every cork that passes visual inspection undergoes the full-proof One by One™ testing. Developed by M. A. Silva, this automated process utilizes cutting edge gas phase spectroscopy and allows each individual cork to be tested prior to being branded with our winery's logo. Corks that prove to be 100% TCA free, as well as void of any other "off-aroma" molecule, meet the standard for our wines. Any cork that does not pass is rejected.



Visual inspection and grading of wine corks.



Luc and Claire meet Susana Pinto, a chemical engineer at M. A. Silva, involved with the development of One by One™

Step 7: Our corks are branded with our winery's name and the vintage, vacuumed to remove any dust particles, coated with wax to form a seal, and then airfreighted from Portugal to California to prevent the possibility of contamination from a shipping container.



Luc and Claire join the 2016 cork harvest in Portugal with Manuel Silva, standing closest to Luc, along with Mr. Silva's son José Silva, standing next to his father.

NO MORE "CORKED" CORKS

Many of us have experienced a "corked" or "off" bottle of a wine at some point during our lifetime. This damp cardboard-like smell and taste is not pleasing by any account and is often caused by the presence of the chemical compound 2,4,6-trichloroanisole (TCA).

In order to ensure that Morlet Family Vineyards only receives the best quality of corks possible, back in 2006, Luc selected M. A. Silva, a top cork supplier. Mr. Manuel Alves da Silva partners with only the best forests in Portugal. These forests are exclusively dedicated to the growing of cork oak trees, with no other crop cultivation allowed. Pesticides, herbicides, fungicides and insecticides are strictly forbidden, preventing chlorine from entering the area. Further, the use of bleach is banned throughout the entire cork making process. Mr. Silva and his team work with the Forest Stewardship Council as well as the World-Wide Fund and are committed to responsible forest management techniques. In the summer of 2016, Luc and our daughter Claire traveled to Portugal to observe the harvest with Mr. Silva and to tour the facility where our corks are made.

Luc takes the same care with the corks as he does with every aspect of winemaking, because an ideal cork should be completely neutral and is essential for the ageability of our ultra-premium wines. Our corks are 54 mm in length (2 ¼ inches) which reduce the headspace in the bottle and properly preserve the wine as it ages. Traditionally, our corks were hand-sorted three times by our supplier. Then, Luc would soak a sampling from a sorted bale in vodka overnight. After this neutral immersion, he tested his samples for TCA. If the percentage of defective corks exceeded his standard, he would reject the whole assortment and he began the process all over again with a new batch. This attention to detail resulted in a mere 0.4% of cork defect in our wines, but nonetheless, it was still frustrating not to be 100% TCA free. (This attention to detail also resulted in my having to purchase a shopping cart full of vodka one year, when Luc hadn't had the time to run to the store. Imagine the shocked looks on the faces of par-



Luc, with fellow presenter Aubert de Villaine of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, at the 2017 "Focus on Chardonnay" symposium in Burgundy.

ents when they saw their child's first grade teacher buying that much alcohol at the end of a school day!)

Beginning with the 2014 vintage of our Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignons, and the 2015 vintage of our other varietals, all our wines have been bottled with One by One™ corks, thus virtually eliminating corked or off bottles from that point forward.

THE QUEST FOR QUALITY CONTINUES



A cork is deemed 100% TCA free during the One by One™ testing process at M. A. Silva.

Luc recently returned from a trip to Burgundy, where he was one of the presenters at the very last "Focus on Chardonnay" conference. Luc's keynote presentation was on the effects of various types of closures on wine over time. Although Luc has only used natural solid corks for our wines, he has always maintained "trial bottles" in the ongoing pursuit of quality. Other closures, such as the Diam 30 from Diam Bouchage, prevent TCA through alternate methodology. This supplier grinds raw cork into very fine, regularly sized particles. The intense pressure and temperature of supercritical CO₂ remove toxins and prevent bottle variation. Although the manufacturer has reproduced accelerated aging and guarantees the mechanical properties of these closures for 30 years, for now, Luc stands behind our One by One™ natural solid corks. We will see what the future brings.

Whether you will soon be opening a bottle to share with friends and loved ones or cellaring our wines for decades to come, we invite you to pop the highest quality cork and savor our 2014 Cabernet Sauvignons... *A Votre Santé!*



2014

'MON CHEVALIER'

KNIGHTS VALLEY
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Located on the hillsides of Knights Valley, near Calistoga, our vineyard benefits from its proximity to Mount St. Helena, whose warm and windy climate is ideal for the long ripening of these red varietals. Handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques, this special wine is dedicated to our son, Paul Morlet. It is 'My Knight' or 'Mon Chevalier.' (86% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Cabernet Franc, 3% Merlot, 2% Malbec, 1% Petit Verdot)

DW 97 points: The palate is strongly focused on a velvety, lush and deep veneer. The core is precise, focused and brilliant. Complete in every way. –pdwr, June 2017. **AG 95+ points:** An exotic interplay of graphite, plum, lavender, smoke and sage. Deep, savory and intense, shows more of the mineral and soil-driven notes that are typical of Knights Valley. Exotic and beautifully layered. –Vinous, March 2017



2014

'COEUR DE VALLÉE'

OAKVILLE, NAPA VALLEY
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

wine represents the vibrant heart of a very special place. It is 'Heart of the Valley' or 'Cœur de Vallée.' (76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 24% Cabernet Franc)

