



Attendees of the Stags Leap District 'Vineyard to Vintner' weekend enjoy Taylor Family Vineyards, one of the many family wineries open to visitors during this annual event. Photograph by Bob McClenahan Photography.

WINES OF THE SILVERADO TRAIL

Rediscovering Napa's Stags Leap District

BY KENNETH FRIEDENREICH

NATIVE AMERICAN lore may even outpace claims asserting Native American bloodlines. One bit of lore involves a notch in the eastern hills rising from the floor of Napa Valley.

A stag hotly pursued to a fatal pass by native hunters came to a break on the trail. Ordered by a precipice ahead and bleating hunters behind, the stag improvised a leap—and disappeared into the mountain mist never again to be viewed or tracked—hence, “stag’s leap.” This razzmatazz thus confers a little mystery on a not so urban legend. But the story doesn’t end with the flight over the ravine by someone’s intended dinner or wardrobe enhancement.

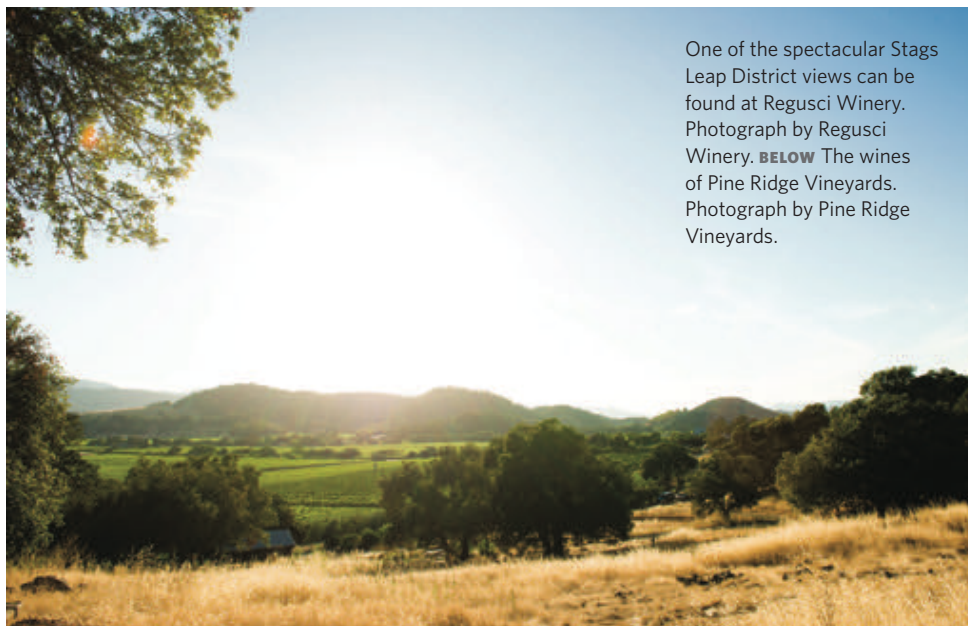
What follows is some more of the story, told in vines. This past spring, through the good offices of the local winery association, an amenable lot of 20 wineries concentrated around the Silverado Trail, we visited a

number of properties in the Stags Leap District. These vine lands are cheek by jowl and it is sometimes possible to drive a few yards from the gate of one to an equally appealing neighbor.

In addition to the Native American lore, what gives this relative wisp of the Golden State its appeal?

One thing is history. The District was the first AVA designated in the larger appellation of Napa Valley itself in 1989. But already the place was on the mental map of world wine enthusiasts.

From Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars on Dr. Fay’s original block (planted 1961), a sloping round that reaches almost to the seating outdoors from the tasting room, are the grapes that stunned the wine world at what has since been remembered as the Judgment of Paris. This refers to Stephen Spurrier’s informal tasting at his French bottle shop. The tasting



One of the spectacular Stags Leap District views can be found at Regusci Winery. Photograph by Regusci Winery. **BELOW** The wines of Pine Ridge Vineyards. Photograph by Pine Ridge Vineyards.



