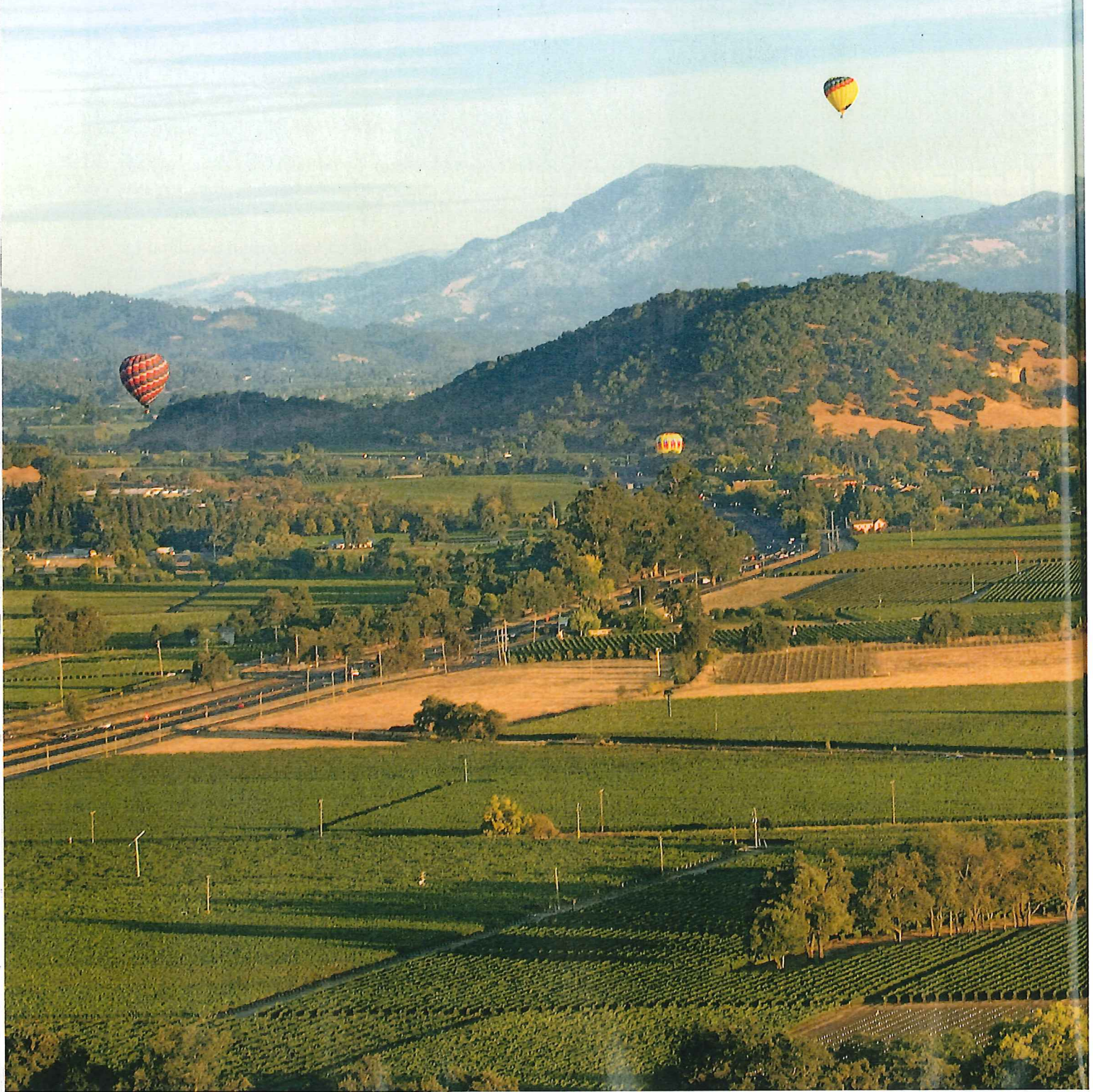


Regional profile

# Stags Leap District

Twenty-five years after it became an AVA in 1989, this narrow strip of eastern Napa continues to enjoy a near-mythical status. While its elegant yet powerful Cabernet-based wines command elevated prices, there's never any shortage of demand, as Adam Lechmere reports





