

# THE GRAY MARKET REPORT

MUSINGS ON WINE, FOOD, SAKE AND OTHER STUFF FROM W. BLAKE GRAY

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## Stags Leap District Cabernets 2005

Stags Leap District has long been perhaps my favorite Napa Valley subappellation for Cabernet. Made properly, Stags Leap Cabs tend to be more elegant than others from warmer parts of the valley.



Stags Leap is in the southern part of the valley, so it gets cool breezes from the Pacific Ocean, allowing grapes to develop ripe flavors with less sugar (and thus less potential alcohol) than a few miles north.

Driving through is much more pleasant than the Oakville - Rutherford - St. Helena wine circus on Highway 29. Stags Leap includes the gentle hills straddling the Silverado Trail from Clos Du Val at the south end to Robert Sinskey Vineyards at the north. It's easy to not notice the boundaries because Silverado Trail is so pretty.

Like the wines, the tourist experience is understated, but expensive. Pine Ridge, like Clos Du Val and Sinskey, is on the general tasting circuit. But most of the other dozen or so wineries are open only by appointment, typically for a wine-and-snacks experience that runs \$25 to \$75 per person.

Speaking of audacious pricing, once a year the local vintners group releases a gift box that Goldman Sachs probably hands out as party favors: a collection of one wine each from 17 different producers. This year it's the 2005 vintage, and the price is \$1,375, not including shipping.

I tasted 16 of the 17 at, of all places, an expensive San Francisco gift and knickknack shop (one winery's rep didn't show). I was one of the very few media; most drinkers were on the wineries' [mailing lists](#), or were regular customers of the store. That made for an odd tasting environment; people were leaning glasses of red wine over pricey upholstery.

With only 16 wines, I could blast through all before too many department store shoppers were horrified by a grown man spitting wine into a bucket (one woman asked if I was OK.)

While these are expensive wines, not all are the top of the line. Shafer sent its multi-vineyard One Point Five Cabernet Sauvignon, not its usually exquisite Hillside Select. Pine Ridge included its 3500 case, \$80 Stags Leap District Cabernet, not its 380 case, \$100 Epitome Stags Leap Cabernet.

Notable by its absence was the defining winery of the district: Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, founded by Warren Winiarski in 1970, and winner of the Judgment of Paris red wine tasting in 1976. Winiarski sold the winery in 2007 for \$185 million to a partnership of Washington's Ste. Michelle Estate and Tuscany's Piero Antinori. But it's still not a Stags Leap tasting without Stag's Leap. (Note that it's different from Stags' Leap Winery, owned by the Australian beer group Foster's; there was a long legal battle over that apostrophe.)

Overall, I found the wines to be -- as expected -- fairly elegant. Tannins were well tamed all around, sometimes to the point of timidity. There were a few fruit bombs, and some alcohol levels over 15%. But there were also a surprising number of wines with alcohol under 14%, a rarity for Napa Cabs these days. Fruit was usually bright, not stewed or roasted. The wines were clean, not rustic, and most were drinkable now, although some seemed likely to reward 5 years or more in the cellar.

A few notes on my favorites:

**Terlato Family Vineyards Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 (NA)**

American wine importer Tony Terlato made his fortune by overcharging suckers for Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio, turning a flavorless but inoffensive wine into an unstoppable brand that's consistently the leading premium white wine choice in U.S. restaurants. The man does know wine and I find his less cynical domestic projects to generally be of the highest quality. This is no exception: This wine, from new plantings, is exactly what

I want from Stags Leap -- elegant and balanced, with cherry and ripe red plum flavors and a nice current of minerality. A restrained 13.8% alcohol. In addition to being talented, head winemaker Doug Fletcher is married to the best cheese critic on the planet. 94

**Clos du Val Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 (\$70)**

Co-founder Bernard Portet has always been a maker of French-style wines in the heart of California. This is a typical effort, combining the complexity and restraint of Bordeaux with the ripe cherry of Napa Valley. In addition to fruit, the nose has notes of leather, copper and dried herbs and flowers, which you also taste on the long finish. Chewy tannins at the end add another dimension. Europhiles may like this wine better than typical Napa Cab fans. 94

**Robert Sinskey Vineyards SLD Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 (\$90)**

Robert Sinskey is one of the few openly organic, biodynamic farmers in a price category where most vintners still see such practices as a marketing negative. My theory is it's because Republicans eat steaks and buy pricey Cabernets, while Democrats eat line-caught wahoo and drink natural-yeast Pinot Noir. But anyway. Sinskey makes one of the widest ranges of wines in Stags Leap, and I often find one of his wines among my favorites in whatever category they're in. This is a lively wine with strong minerality, bright cherry fruit, notes of licorice and Christmas spices, well-managed tannins, focused acidity and a long finish. 94

**Chimney Rock Winery Ganymede Vineyard Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 (NA)**

Also owned by Tony Terlato (did I mention the guy knows wine?) Chimney Rock makes several single-vineyard Cabs -- as well as unusual single-clone Cabs -- that are only available at the winery. This is one of them. I hated the aroma at first; it was closed tight and covered by sulfur. But boy, is this nice on the palate. With its very gentle cherry fruit, this is one of the most delicate Cabs you'll ever have from Napa Valley. Just 13.5% alcohol. Eventually the nose should open up; I don't know how long the bottle was open before I tasted it. 92

**Robinson Family Vineyards Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 (\$56)**

Is it worth extra points that this is one of the most beautiful labels I've ever seen -- a watercolor of the vineyards? Patriarch Norman Robinson bought land in Napa Valley after retiring from the U.S. Army in 1967 (good time to get out), and it turned out his neighbor was vineyard pioneer Nathan Fay. Though just 14.4% alcohol, this wine smells overripe -- like blueberry

syrup -- so the ripping acidity on the palate is a surprise, along with the ripe red fruits (cherries and plums). The acidity gives it hope for a long life, and a future where the blueberry aromas and red fruit flavors coalesce. 91

**Shafer Vineyards One Point Five Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 (\$70)**

Winemaker Elias Fernandez is one of the best in the world at achieving concentration and drink-now hedonistic wines without going over the edge into overripeness. This wine combines some hillside estate fruit with grapes from the Borderline vineyard purchased in 1999. As expected from Shafer, it's intense and concentrated, and the black cherry fruit tastes quite ripe, but the tannins are soft, it doesn't taste hot and there are some cola notes. If you like ripe fruit, you'll like this. 91

**Hartwell Vineyards Estate Reserve Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$115)**

Hartwell's vineyards are actually planted atop a volcano. Fortunately, it hasn't erupted in 4 million years. This wine is very ripe (15.2% alcohol) but it's complex, with notes of cherry, dried plum, allspice and clove, and has chewy tannins that give it presence in the mouth. I like the hints of spice on the finish. 91

Also good (85-89 points, not great value at these prices):

Stags' Leap Winery The Leap Estate Grown Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

Steltzner Vineyards Estate Reserve 40th Anniversary Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

Taylor Family Vineyards Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

I just didn't like:

Baldacci Family Vineyards Black Label Estate Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

Cliff Lede Vineyards Poetry Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

Ilsley Vineyards Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

Malk Family Vineyards Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

Pine Ridge Vineyards Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

Silverado Vineyards Solo Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2005