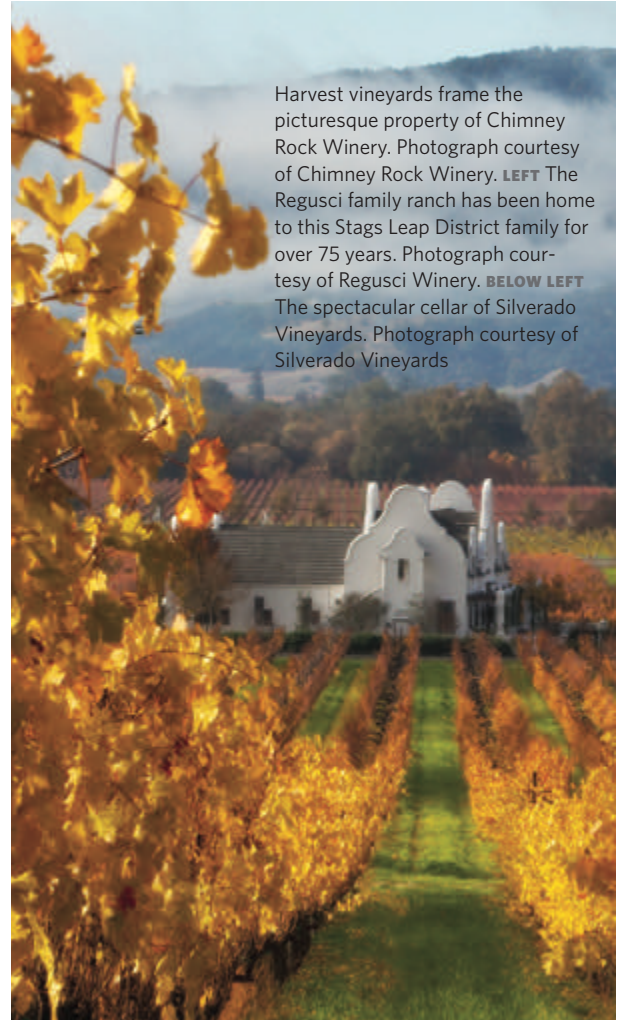
featured a very select group of judges who had little doubt that Western civilization was a Gallic commodity dispensed to the rest of planet earth with customary French attitude—disdain with *élan* hardly covers it. The 1976 tasting has been recounted in a book and later, with poetic license in the 2008 film, *Bottle Shock*. The new kids from California took the palm—Chardonnay from Chateau Montelena and Cabernet Sauvignon from the aforementioned Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, both from the 1973 vintage.

The comeuppance changed attitudes. Diplomats stationed in Washington, DC, often looked at our election cycle in terms such as “four years of drinking California wine,” as if Torquemada was the sommelier. Suddenly, the respectful French were courting “New World” wines, a new age of discovery perhaps overdue.

Although the California wine business could trace its heritage over a century prior, this vintage and the subsequent siege over Pepe LaPue marked the contemporary ascendancy of domestic wines, especially from Napa and Sonoma Counties. This supposes rightly that the Stags Leap wineries are, despite some decades of success, still reasonably youthful, especially when considering the vineyards of Bordeaux and Burgundy have been coveted and cultivated for more than 2000 years. Traditions take time to establish and among the sub-appellation’s wineries, traditions are being fashioned even as celebrity hype and media lifestyle arbiters float aloft in hot air balloons where they seem quite at home.

Because the 2,700 acres of vines under management in Napa Valley represents a constant, and this constant is dominated by Cabernet

Wine



Harvest vineyards frame the picturesque property of Chimney Rock Winery. Photograph courtesy of Chimney Rock Winery. **LEFT** The Regusci family ranch has been home to this Stags Leap District family for over 75 years. Photograph courtesy of Regusci Winery. **BELOW LEFT** The spectacular cellar of Silverado Vineyards. Photograph courtesy of Silverado Vineyards



Sauvignon vines, the visitor may rightly inquire what separates these Stags Leap grapes from other parts of the Valley, such as the Rutherford Bench or the Yountville Crossroad, Oakville or Mount Veeder. Grapes are grapes, right? Well, yes—and not quite the same. That makes noting differences great fun.

The Stags Leap aggregate accounts for about 1,200 acres of the planted rows in Napa Valley. From our perch at the Silverado Vineyards, its long deck overlooking vines and hills to the northeast, we boast a centrally placed command post. Around us are the peculiar components of soil, part loam at the floor, and volcanic stew coming down from the Vaca Range Mountains formed in the geological wakeup call of this piece of the continent.

The soils contribute to a characteristic intensity that is not all fruit and frippery, but complex, harmonious, and textured wines with sufficient stamina to cellar for 12-20 years with assurance it will maintain its appeal and structure.

If there's a problem with these wines, it derives from their uniform depth and quality. They are prized as food wines because they rarely stray from their oft brooding and subtle flavor profiles. They seem to like oak, but hardly enough to furnish Dad's office over the carriage house.

Growers handle the five Bordeaux varietals that include Cabernet, Petite Verdot, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Malbec, producing some

interesting small lot blends and single bottling of varietals. So, despite the intrinsic uniformity, enough differences show up to remind drinkers these fine wines were not made by the Stepford Wives. The appeal for this writer remains that the respective properties come out with wines of enough individuality that one will have more than a me-too Cabernet Sauvignon. Drink up. Life gets pretty swell in these few square miles of vineyards far away from France.

Below follows some of these wineries looking out onto the trail like puppies at a kennel to melt your heart.

The Stags Leap Wine Growers Association website is as good a place to begin forming a sense of the place online —www.stagsleapdistrict.com. We visited around our primo perch at Silverado Vineyards to Pine Ridge, Regusci Winery, Baldacci Family, and Chimney Rock, Cliff Lede Vineyards, plus of course the Stag's Leap Wine Cellars that helped edfnie this AVA. In past times we had already downed wines from Clos Du Val, Shafer, Hartwell, and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. This represents about half the district producers. One is less struck by the apparent kinship of the wines once they reach the glass, but rather by the traits that give them individual appeal while maintaining the signature complexity and reticent tannins marking their leaps across our lips and memories. It is a comment in a vintner glossary to experience, in Christopher Marlowe's words, "infinite riches in a little room." **CH**