## Stags Leap at a glance

**Area under vine** 526ha

**Number of wineries**

25 approx

**Grapes planted** 80%

Cabernet Sauvignon,

15% Merlot, 2%

Cabernet Franc, 2%

Petite Sirah, 1% other

**Soils** Diverse,

predominantly

volcanic. The higher

reaches of the

Palisades have

well-drained gravel

over volcanic rock. The

lower, western reaches

of the district, down

the Napa river, are

alluvial – a blend of

gravelly loams with

clay-based

substructure. Generally

poor water-holding

capacity resulting in

low-vigour vines.

**Total production**

Average 64,000 cases.

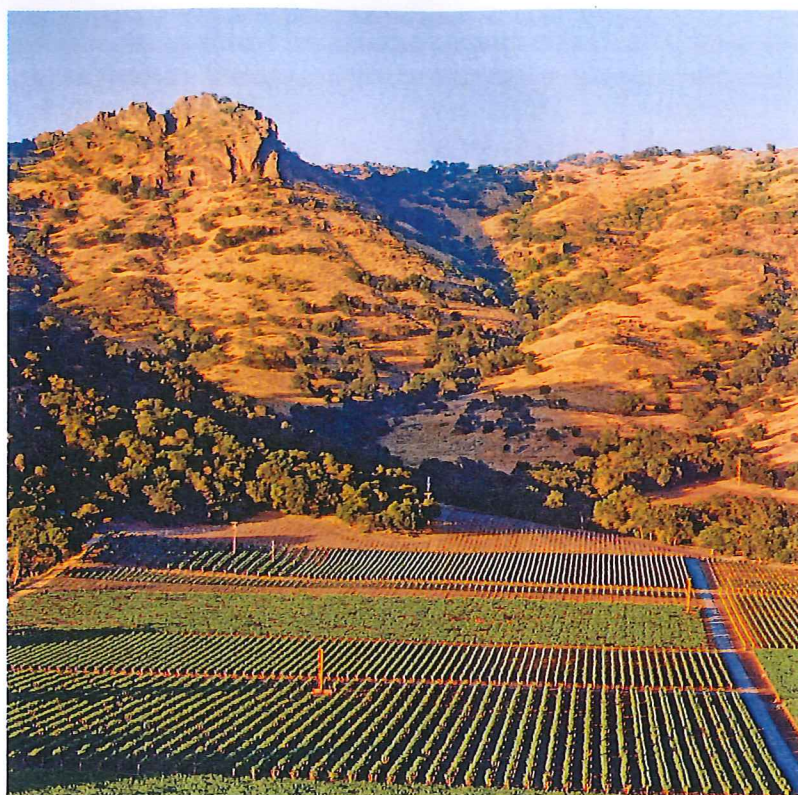
The average

production per winery

varies between 210 and

15,000 cases,

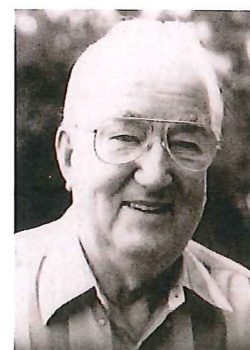
depending on size



**Left: the Nathan Fay vineyard at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars estate**

**Below: Stags Leap District pioneer Nathan Fay**

**Bottom: Robinson Family Vineyards is among the region's smaller producers**



IN A WAY, it all started with a prune orchard. Prunes were once big business in California's Napa Valley, and in the late 1960s Nathan Fay's Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards, just off the Silverado Trail under the craggy escarpment known as Stags Leap Palisades, were surrounded by them. Fay sold grapes but also crushed a few tonnes himself and shared his homemade wine with people like John Shafer and Warren Winiarski, career-changers who had arrived in Napa with young families and were thinking about buying vineland.

