

# MARIN

EXTRAORDINARY LIVING



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# The *Manoir* of Stags Leap

PHOTOS TERENCE FORD

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“I often find myself speaking to large crowds and some wine geek will ask about *terroir*...I can sense the audience glaze over.”

**A**T A RECENT DINNER HOSTED BY THE STAGS LEAP DISTRICT Of Napa Valley, food superstar Michael Chiarello defined his concept of *manoir*. “I often find myself speaking to large crowds and some wine geek will ask about *terroir*,” he said, addressing his familiar neighborhood group. “I can sense the audience glaze over.” He went on to describe his unique definition of this hallowed word, one he likened to the scent of a beautiful woman (his roots are Italian), the “something” about a wine that you remember the next day—the same “something” you will taste 10 bottles later the “something” that takes you back to a particular place and time. “Every American Viticultural Area (AVA) in the valley spends thousands of hours talking about its unique *terroir*—especially Stags Leap.” A few cackles and chuckles erupted around the room. “But I think the most important taste in a glass of wine is *manoir*.”

“After reading a reviewer who used words like ‘hedonistic, over-extracted...must drink alone,’” he continued, “I think to myself, *blah blah blah*, they’ve missed the point.” Those words were used to describe his buddy Sam Turley, of Turley Wines. “Have ya met the guy? He’s a six-foot-six strapping Southerner who put himself through med school to become an emergency room doc. A man I saw nearly every day for 10 years as I was coming to work at Tra Vigne, leaving his night shift, before he became a vintner. When I drink a Turley wine,” Chiarello said with a pause, “it stands me up straight; I don’t get in its way. I love it and it loves me right back.”

The annual V2V (Vineyard to Vintner) tour is this month, giving wine enthusiasts a chance to meet the winemakers and winery owners of this hallowed district—and to learn why and how they make their wines.





**Baldacci Family Vineyards** A big presence with a booming voice, Tom Baldacci will tell you that while his grandparents made wine, he didn't ever think it would be possible to continue the tradition. Until, that is, he bought these 20 acres. "We're hooked," he says.

**Chimney Rock Winery** Winemaker Doug Fletcher and his wife, Janet (the Chronicle food writer and cookbook author), have been fixtures in the valley for nearly three decades. Doug Fletcher, along with Pine Ridge's Stacy Clark and Silverado's Jonathan Emmerich, has a wine tasting club, "sort of like a book club, but a lot more fun," Fletcher says.

**Cliff Lede Vineyards** is the new kid in town, and as famed wine critic Robert Parker wrote, "If you're looking for a new superstar in Napa, look no further." And Lede has arrived with a splash, including a "wow" Howard Backen-designed tasting room and a dream team including general manager Jack Bittner and winemaker Michelle Edwards. A visit to the public tasting room offers a glimpse into their meticulous approach, which includes picking out "imperfect" grapes by hand. "Not something you see very often," Bittner confirms.

**Clos du Val** Cofounder and winemaker Bernard Portet hails from the Bordeaux region of France and, since coming to Napa in 1970, has been widely regarded as one of the fathers of the Napa Valley wine industry. In his free time he sails his boat, Obelix (after the famous French cartoon character in the Asterix series), docked at Loch Lomond.



**Malk Family Vineyards** Wind up the driveway and climb the stairs of Brian Malk's home/tasting room and chances are you'll meet Griffin, the four-legged companion whose image is emblazoned on the label. Born in South Africa, Malk has a charm and zest for adventure that's contagious and, if you concentrate, detectable in his wine.

**Hartwell Vineyards** As a successful businessman, Bob Hartwell came to Stags Leap in the early '90s and planted his own vineyards on this legendary soil. Hartwell is very serious about making really good wine. Spend two minutes with him and you'll see he is also serious about making you laugh.

**Ilsley Vineyards** Three generations of wine growing live on at this family compound/winery, with three siblings running the operation side by side. "Our house is the one with all the plastic toys out front," Ernie Ilsley says. His three young daughters are used to the annual V2V tour and look forward to all the commotion.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Jeff Virnig, Stacy Clark, Doug Fletcher, Jonathan Emmerich and Kevin Morrissey; Patricia Taylor and Sandy Taylor Carlson; Cliff Lede. LEFT: Doug Shafer, Bernard Portet, Richard Steltzner. LOWER: Robbie Meyer, winemaker, and Brian Malk.



## THAT ALL-IMPORTANT Apostrophe

After a well-known lawsuit over use of the name, here's how that critical apostrophe is (or isn't) placed.

**Stags Leap District**  
(no apostrophe);  
**Stag's Leap Wine Cellars;**  
**Stags' Leap Winery.**

Got it?

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**Taylor Family Vineyards** Those who choose to bike the tour will be humbled by the steepness of the driveway. That's where the pain ends. Patricia and Sandy (mother and daughter) usually pair something chocolate with their luscious cabs. Why the airplane on the labels? Sandy's husband, Phil Carlson, is a Naval Academy graduate and commercial airline pilot.

**Pine Ridge Winery** Celebrated vintner Stacy Clark is one of the first women winemakers in the valley, and her long-thriving operation could lend some credence to the anti-aging effects of polyphenols in wine.

**Regusci Winery** A true ghost winery (surviving from the region's early wine-making days); the barn is one of the oldest structures in the valley. The Regusci family has been producing notable wine here since the 1930s, and Jim Regusci is also one of the most respected farmers in the region.

**Shafer Vineyards** Often spoken about in hushed tones, Shafer wines have a loyal following. The new state-of-the-art tasting room will surely widen their fan base.

**Robert Sinskey Vineyards** Meeting winemaker Jeff Vornig and tasting his wines, one has no doubt why he does what he does. His passion for wine making and organic farming are realized in each bottle.

**Silverado Vineyards** The winemaker Jonathan Emmerich worked his way up from the position of laboratory technician here many years ago, but he still loves to talk about the nuances of wine chemistry and, most important, what tastes good and why. Just ask him his thoughts on "front-end heat!"

**Stags' Leap Winery** If possible, catch one of Ken Swanson's tours to learn about the history of this spectacular estate—including the three former famous and infamous family owners of what today is an award-winning winery.

**Steltzner Vineyards** "I send her to college and she comes back smarter than me," Richard Steltzner says with a laugh of his daughter Allison, a veritable font of wine industry do's and don'ts. Dad's not too thick: he was the first to plant cabernet sauvignon in the district. Genius. If it's possible to bottle a good time, this family comes close.

*From the elegant space of Cliff Lede's tasting room to the Taylors' front porch, this month you can explore for yourself the Stags Leap District and its legendary manoir.*