RP 96 points: Incredibly complex with a dense purple color, a striking bouquet of violets, forest floor, licorice, fruitcake, blackberry and blackcurrants. Powerful and rich with supple tannins and extraordinary concentration and purity. A magnificent wine to drink over the next 25 or more years. –The Wine Advocate, Oct. 2016. **DW 95 points:** The palate entry is vibrant and structured showing a bright herb, coffee and firm red cherry fruit with solid acidity throughout. –pdwr, June 2017



WINE REVIEWERS: Doug Wilder (DW), Antonio Galloni (AG), Robert Parker, Jr. (RP), James Suckling (JS)

Fall 2017 Release



2014

'PASSIONNÉMENT'

NAPA VALLEY
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

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DW 96 points: The nose is beautiful spiced currant with polished notes of plum, blackberry, licorice and carbon. The palate entry is a seductive mint and sleek black fruit that merges with a dense chocolate and currant filled core of youthfully fresh fruit, finishing with sumptuous spice and chocolate. –pdwr, June 2017. **RP 95 points:** Sweet tannin, a seamless entry on the palate, an opaque ruby/purple color and a big kiss of crème de cassis, blackberry, scorched earth and burning embers is followed with a long finish, moderate tannin and surprising intensity and power for a 2014. –The Wine Advocate, Oct. 2017



2014

'MORLET ESTATE'

ST. HELENA, NAPA VALLEY
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Located on the world-renowned Oakville Bench, in the heart of the Napa Valley, this vineyard is planted with Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. The vines benefit from the gravelly and loamy Bale deep soil. Handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques, this

wine represents the vibrant heart of a very special place. It is 'Heart of the Valley' or 'Cœur de Vallée.' (76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 24% Cabernet Franc)

RP 96 points: Incredibly complex with a dense purple color, a striking bouquet of violets, forest floor, licorice, fruitcake, blackberry and blackcurrants. Powerful and rich with supple tannins and extraordinary concentration and purity. A magnificent wine to drink over the next 25 or more years. –The Wine Advocate, Oct. 2016. **DW 95 points:** The palate entry is vibrant and structured showing a bright herb, coffee and firm red cherry fruit with solid acidity throughout. –pdwr, June 2017

Our unique estate lies on the western foothills, just north of the town of St. Helena. Shallow loamy topsoil, rocky alluvial subsoil and full sun exposure create ideal conditions for our Cabernet Sauvignon vines. Respecting its historic 1880 charm, we restored the pre-Prohibition stone winery, which is illustrated on the label. Handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques and reminiscent of a true First Growth, this wine represents the precious memory of a very special place. (100% Cabernet Sauvignon)

DW 98 points: The nose is ebulliently dense earth, cranberry, cedar, plum and blackberry with notes of fresh cut herbs. The palate entry is exceptionally rich and supple with a core of blue and black fruit that is polished, silky and effortlessly poised. With well-integrated oak, the 60-second finish is creamy, balanced black fruit, coffee and herb. –pdwr, June 2017. **RP 95 points:** Exhibiting loads of chocolate, crème de cassis, pain grillé and camphor in a full-bodied Pauillac-inspired style. It is rich, with silky tannins and a long finish. –The Wine Advocate, Oct. 2016

MORLET
Family Vineyards



2014

'FORCE DE LA
NATURE'OAKVILLE, NAPA VALLEY
CABERNET FRANC

This wine captures the strong, rich and dense character of the Cabernet Franc grapes from the world-renowned Oakville Bench. Bottled only during outstanding vintages, this massive wine pays homage to Luc's great-grandfather, Gaston Morlet, who had a reputation for being a force of nature in his native Avenay-Val-D'Or. His

pioneering spirit remains one of the forces behind our family's passion for making the best wines possible. Crafted from 100% Cabernet Franc grapes, this wine truly is a 'Force of Nature,' or 'Force de la Nature.' (100% Cabernet Franc)

DW 97 points: The nose is gorgeous black fruit, mint, warm notes of herb and mocha. The palate is firm, well-structured and vibrant with a chocolate and espresso focused core. The finish is superbly integrated – polished and velvet-like blackberry, spice and carbon. –pdwr, June 2017.

JS 96 points: Amazing aromas of crushed blackberries, violets, hot stones and blueberries follow through to a full body, yet one that's tight and polished. Chewy tannins and a long and intense finish. Powerful yet reserved. A unique wine. –JamesSuckling.com, May 2017



2011

'LA PROPORTION
DORÉE'SONOMA COUNTY
PROPRIETARY WHITE
BORDEAUX-STYLE BLEND

We first bottled this harmonious blend of the classic white Bordeaux varietals in 2012. Now, five years later, the much-anticipated time has arrived for this library release of 'La Proportion Dorée.' This unique cuvée was handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques inspired from the finest producers of Pessac-Léognan. Just like its Bordeaux

Graves cousins, this wine has greatly gained in complexity while cellaring in bottles. (65% Sémillon, 35% Sauvignon Blanc – there are less than 50 cases remaining for this library release)

RP 95 points: Most distinctive and unique. Morlet's reference point would appear to be the white wine made at Laville Haut-Brion and Haut-Brion. This remarkable, honeyed white offers hints of citrus oil, candle wax, tangerine skin and oranges. A wine of great intensity, texture and body, it is a dry, complex white. –The Wine Advocate, Dec. 2013

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