'I tasted Nathan's 1968 Cabernet Sauvignon and it inspired me to establish a Cabernet vineyard as close as possible to his,' Winiarski remembers. So he bought about 12 hectares of prunes next to Fay and in 1970 planted a portion of it to Cabernet Sauvignon, calling it SLV – Stag's Leap Vineyard. A few years later he sent the 1973 vintage to Steven Spurrier's now-legendary Judgment of Paris tasting, and straight into the history books.

Stags Leap District – which celebrating its 25th anniversary as an American Viticultural Area (AVA) this year – is an odd mix of the corporate and the cosily domestic. While 95% of Napa's 500 wineries are family-owned, the figure is somewhat lower in Stags Leap, where Constellation (Mondavi), Treasury Wine Estates (Stag's Leap Winery), Antinori-St Michelle (Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, bought from Winiarski in 2007), Terlato Wine Group (Chimney Rock) and other corporations hold sway. Then there are big family-run producers such as Baldacci and Regusci, producing solid, high-end wine almost entirely for a domestic market. The formidable Silverado Vineyards is also a family affair, owned by the Millers, descendants of Walt Disney.



Photograph: Terence Ford

*'Stags Leap District – which celebrates its 25th anniversary as an AVA this year – is an odd mix of the corporate and the cosily domestic'*

Then there are smaller, 300-case producers – Greg Lindstrom, Robinson Family, Taylor Family Vineyards, Ilsley – which are hardly known outside America. They are comfortable, friendly affairs. Tom Jinks of Robinson Family (his wife's name – they thought it sounded better than 'Jinks Vineyards') showed me the cellar he'd dug by hand, while his numerous daughters and their children handed round pizza to guests visiting for Vineyard to Vintner, the district's annual open day. Many, like Sandy Taylor and her family, started out as growers and made the decision to start producing wine relatively recently. ➤





Above: owner John Shafer and his family began renovating and expanding the Shafer Vineyards after purchasing the original 85ha estate in 1972

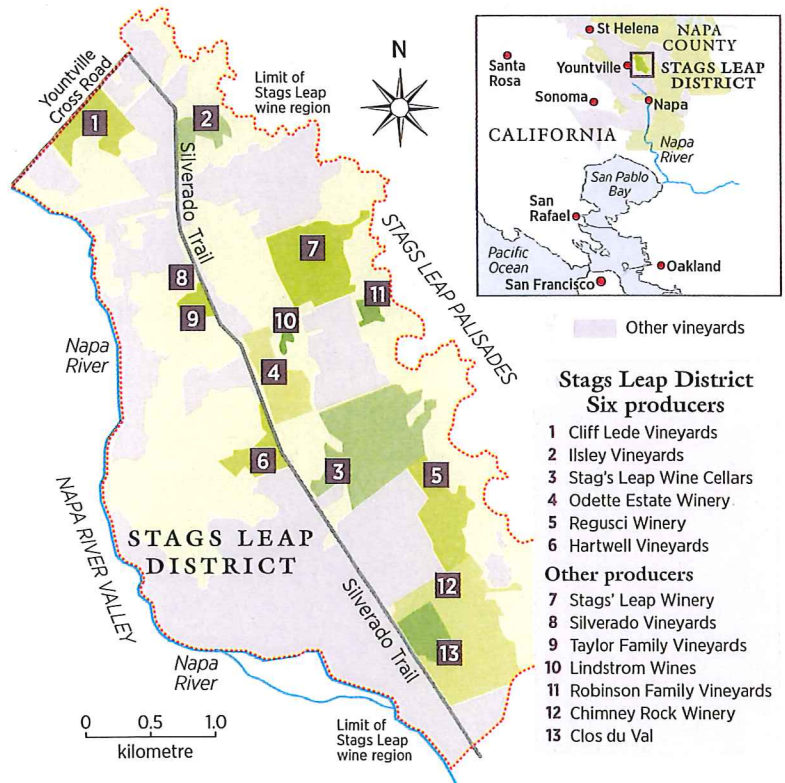


Above: taking sugar level samples of the grapes at Odette Estate, located on 18ha along the Silverado Trail

## Cabernet is king

The district is bounded to the north by the Yountville Cross Road and to the west by the Napa River, and its eastern borders – the Palisades – are vertically delimited: no vines may be grown above 120m altitude. The district measures 5km by 1.5km and supports the 25 or so producers. There are no restrictions on varieties or on yields. 'This is America and you can plant anything you want,' John Shafer's son Doug reminds me.

