

Stags Leap Year

Stags Leap District winegrowers mark 25th anniversary at Shafer Vineyards

BY JAMES KNIGHT



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Stags Leap District is a little slice of Cabernet paradise and a copy editor's headache. Is it Stag's Leap, Stags' Leap or Stags Leap? All three are true, in their own way.

Two wineries wrangled over the designation in the 1980s until a California Supreme Court decision simply moved one of the litigant's apostrophes. The spoils went to the lawyers. "Lots of Porsches were bought for college kids," winemaker Richard Steltzner remarked during a panel discussion held on April 26 to commemorate the awarding of American Viticultural Area (AVA) status to Stags Leap District in 1989. By then, it seems, nobody was in the mood to champion an apostrophe.

If a map of Napa Valley's sub-appellations looks a little like a butcher's chart of meat cuts, divided into just about equal parts Oakville, Rutherford, St. Helena and others, Stags Leap District must fit into the top sirloin spot. One of the first to be recognized as an AVA. It's Napa's smallest sub-appellation, but it had an outsized reputation since before it was officially recognized. It was a Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon that outranked top Bordeaux contenders in the—say it with me now—1976 "Judgment of Paris" tasting that shook up the wine world.

Seated before a panoramic view of the rocky little appellation at Shafer Vineyards, panelists searched for words to define the region's unique qualities. It's the orography, said Kirk Grace, director of viticulture at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, the way cool winds from San Pablo Bay meet the hot, rocky palisades. It's acidity and dusty, cocoa powder tannins, said Michael Beaulac, winemaker and general manager at Pine Ridge Vineyards.

To illustrate the famed accessibility of the area's Cabernet Sauvignon, John Shafer relates a beloved old yarn about the time he debuted his 1978 Hillside Select at a tasting. "Every third person who came by the table asked me how much Merlot is in the wine," Shafer recalled. Finally, one guy sidled up to him behind the table and whispered, "If you tell me how much Merlot is in there, I won't tell anybody!"

Poured from Shafer's library vintages, the all-Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 Hillside Select is soft indeed, and still tasting as young as this morning's breakfast: perfectly browned toast and a spoonful of blueberry preserves. Similarly plush, the 2011 One Point Five (\$75) has some grip and cool, chocolate mint notes that keep the brown sugar and ripe plum fruit in line. But there's no need to sidle up and whisper, "How much Petit Verdot is in this wine?" It's 5 percent.

Shafer Vineyards, 6154 Silverado Trail, Napa. Tasting by appointment only, Monday-Friday, 10am and 2pm. \$55 per person. 707.944.2877.