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Stags Leap District: Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon Of Subtlety And Finesse



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Food & Drink

I write about wine from around the world.



Estate vineyards of Shafer Vineyards in the Stags Leap District of Napa Valley PHOTO ©RUSS WIDSTRAND

The Napa Valley is one of the premier production zones in the world for Cabernet Sauvignon and similar wines made with other Bordeaux varieties, such as Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. Currently Napa is divided into 16 different wine appellations, known as American Viticultural Areas (AVA); these are sectors identified and categorized by such factors as geography and soil types. While each

AVA has its strengths and specific characteristics, only a few names have become familiar to the wine drinking public at large, the best known arguably being the Stags Leap District.

I think it's clear from the image above that a primary reason why the Stags Leap District has captured the public's imagination is the beauty of this territory - as well as the name, of course. You can easily imagine a time more than a hundred years ago when hunters would see stags leaping across the craggy bluffs that are typical of this small district.

This story is charming and does stir the imagination, but in the final analysis, the Stags Leap District is famous because of the quality - as well as the style - of its red wines, primarily Cabernet Sauvignon. The list of producers located here is among the most impressive in all of Napa Valley - or anywhere in the world, for that matter: Shafer, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Stags' Leap Winery, Pine Ridge, Chimney Rock, Clos du Val, Odette and Silverado Vineyards are among the wineries that are situated in the Stags Leap District.

As for the style, these are among the most subdued and graceful examples of Cabernet Sauvignon in the region. Think Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon and chances are that power and intensity come to mind, but when you sample a Cabernet Sauvignon from the Stags Leap District, it's a different sensation, as the wines are all about charm and finesse.



Chimney Rock Winery, with estate vineyards PHOTO COURTESY CHIMNEY ROCK/ TERLATO

The Stags Leap District is situated in southeastern Napa Valley, along the Silverado Trail, about five miles north of the city of Napa. It is one of the smallest of all the Napa Valley AVA, only about a mile wide and three miles in length. Approximately 1,600 of the district's total 3,000 acres are planted, with Cabernet Sauvignon being the most widely planted variety.

Given its southern location in Napa Valley, it is a cooler area than the northern reaches of the valley, resulting in a more subdued style of Cabernet Sauvignon than other Napa areas. For Elizabeth Vianna, winemaker at Chimney Rock, there is an amalgamation of factors that helps to produce elegant Cabernets in this district. "I think the essence of the AVA -- and what makes it so special -- is the "holy trinity" of soil, climate and geology. When the funneling of cool breezes from nearby San Pablo Bay along with the afternoon heat that gets trapped in the Stags Leap District Palisades rock outcropping combine with the beautifully well drained soils, it creates a magical vortex for balanced ripeness, balanced acidity, great mouthfeel and wonderful concentration."

For Warren Winiarski, who founded Stag's Leap Wine Cellars in 1972, the red wines produced here are like "an iron fist in a velvet glove," a now legendary statement that perfectly captures the splendid blending of power and sleekness in these wines.



John (l) and Doug Shafer, Shafer Vineyards, Napa Valley PHOTO ©ROBERT HOLMES

While grape growing in the Stags Leap territory dates back to the 1870s, the modern history dates to the early 1960s when Nathan Fay planted Cabernet Sauvignon in this area. In 1972, John Shafer, a successful businessman from suburban Chicago, purchased 200 acres here; his son Doug who made the move with his parents, recalls that all the local properties for sale at that time were on the valley floor, "but Dad chose this one because he was looking for a hillside site. All the research indicated that hillsides produced the highest quality fruit."

The younger Shafer remembers that his father wasn't sure which variety to plant, but thanks to an invitation from Fay to taste his homemade 1968 Cabernet Sauvignon, his father was, in his words, "completely blown away." It went a long way toward steering him to Cabernet Sauvignon for his initial hillside planting in

1975 and 1976." The first harvest of Shafer Cabernet was in 1978; today this winery's Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon is not only one of the best Cabernets in the Stags Leap District, it is also routinely considered one of Napa Valley's finest wines.

In 1976, British journalist Steven Spurrier arranged a special tasting in Paris of California whites and reds that would be tasted blind alongside their French counterparts; wines from both territories would be among the finest produced at that time. Spurrier selected two Cabernet Sauvignons from the Stags Leap District: the 1972 Clos du Val and the 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars - both were the initial releases of these wines. Amazingly, the Stag's Leap wine was judged as the best red, besting such luminous wines from Bordeaux such as Chateau Mouton Rothschild and Chateau Haut-Brion, both from the outstanding 1970 vintage. The Stags Leap District was on the viticultural map, and interestingly, when the tasting was repeated ten years later at the French Culinary Institute with the same wines, the highest ranking wine this time was the Clos du Val! Yes, the Stags Leap District had arrived and was now considered one of the world's premier production zones for Cabernet Sauvignon.

Meanwhile, the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes from Fay's vineyard were sold to wine producer Joseph Heitz, who bottled them separately; the Heitz Fay Vineyard offering was one of the first vineyard-designated Cabernet Sauvignons in Napa, and during the 1970s, this was one of the most famous of all Napa Cabernets.

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars purchased the Fay Vineyard in 1986 and began to produce a vineyard-designated Cabernet, beginning in 1990. Today, the winery is owned by Marchesi Antinori of Tuscany, and the Fay Vineyard is still produced, along with an S.L.V. Cabernet, from Stags Leap District fruit. There is also the Cask 23 Cabernet, which is a blend of the Fay and S.L.V. vineyards; all three wines, made in limited numbers, are classic SLD Cabernets.