In reality the appellation is self-regulating: with Cabernet Sauvignon fetching US\$7,500 (£4,500) a tonne here, compared with the Napa average of US\$5,500 (£3,250), it would 'make no financial sense to plant anything else', according to Christian Ogenfuss, marketing director at Odette, the district's newest winery. Stags Leap may not have any *bona fide* cults – although former Screaming Eagle owner Jean Phillips has just bought 46ha next door to Odette – but it has its own aristocracy in the form of Shafer, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and Clos du Val. While their wines put them into the luxury goods bracket (Stag's Leap Wine Cellars' Cask 23 can be more than £200 a bottle) prices are generally hefty. You'd be hard pressed to find an entry-level wine at less than US\$60 (£36), and the average for a mid-level estate Cabernet Sauvignon is around the US\$125 (£75) mark. 'It is the financial



appellation,' Ogenfuss says – quite a claim, in Napa.

Apart from a handful of anomalies, Stags Leap District is a Cabernet appellation. One notable exception is Stag's Leap Winery, whose Ne Cede Malis Petite Sirah – a field blend which includes Tannat, Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc and Muscat – is celebrated. Petite Sirah, though, makes up only 2% of the 256ha planted in the AVA. Most of that is at Stag's Leap Winery, and Quixote, the winery set up by Stag's Leap's former owner Carl Doumani, who has just sold to a Chinese-backed company for more than US\$20m (£12m).

About 80% of the grapes in Stags Leap District are Cabernet Sauvignon, and with good reason, the district's veteran growers maintain. Dick Steltzner, who started his winery in 1972 and, with John Shafer, was one of the key architects of the AVA, considers its climate uniquely suited to Cabernet. ➤



Left: for the 2010 vintage of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cask 23 Cabernet Sauvignon, a little more than half the grapes were grown in the company's Fay vineyard.





Above: the vines at Cliff Lede Vineyards benefit from hot days and cool nights



Above: Stags Leap District leading lights Doug Shafer, Bernard Portet (Clos du Val) and Richard Steltzner

First, the peculiar inward curve of the Palisades funnels and circulates the cooling breezes from San Pablo Bay. 'Because of that air movement we have smaller leaves, so we have more sunlight on the fruit,' Steltzner says. The light alluvial soils of the benchland give more stress to the vines, so berries are small and intensely flavoured. Steltzner believes they have more hang-time than the rest of the valley, resulting in more phenolic ripeness, which coupled with cool nights allows acid retention.

### Finesse and power

At Cliff Lede Vineyards, winemaker Remi Cohen points out another well-recognised feature of the Palisades (which at this northernmost tip of the appellation – the narrow apex of the funnel – loom over the vineyards): they reflect the sun. 'By day we can be as hot as Calistoga, by night we're far ➤

## Six producers to watch



Remi Cohen, Cliff Lede Vineyards

### Cliff Lede Vineyards

Canadian native Lede purchased 22ha at the northernmost tip of the appellation in 2002, employing David Abreu as his vineyard architect and planting to the five Bordeaux varietals. Although the vineyards are named after classic rock anthems (Stairway to Heaven, Born to be Wild...), the wines are surprisingly restrained, with winemaker Remi Cohen valuing precision and tension above all.

### Ilsley Vineyards

David Ilsley runs the vineyards at Shafer next door, and from the family's 9.5ha of 'decomposing volcanic hillside' produces a pair of Cabernet Sauvignons and a Malbec blend. A former grower for Mondavi, Ilsley

looks for 'suppleness of tannins and a little bit of herb on the nose'. The Malbec is particularly fine, with grainy tannins, cherry and sweet damson on the palate.

