

Stags Leap AVA celebrates 25th anniversary

A controversial beginning led to acclaim



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The Stags Leap District American Viticultural Area (AVA) celebrates its 25th anniversary this year as one of the most distinctive grapegrowing corners of Napa Valley.

When it was formed in 1989, the Napa Valley had only been subdivided into two other AVAs, Howell Mountain and Carneros.

Now almost the whole valley is chopped into separate AVAs.

The Stags Leap District is on the eastern edge of Napa Valley among the foothills of the Vaca mountain range. Barely one mile wide and three miles long, this tiny region is universally acclaimed for the power and elegance of its cabernet sauvignon.

Stags Leap District has been a grapegrowing region since the mid-1800s, though the first cabernet sauvignon vines weren't planted until 1961 by Nathan Fay. His fruit was in high demand from winemakers throughout the early 1970s.

In 1976, the famed Judgment of Paris catapulted the region into the global spotlight when French judges awarded a 1973 cabernet sauvignon from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars made by Warren Winiarski first place over legendary Bordeaux producers.

Ten years later, when the same wines were tasted blind a second time, top honors again went to a Stags Leap wine — the 1972 Clos du Val Cabernet Sauvignon.

An AVA is born

The idea for the AVA came from John Shafer and Dick Steltzner, two vintners with vineyards in the area.

“We heard from both consumers and wine writers that our cabernets were distinct from others in Napa Valley, powerful but silky and velvety,” said Shafer.

They felt that the valley between the Silverado Trail and the rock palisades to its east was key. The rocks capture and focus daytime heat, and they also funnel Pacific breezes down the hillsides to cool the vines at night, although studies by Terraspase, a St. Helena a soil and climate consulting firm, show that the area's temperatures match those of northern St. Helena, and are warmer than Yountville or Oak Knoll nearby.

This area also has distinctive volcanic soils with bale loam overlay.

Shafer and Steltzner said that these characteristics qualified the area to become its own AVA, geographically defined and identified as a place.

Then, Shafer said mildly, “Other people got involved.”

A controversy erupts

Shafer and Steltzner didn't think areas to the west of the Silverado Trail should be included. “The rich, low-lying soils near the Napa River weren't ideal for cabernet sauvignon,” Shafer said.

Next, Pine Ridge winery, which sits west of the area, but is in a similar valley with similar soils, thought that it should be included.

So did Jack Stuart, then president of the Disneys' Silverado Vineyards, just north of Pine Ridge, but in another valley. “The old See Vineyard, which the Disneys bought, was planted in the '60s,” Stuart said. “It was considered part of the community, and even though it's west of the Trail, has the same decomposed granite soils.”

Part of this property is enclosed by hills, while the section alongside the Napa River is on a steep slope with the same soils.

Stuart said that the See property, like the others, was considered a distinct farm community centered on the old Yount schoolhouse, which is still standing, although now a private residence.

“There was no bridge over the Napa River, just a ford impassable in the winter, and the community didn't identify with Yountville, just each other,” Stuart said. “Cuttings from the vineyard form one of the three heritage cabernet sauvignon clones at UC Davis. That reinforces its importance.”

Eventually, Pine Ridge, Silverado Vineyards and other vineyards were included, along with a large plot south along the river owned by the Robert Mondavi Winery.

Even Anderson Vineyards (now Cliff Lede) north of another knoll by Yountville Crossroads petitioned to be added and was included.

Likewise, the founders wanted to include Clos du Val south of the heart of the district, but part of it was surrounded by Chimney Rock, so Chimney Rock was included.

And, the two wineries with “Stags Leap” in their names — Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and Stags' Leap Winery — objected, too, to an AVA that contained their names. (These wineries also had issues with each other about their similar names; this was finally resolved with different placements of their apostrophes.)

The AVA became a district to distinguish it from the wineries. Nevertheless, Carl Doumani, who owned Stags' Leap Winery at the old Stags Leap Resort, never joined the association, with Stags' Leap or his present winery, Quixote.

Over time, growers learned how to grow excellent cabernet even in some richer soils areas by careful management, and the area is famed for this variety. Today, approximately 90 percent of the 1,200 acres currently planted to grapevines are cabernet sauvignon or other Bordeaux varietals.

Other grapes are grown there, including petite sirah at Quixote and Stags' Leap Winery.

The original controversies have faded with time and new ownership is happy to bask in the district's glow. Today, Stags Leap Winegrowers Association has 19 winery members and 11 grower members.

Members range from tiny family-owned properties with limited production to Mondavi, owned by Constellation, Stag's Leap Winery by Treasury Wine Estates from Australia and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars owned by Ste. Michelle of Washington and Piero Antinori of Tuscany.

Michael Beaulac, general manager and winemaker at Pine Ridge Vineyards, is the current president of the association.

The first appellation collection

Nancy Bialek came to the district as the first paid director of the Stags Leap Winegrowers, the trade association formed to promote the district, in 1997, long after any controversy.

One of her first efforts was creating the Appellation Collection of wines from the district, which is sold to cover marketing and other expenses. The association had to get special state legislation to allow them to sell the collection.

The first collection was created in 1997, and contained 12 bottles of limited-release Stags Leap District cabernet sauvignon. Last year's collection had grown to 18 bottles, as new wineries have joined, including long-time growers like Regusci. This year, it could contain 19.

The collection always sells out. Last year's release, all from the 2009 vintage, sold for \$1,599. It went on sale on Oct. 15 and sold out in two months.

Annual Vineyard to Vintner festival

The other major promotion for Stags Leap Winegrowers is its annual "Vineyard to Vintner" celebration each April. This event offers attendees a backstage pass to the wineries of the Stags Leap District AVA.

It's grown from a one-day open house to a three-day weekend that attracts 500 people, many from around the country, and even the world.

The weekend is packed with library wine dinners, open houses, private tastings and seminars with the winemakers. This year, as they will celebrate their 25th anniversary, the association also conducts some other events including tastings in various cities and a tasting before Premiere Napa Valley.

Although the AVA is one of the smallest subdivisions of the Napa Valley AVA, its wineries continue to evolve. The PlumpJack group that acquired the former Steltzner winery is expanding what is now called Odette, while Treasury's Stags' Leap Winery is applying for a permit to expand, and Ste. Michelle is building a showplace visitors' center at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars.

Was forming the AVA and promoting it worthwhile?

Winiarski, who created the first buzz for the district with the 1976 Paris tasting, was opposed to forming the district for fear it would dilute his image. “They’ve done pretty well with it within the latitude and limitations,” he said. “It’s done as well as could be expected.”

He noted that growers realized that cabernet was their star and planted it voluntarily.

John Shafer’s wines also made a name for themselves without much identification with the district. He admits, “Early on, I could not say that having Stags Leap District on the label held any advantage, but I was premature. Today, it makes a difference. Time, good wines and promotion have made it valuable, but I still think the individual winery’s reputation transcends the district’s.”