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Stag's Leap's Vineyard to Vintner and Jim Regusci: Tales from the front lines of the October wildfires

Tony Poer Apr 19, 2018 Updated Apr 20, 2018



Jim Regusci of Regusci Vineyards stands amidst his Stags Leap vineyards.

Rex Gelert photo

One of Napa Valley's annual signature events is about to turn 20. Last October, it seemed quite possible that this milestone might not even arrive.

Vineyard to Vintner will take place in one week, spread out among a handful of wineries in the shadow of the majestic Stags Leap Palisades. It's the spring celebration created by the Stags

Leap Winegrowers Association in 1998 to welcome visitors to the valley's second oldest AVA.

When the event wrapped up last year, after a wet winter and rainy April, no one pictured a stage set for the biggest fire disaster in California's history. And a harrowing tale it was, worthy of Hollywood but — for the deadly reality provoked by Mother Nature — more deserving an episode of “Frontline” or a segment on “60 Minutes.”

In the meantime, there is Jim Regusci to recount the story at Regusci Winery to visitors next Saturday morning who should buckle their seatbelts. The third-generation grapegrower is going to tell them about a bumpy night.

One of this year's Vineyard to Vintner hosts, Regusci was thrust onto the actual front line of the October fires that descended upon his neighbors and him from Atlas Peak. The drama was real, with the minute-by-minute memories still vivid for the Napa native only six months later.

“For us, what I guess we'll explain to people and what some of these folks kind of want to hear, is how the whole thing went for us through that night,” Regusci said recently. He was giving a preview on a cool, breezy morning of the path that attendees will follow amidst his Cabernet and Zinfandel vines as part of the celebratory weekend. Anticipating questions about the enormous blaze, he has mapped the walk around places on his property that burned, or nearly did. “It was the drama of the fire and, in addition, how this valley recovered. It's not only our story, it's the story of the valley as a whole.”

Except for some blackened oak trees on Regusci Winery's carefully landscaped property and visible on the nearby hillsides that rise steeply up towards the Palisades, visitors might never guess that a terrifying inferno had blasted across Stags Leap District just last fall. The burned-to-the-ground Signorello Estate down the road tells a different story.

The Regusci saga goes back much further than that, of course, both as a winery brand and a viticultural property. Regusci's Italian-Swiss grandfather, Gaetano, arrived in Napa Valley alone as a teenager in 1896. The graceful, sand-colored stone winery, easily viewed from the Silverado Trail just north of Napa, was already almost 20 years old the first time the young immigrant

gazed upon it. When, years later during the Great Depression, he cashed in a \$22,000 life insurance policy to purchase what was known as the Grigsby Ranch, the determined Gaetano laid the groundwork for a family farm that would eventually pass down to his grandson.

Some family determination has filtered down through the generations, as well. An affable, salt-of-the-earth grower with a warm exterior, Regusci also displays plenty of underlying grit and no-nonsense character. He's inseparable from both his land and the concept of Stags Leap District as a distinct grapegrowing region within Napa Valley. With more than 75 people expected for the vineyard walk next weekend, it will be an opportunity for him to share some of the Stags Leap insider knowledge he has accumulated during a 30-year career as a grower and vineyard management consultant.

"I would imagine what the narrative will be on this is getting people out and explaining to them so they understand, you know, what Stags Leap is," he said, stopping along a gravel path to point out some neighboring vineyards in the District. "It's a Bordeaux wine grape area, no question. We're fortunate that this little AVA exists, the smallest out of all of them. It was early to jump on when the AVA system started. No one, I don't think, understood what it meant to get the AVAs...and then you look back on it, and it really makes sense."

He noted that, having about 60 winery clients, he feels fortunate to drink from a wide range of Napa Valley wines and several other AVAs. But in the end, he said he believes that Stags Leap District is "one of the areas that you can approach these wines younger, but there's also a common thread that runs through all of them [and] if you sit down and really taste through them, Stags Leap seems to always rise to the top."

The he laughed and confessed, "I might be biased."