### Odette Estate Winery

In 2012, Plumpjack Group bought 19ha of Cabernet, Merlot and Malbec from Dick Steltzner, the first man after Nathan Fay to plant vines in the region. There's a new winery with a dozen tiny tanks and conical concrete fermenters. The first vintage, the 2012, looks very promising. Former Screaming Eagle owner Jean Phillips bought Pillar Rock next door.

### Regusci

Jim Regusci (whose resemblance to the late, great James Gandolfini – or Tony Soprano – is so marked that he is frequently stopped in the street for photographs) makes a range of bold, classic wines in one of Stags Leap's most historic properties, the handsome 19th-century stone Grigbsy-Occidental Winery bought by his grandfather in 1932.

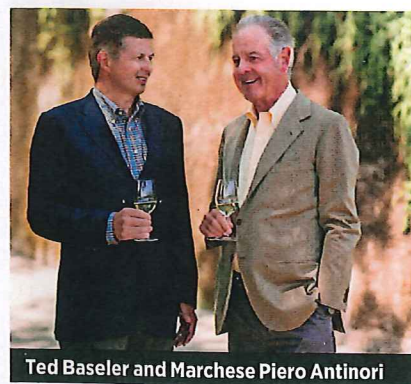
### Hartwell

Slick, classy operation owned by septuagenarian millionaire and Francophile Bob Hartwell. Bordeaux-trained Benoît Touquette (the cultish list of past

winemakers includes Celia Welch, Heidi Barrett and Andy Erickson) crafts sophisticated, perfumed Cabernets with the help of the most up-to-date equipment on the market. Heavy investment in vineyard and soil research.

### Stag's Leap Wine Cellars

This undisputed aristocrat of the district sold for US\$187m to a joint venture of Chateau Ste Michelle and Antinori in 2007. Immediate changes included a new winemaker, a new cellar cooling system to clear brettanomyces (it was a problem, according to Ste Michelle boss Ted Baseler) and a new US\$7m (£4m) visitor centre. Renzo Cotarella of Antinori insists the style will remain the same.



Ted Baseler and Marchese Piero Antinori

Photographs: Terence Ford; David Paul Morris/Bloomberg via Getty Images





Above: Clos du Val winemaker Kristy Melton

cooler,' bringing that sought-after combination of ripeness and acidity. 'The wines are ripe, but with tension and vibrancy.'

Cohen says it's almost impossible to make a bad wine in such promising terroir. Her wines combine finesse and power, the bold tannic heft and concentrated fruit tempered by a nervy precision. Across the appellation, there are wines from either end of the spectrum. There are the international stars – Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Shafer – producing wines of numinous elegance and longevity. Of the many decades-old Napa wines I have tasted, Winiarski's Cask 23 1977, with its scent of old book leather and cherry compote, is an example of how the wines can age. At a 30th anniversary re-run of the Paris Tasting in 2006, with the same wines, Winiarski's 1973 took first place again.

The winemaker, of course, sets the style. Many Stag's Leap District wineries cater largely or exclusively for a domestic market, which often demands wines showing that classic Napa profile of the past decade: oak, bombastic fruit and alcoholic heat. But – and this bears out Cohen's belief – it is never difficult to find an edge of elegance, whether it be a hint of herb or a rush of brisk acidity that mitigates jamminess. Jim Regusci's wines are a case in point. While I found his Patriarch 2010 too hot on the finish, the Estate Cabernet Sauvignon was perfumed and exotic, with a lovely nettley greenness at the end.

