



We tasted several of the cabernet sauvignons from Stags Leap District, including Stag's Leap Wine Cellars (cherries and violets), Cliff Lede (earthy and pleasantly gamy), Chimney Rock (cherry and blackberry aromas), Shafer (bright blueberries and licorice) and Pine Ridge (rich and powerful). (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

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Tasting power and beauty of Stags Leap wines



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Jump in? Stags Leap collection allows deep taste of the famed district, but at a price.

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The words "Stags Leap" might ring a bell with you, or, in the other extreme, fire your inner pleasure centers, or, in yet another scenario, inspire you to stand up and wave the closest Old Glory you can find.

If you are in the bell-ringing camp, let's bring it home: Stags Leap is a wine region in Napa Valley renowned for its cabernet sauvignons. It is also the name of the legendary winery — although spelled Stag's Leap — that won the Paris wine tasting of 1976. Known as the Judgment of Paris, it showed the world that California wines were every bit as good — better, in this instance — as the wines of Bordeaux, arguably France's most prestigious wine region. Go ahead and wave your flag; the contest still matters 39 years later.

So, we have the Stags Leap District, the triumphant Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and Stags' Leap Winery, a different but also renowned Stags Leap winery. (English teachers, professional copy editors and amateur apostrophe enthusiasts: You're welcome for that last sentence.)

If you are in the fired-inner-pleasure-centers camp, you know that the tiny Stags Leap District is an appellation that produces some of the most universally loved cabernet sauvignons in Napa Valley. There are other areas in Napa known for great cabernets, but probably none is identified as much for its wines' distinct, rare combination of power and grace as Stags Leap. Even the name of the district evokes power and grace: Stags Leap. It's fitting, but it is just a coincidence; the appellation is named for a legendary stag that eluded hunters in the area with an elusive, well-timed leap.

You could take your own well-timed leap Oct. 15 when the Stags Leap Appellation Collection goes on sale. The 19-bottle collection is made up of 2012 cabernet sauvignons from 19 Stags Leap District wineries, and some of the wines are not widely available. The price? \$1,899.

I went ahead and tasted through a portion of the collection on your behalf, because, well, \$1,899 is not walkin'-around money. This would be a substantial investment, and I would not want you to go into it without the proper amount of information. I want you to know that I care. We are in this together, you and I, and this is something I did not mind doing for you.

Sweet harmony, these are some stellar wines. But first, a little more background. The Stags Leap District is situated in the southern half of Napa Valley, which is not as hot as the north, and on the eastern slope, which means the sun is gentle in the afternoon. Through some naturally formed corridors, the district also enjoys cool nighttime ocean breezes. These are some of the factors that contribute to the wines' silky elegance. Of course, their power comes from the mere fact that Stags Leap is in Napa Valley. Redwood National Park is full of tall trees, and Napa Valley is full of big cabs.

Now to the tasting, to help you with your decision.

Chimney Rock exploded with cherry and blackberry aromas, and had tons of body that led to a toasted finish and a kiss of tannin.

Cliff Lede was earthy and pleasantly gamy, with plum and cedar notes.

Lindstrom gave out bright cherry aromas and had a long, beautiful mocha finish.

Odette was earthy with raspberry, violets and a mouthfeel so silky you might want to wear it to bed.

Pine Ridge had a touch of barnyard — a great thing — and toasted marshmallows, making it rich and powerful in the best way.

Shafer showed aromas of clean and bright blueberries and licorice, the most fruit-forward of the bunch.

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars was all about cherries and violets giving way to a sensual caramel-cocoa finish.

Steltzner started with nutmeg and finished with smoke, a magical journey from baker's oven to campfire.

Taylor Family Vineyards gave out vanilla, licorice and tobacco leading to a deep cocoa surprise in the end.

Open any of these bottles, and it will make you go, "Damn."

If you're not ready to commit to the whole collection, perhaps you could track down a single bottle or two, starting with Regusci (\$50) and moving on to either Baldacci (\$75) or Terlato (\$76), the lowest-price offerings of the lot.

The way I see it, diving into the collection is a good way to introduce yourself to the region's wines, or to indulge in its latest greatest offerings if you are already familiar with the wines. Have a party, and drink them all in one night, or lay them down and drink a couple per year for the next decade. If they don't get too warm or too cold, or exposed to too much light, they'll probably be as good in 10 years as they are today — maybe even better.

Plus, the 40th anniversary of The Paris Wine Tasting is right around the corner, on May 24. No one would blame you for opening a bottle that day and thumbing your nose in the general direction of France. Or, if you wanted to be a good sport about it, you could just raise a glass in that direction and nod before taking a sip of greatness.

For the complete list of the collection wines and buying information, visit www.stagsleapdistrict.com.

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