

# Washington Wine Report

## Corliss Estates 2004 Red Wine and Cabernet Sauvignon

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While Walla Walla's **Corliss Estates** made its first vintage in 2001, the winery did not release its first wine until December of 2008. In the interim, the team at Corliss made and discarded two vintages. They also moved into and renovated the old Red and White Brand bakery building in downtown Walla Walla. With their third vintage – the 2003 – founders Michael Corliss and Lauri Darneille found what they were looking for. In that year Corliss produced a Red Wine, Cabernet, and Syrah that would constitute their inaugural release. However, it would be a full five years before these wines were available, much longer than the one to three years most wineries wait to release vintages.

The story behind these decisions shows why Corliss is not just striving to make wines that stand among the best in the state, they are achieving excellence. Corliss and Darneille started Corliss Estates with the goal of making exceptional, age-worthy wines. Doing so requires both patience and a meticulous attention to detail. In terms of patience, sticking to the adage that you never get a second chance to make a good first impression, Corliss and Darneille discarded the first two vintages when they didn't meet the level of excellence they were looking for. Similarly, believing many wines are released too young to be properly enjoyed (amen), they held the 2003 vintage wines until they believed the wines were ready. In terms of attention to detail, Paul Gregutt gives a good description on **his blog** of watching the processing of some of this year's fruit, writing:

The bunches of grapes passed through a gentle de-stemmer and poured out onto a conveyer belt, where every bit of leaf, stem and vineyard detritus was picked out by hand. By the time the grapes reached the end of the conveyer belt – just before being dropped (not pumped) into fermentation bins –

they looked like perfect blueberries, each pristine grape isolated and unbroken...This is what it takes to make great, not good wine.

Great wine is what Corliss is making. These wines are nothing short of extraordinary and are among the best I have had from Washington. They have jaw-dropping amounts of complexity, elegance, and power. They are also built for the long haul. The inaugural releases were so impressive Seattle Magazine listed Corliss Estates as one of Washington's next "cult wines" in their August issue. Indeed, last April I tried Corliss' 2003 Red Wine alongside several vintages of Washington's premier cult wine, **Quilceda Creek**. The Corliss wine stood shoulder to shoulder.

Since their initial release last year, the people behind Corliss have been busy. Along with winemaker Kendall Mix, Corliss and Darneille launched a second winery, **Tranche Cellars**, this spring year with a Rousanne-Viognier, Chardonnay, and Pinot Gris. In 2010, they will launch a third winery, **RMV Cellars** (Red Mountain Vineyards) at the former Sandhill Winery location. While Mix will direct winemaking operations at each of the three wineries, each winery is intended to operate independently with its own staff and estate vineyards. To this end, Corliss Estates planted a fifty-six acre estate vineyard on Red Mountain this spring, with Tranche and RMV Cellars' estate vineyards already on-line.

After releasing their 2004 Syrah earlier in the year, Corliss will release their 2004 Red Wine and 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon in November. Having sampled these wines earlier this month, I can only say that Corliss continues to impress. While the Red Wine, a Bordeaux blend, is predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon, it is the large percentage of Cabernet Franc and other Bordeaux varietals that make this wine shimmer and shine. This is a bold, muscular wine that drinks beautifully now but only benefit from additional years in the cellar. The Cabernet Sauvignon, while displaying great intensity, also shows an immaculate, restrained elegance. Both wines are at the high end of their respective categories in my rating system with the Red Wine better measured on the Richter scale. These are impeccable wines that guarantee to build on the reputation of Corliss' first release.