

CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE



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MONDAY MANIFESTOS
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Finding Cabernet Love In All The Right Places

By Stephen Eliot

Last week was a one of travel for us, and Cabernet Sauvignon was the destination. It started with a run down Highway 101 for three days of tasting and talking with the member wineries of the Paso Robles CAB Collective. It finished with a mad dash back north in time for the weekend's 25th anniversary celebration of Napa Valley's Stags Leap District appellation. There were first-rate wines and interesting folks to be found at both ends of the week, but, in a good many ways, the two venues seemed to be worlds apart.

The Stags Leap District, of course, has long and justifiably been recognized as one of California's preeminent producers of world-class Cabernet. It was finally granted formal AVA status in 1989 but was well known and highly regarded by most every California Cabernet devotee since Warren Winiarski's 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars version walked off with top honors in the so-called "Judgment of Paris" in 1976, and is now home to a host of outstanding estates such as Shafer, Hartwell, Pine Ridge, Chimney Rock and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and Stags' Leap Winery, to name but a few.

Paso Robles, on the other hand, is hardly a name that makes Cabernet fans swoon, and, while considerably changed from the sleepy, agricultural town that it was not so many years back, its recent rise to fame has been based as much on Rhone varieties than anything else. There are more than a few local winemakers, however, that are betting that great Cabernet lies in its future, and we would not bet against them.

Stags Leap and its producers, while not at in the least complacent and content to rely on past praise are nonetheless settling into very comfortable middle age. They know who they are and what they have, and the world knows it too. The new Cabernet crowd down in Paso is still finding its footing, but the palpable excitement of possibility is in the air.

We have always thought that the true measure of great Cabernet is how the wines age and develop over time. We have decades of experience with the Cabernets of Stags Leap; there is a critical mass of older wines that have aged brilliantly, and the verdict is in. Conclusions about Paso Robles Cabernet must wait. There is no such critical mass of older wines, but, as we have been reminded so frequently and in so many ways, time passes quickly, and it will be fascinating to see the changes that the next generation brings.