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars winemaker Marcus Notaro notes the difference in the S.L.V. and the Fay wines, primarily due to their origins, with the S.L.V. being planted in younger soils. "S.L.V. has a darker personality, with a signature dusty

cocoa powder note with black currants and violets, and the finish is more structured as well," Notaro comments. "Fay has more of a red fruit, berry note, with a signature floral character and silkier tannins. Both have great potential for aging but have a different character, which we try to enhance during the winemaking process."

While the special qualities of Cabernet Sauvignon from the Stags Leap District were evident early on, there has been continual refinement of the wines over the past several decades. At Pine Ridge, which released its first Cabernet from the 1978 vintage, assistant winemaker Mike Conversano comments on recent transformation in their wines. "The most significant change in our wines has been in the intensity of flavors and the focus on varietal character, giving the wines a sense of place." John Conover, general manager and partner at Odette Estate, speaking about his SLD Cabernet, remarks that the wine has "great aging potential. Don't let the approachability upon release fool you - we craft our wines for long term aging."

The best source for comparing today's Stags Leap District Cabernets with those from the 1970s is from Shafer Vineyards, which has been under the same family ownership since its founding more than 40 years ago. Doug Shafer sums up the differences between now and then, and finds a reassuring quality about the area. "I think what's interesting is how it's changed and how, fortunately, it's stayed much the same. The changes have come largely in how we tend our vineyards. Technology has changed. Understanding of irrigation has changed. When and how we harvest has changed.

"What is much the same is what you see, for example, when you stand on the hill where my dad's house is built. You see a single roadway, the Silverado Trail, you see vineyards and hillsides covered in trees and scrub. If you shot a photo looking down the heart of Stags Leap District in 1972 and shot a photo from the same place today, you would see very little difference. There are no housing developments, no strip malls, no billboards or hotels. Just lots and lots of green."

Notable Stags Leap District Wines

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon "Fay" 2015 (Napa Valley) - Deep, bright ruby red; aromas of black plum, black cherry, vanilla and hints of cigar box. Rich, ripe and lush, with good acidity, silky tannins and excellent persistence. Superb harmony and great complexity. Just a baby, this should drink well for 15-20 years. Classic SLD style. **Outstanding**

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon "S.L.V." 2015 (Napa Valley) - Deep, bright ruby red; maraschino cherry, red licorice, violets and notes of dark chocolate and crushed pepper. Powerful, but nicely balanced with good acidity, young tannins, ample wood and outstanding persistence. Give plenty of time. Excellent complexity, but a bit too much wood. 15-20 years. **Excellent**

Stags' Leap Winery Cabernet Sauvignon "The Leap" Stags Leap District 2014 - Bright purple; rich aromas of black cherry, black plum, violets and a touch of mint. Medium-full with a rich mid-palate, delicious varietal fruit with ideal ripeness, good acidity, well integrated oak and young, polished tannins. This is a substantial wine on the palate, but there is a nice sense of finesse and restraint here. This is not the most powerful wine in the Stags Leap District, but is one of the most harmonious, as well as being a textbook example of the subdued Stags Leap District style. Just beautiful! Approachable now, but best in 12-15 years. **Superb**

Chimney Rock Cabernet Sauvignon Stags Leap District 2015 - Deep ruby red/light purple; aromas of black plum, myrtle and violet. Medium-full, with forward, very ripe fruit, a rich mid-palate and excellent persistence. Very well made wine with delicious Cabernet fruit, beautiful varietal purity and fine balance. Good acidity, oak notes are a bit strong, but not overwhelming. 10-12 years. **Excellent**

Odette Cabernet Sauvignon Stags Leap District 2015 - Deep ruby red/light purple. aromas of red plum black cherry and violets. Medium-full, with very good acidity, polished tannins, very good complexity and impressive persistence. Beautiful Stags Leap District style. Peak in 12-15 years. **Excellent**

Shafer Cabernet Sauvignon “One Point Five” 2015 Stags Leap District

- A blend of 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Merlot and 3% Malbec. Bright purple; aromas of black currant, black cherry, licorice and vanilla. Medium-full with excellent depth of fruit –very rich mid-palate. Ideal ripeness, superb varietal character, round velvety tannins, good acidity and excellent persistence. Very stylish, this is a rich wine that never confronts the palate, but instead caresses it. 100% new oak, but you’d never know it. 12-15 years. **Outstanding**

Pine Ridge Vineyards Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2014

- Deep ruby/purple color; aromas of black cherry, black plum, black cough syrup and wood notes. Medium-full with ideal ripeness, excellent persistence, silky tannins, good acidity and beautiful varietal Stags Leap character. There is ample oak, but it does not dominate. Beautiful harmony and complexity. Approachable now because of its soft tannins, but best in 7-10 years, and should peak a few years after that. **Outstanding**

Clos du Val “Hirondelle Vineyard” Stags Leap Cabernet Sauvignon

2015 - 100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Inky purple; aromas of molasses, myrtle and black plum. Very ripe, and somewhat opulent, this has classic Stags Leap suppleness, along with excellent depth of fruit, silky tannins and good acidity. While I prefer the traditional style of Clos du Val that was the trademark of this producer for more than 40 years, this is a beautifully made, appealing wine with an excellent sense of local terroir and with the stuffing to age for 15 plus years, perhaps peaking in 20 years. 100% new oak, but there is enough fruit to support the wood. As big a wine as this is, it is quite harmonious. **Outstanding**

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