The Stags Leap Palisades, Soda Canyon, and nearby Atlas Peak combine to form a rocky and wild section of southeast Napa Valley. They're the picturesque backdrop for one of the Valley's more tucked-away AVAs. "What's nice about getting folks out here, pretty much from here you can see a good amount of what Stags Leap is." Regusci paused again to motion toward the hills. "And then on the other side of the ranch you can understand with this mountain range how it ties in and how it's so different."

Ironically, Stags Leap District's striking geography contributed to its near-decimation last Oct. 8, when the Atlas fire started and was propelled by high winds down through Soda Canyon on a direct path toward wineries like Signorello, Darioush, James Cole and Regusci.

“What we're going to do is we're going to take them on a walk through the property,” he continued, on the move again up a slope as the gravel crunched heavily under his boots. “We'll head out to the hill and go through a few of our blocks on the way. Just do a nice walk around. We're going to have coffee and pastries and that type of thing. And then they'll go on and start their day on the open houses and different winery visits.”

What visitors won't realize until they follow Regusci on his walk is that, in between the morning coffee and afternoon Cabernet, they will go to hell and back with him.

Nancy Bialek, executive director of the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association, can take some credit and/or blame for this unique agenda. Since the fires, the veteran marketing executive has had plenty to think about in the lead-up to this year's Vineyard to Vintner weekend.

“Because of the fires still being within that year of grief, if you will, we have so many customers who are obviously interested at a caring level and just fundamentally interested in vineyards and grapegrowing and what was affected,” Bialek said by phone at her Marin County office.

“We went to Jim specifically because he was right there on the front lines. The idea was for him to kind of share what went down in Stags Leap District. I don't know how revealing he's planning to be with the ‘fear factor,’ but it was obviously pretty [serious]. We really want to talk about, in that context, what happened to the vineyards and where we are now.”

Though Bialek has the artisan Ohm Coffee Roasters of Napa scheduled to serve coffee to Regusci's visitors, the “what happened” at Regusci Winery on Oct. 8 and 9, as he plans to tell it, should provide more than enough of a jolt.

Concluding his preview walk, he led the way back into one of the ghost winery's barrel storage rooms that doubles as an event space. He sat down on a couch and described the hectic scene

that began around 10 p.m. on the Sunday night the fires broke out around Napa Valley. He recalled that they'd had a 200-person event that day at the winery, and the Safeway Open PGA golf tournament had just concluded at Silverado Resort.

“All that stuff was going on at the same time,” he explained. “Then the fire started on Atlas Peak, so it came over the top of Atlas Peak and it burned straight through Soda Canyon behind us, then it came at us from every direction. It just came over the mountain.”

“What happened was, when the fire came across, it made the same pattern — I'm 51 and I've seen it burn three times — it took the same path. I mean it came straight up, came straight over the top, and once it burned up Soda Canyon, then it came over this way. Though, this was different than most because it had all of the bells and whistles: it had wind, it had heat, it had everything. You hear the term ‘perfect storm’ once in a while. It holds true on this one.”

Though Cal Fire and the local departments were stretched too thin to help fight the fires in Regusci Winery's immediate vicinity, Regusci praises their efforts.

“The fire department did a great job that night. If anybody complains about it, the only thing they're complaining about is losing property. Forty thousand acres lit up in an hour or two, OK? Their job was to get people out. Who cares what burns?”

With the extraordinary help of his immediate circle of friends, colleagues, and family — not least from his wife, Laura — Regusci and his team managed to fend off the flames that burned almost to the fuel tanks in his winery work shop. His account of those intense and stressful days last October is too long to retell here. Perhaps a Hollywood movie would be a way to convey the drama. The Regusci family's and winery's efforts seem, in any case, to have become part of the post-fire lore in Napa Valley.

“I don't to use the word ‘hero’ loosely,” Nancy Bialek said. “But, you know, there are some people who feel that Jim was obviously just invaluable in saving their property and saving his own.”

Ticking off a few of the what-ifs before heading down to the winery tasting room to greet some visitors Laura had lined up for him, Regusci laughed to himself as he considered what he would have done if the fire had destroyed his entire property.

“Put it this way,” he said, “I have a very large farming company. If that completely went to hell in a handbag, all I’d need is a backhoe and a truck, and I’d start over.

“Hey, I started with a pickup and a house trailer. So, what the heck, we’ve been there before.”