Kristy Melton at Clos du Val uses a phrase beloved of all Stag's Leap winemakers: 'The iron fist in the velvet glove: silky tannins, bright acid, a backbone of black fruit, elegance.' John Shafer and his fellow pioneers recognised it all those years ago, as he said: 'We saw the common thread running through these wines, and we thought, this deserves to be a separate AVA.' **D**

Adam Lechmere is a freelance wine writer and former editor of Decanter.com

## A taste of Stag's Leap: 10 to try



**Clos du Val, Cabernet Sauvignon 2010** 18.5/20pts (95/100pts)

£27.95-£56.54 All About Wine, Slurp, The Portage Co, Wholefoods, WoodWinters  
Very discreet, earthy dark fruit nose with hints of tobacco. The palate has sour plum, coffee, high notes of tobacco, very fine cigar leaf.

Fine-grained tannins release juice in a long finish. Complex and structured.

**Drink** 2014-2025 **Alcohol** 13.5%

**Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Cask 23 2010** 18.5 (95)

£174.50-£200 Berkman, Fortnum & Mason, Handford, Majestic, Winedirect  
Beguiling nose with blackberry and ripe black cherry. Very attractive early palate with forward blackcurrant and damson and hints of green pepper. A rolling, delicate wave of precise, linear tannins, with an overall impression of silkiness. Very fine, very approachable.

**Drink** 2015-2030 **Alc** 14.5%



**Pine Ridge Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon 2010** 18 (93)

£92.99 Liberty, Slurp  
Bright nose with salted plum. Sour acid, concentrated, tightly wound, dark fruit but with alluring hints of redcurrant and ripe raspberry. Soft, persistent tannins.

**Drink** 2016-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

**Chimney Rock, Cabernet Sauvignon 2008** 17.5 (91)

£34.99 CellarVie, Hard To Find Wines  
Austere nose with dry cedar aromas, a palate loaded with sour plum, damson and a fine contrast of sweet blueberry. Superb dense tannic length.

**Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



**Cliff Lede, Moondance Dream Cabernet Sauvignon 2011** 17.5 (91)

N/A UK  
[www.cliffledevineyards.com](http://www.cliffledevineyards.com)  
Amid the cassis, chocolate and tar on the nose is a waft of fresh green mown grass which lifts the aromas. On the palate, black olives, a touch of nettle, and suave

tannins. Unexpected, brash but oddly feminine. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

**Ilseley Vineyards, Seis Primas Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot 2011** 17.5 (91)

N/A UK [www.ilsleyvineyards.com](http://www.ilsleyvineyards.com)  
Very fine dark ruby hue, bright cherry and sweet damson on the nose, grainy fine tannins with more cherry, damson and plum. Good concentration, bold, open palate with lovely juiciness and perfume. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

**Odette Estate, Cabernet Sauvignon 2012** 17.5 (91)

N/A UK [www.odetteestate.com](http://www.odetteestate.com)  
Bright lifted nose with cherry, chocolate notes. Instant tannic grip, sweet dark cherry and sandalwood, dry dissolved tannins leading to juice and freshness, fine perfumed length, food friendly, very persistent. Young and vibrant. **Drink** 2016-2026 **Alc** 15%



**Stag's Leap Winery, Ne Cedre Malis Petite Sirah 2010** 17.5 (91)

N/A UK [www.stagsleap.com](http://www.stagsleap.com)  
Lovely sweet cooked raspberry and balsamic vinegar nose, medicinal and fragrant. Structured and tight with dense tannic heft. Very juicy, with leather and minerality. Intense, precise. **Drink** 2014-2030 **Alc** 14.5%



**Regusci Estate, Cabernet Sauvignon 2011** 17 (90)

N/A UK  
[www.regusciwinery.com](http://www.regusciwinery.com)  
Bright nose with ripe damson and spice. Dark fruit palate, plum, damson; then a surprising exotic layer of perfume and lovely nettley greenness at the finish. **Drink** 2014-2020 **Alc** 14.5%

**Silverado Vineyards, Solo 17** (90)

£71.50-£85.70 Handford, Harrods, Hedonism, Theatre of Wine, WoodWinters  
Sweet plum aromas, coffee and a hint of raisin. Austere, dark fruit, minerality, and a powerful texture from oak-heavy tannins. Young, on past form it will age gracefully. **Drink** 2015-2030 **Alc** 14%

For full details of UK stockists, see p106