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California's Kingdom of Cabernet: Stags Leap District

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There's an old adage in wine touting Cabernet as King.

Grown all over the world from France to Australia, and Chile to California, the thick-skinned red grape variety produces classically complex wines. Like a monarch, Cabernet Sauvignon often rules alone, but shows its strength as well in Bordeaux-style blends alongside varieties such as Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, and Petit Verdot.

Though its stature conjures up images of a wide-shouldered, robust red, Cabernet Sauvignon can be a King in touch with his feminine side, too. When grown in the right spot – [the Stags Leap District](#) of Napa Valley, California, for example – the grape produces powerful wines with signature softness befitting a benevolent ruler.

What is it about this miniscule viticultural area – just one mile by three miles – that makes the wines so special? Simply put, Stags Leap District is the perfect place for Cabernet Sauvignon.

Bordered on the east by the Stags Leap Palisades, a rugged mountainous outcropping, vineyards blanket the hillsides and descend to the curves of the Napa Valley floor. Heat radiates down from the mountain side to help grapes ripen fully while cool breezes at night allow for a long, slow growing season. These conditions, along with ideal volcanic and riverbed soils, provide the late-ripening grape variety a chance to shine.

The District lays claim to a rich past with grape plantings dating back to the mid-1800. However, their modern era really kicked off when in 1976 at the now-famous Paris Tasting, the 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon bested top Bordeaux and placed California squarely on the world wine map.

Nearly 80 percent of the Stags Leap District is planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Showcasing structure wrapped in suppleness, some of my most beloved Cabernet Sauvignons come from this unique place. Pricing generally ranges from \$40 to several hundred, but you can find values in the \$25 range, as well.

With around 20 boutique producers, there is something for every red wine lover to enjoy making it easy to say, "Hail to the King."

Prized Producers:

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars – The winery that put Stags Leap in the spotlight, its iconic Cabernet is named “Cask 23,” but my personal favorite in their lineup is the “Fay Vineyard” Cabernet. From vineyards initially planted by veteran grower Nathan Fay in 1961, the wine is elegance in a bottle.

Shafer Vineyards– Dating to the early 1970s when John Shafer began the winery, their highly-coveted “Hillside Select” is world class, but don't miss the Shafer Syrah-based red dubbed “Relentless” and their “Red Shoulder Ranch” Chardonnay from the Carneros area (I dream about drinking that wine, that's how much I love it.)

Silverado Vineyards– Ron and Diane Miller founded this beautiful winery in 1981 and it's known for not only crafting world-class Cabernet such as the “Solo” but also for producing delicious Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot and Sangiovese.

Chimney Rock– With Cape Dutch-inspired architecture this dramatic winery is a top spot to visit. Another of the classic producers in the district dating back nearly 30 years, this winery's focus is on Bordeaux varieties. Their flagship red blend “Elevage” is a beauty.

Pine Ridge– Impressive caves and bucolic surroundings make this a destination. Their Cabernet Sauvignon is an understated classic and their limited-production “Le Petit Clos” Chardonnay from the Stags Leap District makes me swoon.

Other top producers include **Clos du Val**, which crafts stylish and still affordable wines, **Robert Sinskey** whose focus on biodynamics sets them apart, **Cliff Lede**, an insider's secret spot producing plush, dramatic Cabernet, and **Stelzner Vineyards**, one of the districts anchor producers making a Reserve Cabernet that ranks among the best.

***Leslie Sbrocco** is an award-winning author of **Wine for Women** and **The Simple & Savvy Wine Guide (HarperCollins)**, and a nationally-recognized speaker, and wine consultant. She is host of **PBS television's Check Please!** which has garnered both a James Beard Award and three Emmy awards. She's also a key judge on the new reality TV series, **The Wine Makers**, coming to PBS in September 2009.*