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A LEAP BY ANY OTHER NAME

Stags Leap District makes a name for itself.

by Jim Tobler

Drive north from San Francisco. From the airport you can take the Bay Bridge and just catch fleeting glimpses of the City by the Bay, to your left, if you are in a hurry to get to one of the world's great wine destinations, the Napa Valley. Sonoma County is not far away, either, but Napa has been, since 1976, part of the fine-wine world—a hard-won international stature that no one there takes for granted. Among the famous wine routes in Napa is the Silverado Trail, and along the Trail, beginning at Clos Du Val and Chimney Rock and stretching to Cliff Lede Vineyards at the north end, is a group of wineries that have banded together and formed the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association. They have teamed up to make a point, largely about their geographic location, and the soils that are commonly found in this very specific area. In other words, they have formed an association based on the terroir of the region. It is to many an excessively used and over-hyped word, often used rather haphazardly to generically describe a wine-growing area. But taking their lead from the illustrious regions of France and Italy, and actually following something of a trend globally, the Stags Leap District is interested in sharing the unique facts, of the soils and the climate, and of what

ultimately finds its way into a glass, with the rest of the world.

In Australia, even, that land of vastness that is home to some of the world's biggest wine brands, there is a significant push toward specificity, indicative of how important it is becoming to identify the wines of a region with particular characteristics. In Burgundy, you need not drive but walk your way from one remarkable wine to another, each differentiated from the last by techniques, but mostly by the different soils that constitute any particular hillside plot of vines. The grapes at the top of the hill are different from those at the bottom; the wines are different, too. That is how the idea of terroir made its way out of France, where it is pretty much taken for granted, and Italy, where it is understood as a simple fact of life, and into the world of high-end—and high-stakes—wine estates in other parts of the world. Napa Valley, a relative newcomer, wanted to stake its place, and has succeeded to a remarkable degree, aided by some significant international tastings that showed them to good effect against their famous European counterparts. So to say a wine comes from Napa, once a given quality marker, is not quite specific enough. The rare air of ultra-premium wine requires even more, even from Napa, and so we are beginning to see more



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specific designations—of where the grapes are grown, where the estate is, and what is significant about all that. Still, the Stags Leap District is the first tightly defined appellation in California, and it is purported to signify something important. What, exactly, is that?

There are answers, and a visit to and extensive tastings in the area confirm that this is not mere hype. Where to begin? At the north end, at Cliff Lede Vineyards. Mr. Lede is a Canadian businessman whose passion for fine wine led him all around the world, to vineyards and winemakers, and eventually he knew his passion had to be directed into purchasing vineyards and a winery. Napa Valley is reasonably close to home, and is now his second home; he has built a lovely inn and a new winemaking facility. His enthusiasm knows no bounds, and a tasting with him is at once intense and convivial. The wines, beginning with an elegant, crisp and clean sauvignon blanc and culminating in the also elegant, bordeaux-style Poetry Cabernet Sauvignon, are all fine, exemplary in fact. The Poetry is one of the valley's finest cabernets, and you can begin to understand the essence of the Stags Leap terroir a bit, here. The Cliff Lede reds are all built with some potential to age in bottle, but even the Poetry is fairly approachable young. It is all about gorgeous fruit, and supple, ripe tannins.

This is one of the hallmarks of the area, as Jeff Virnig, winemaker at Robert Sinskey Vineyards, explains. He is pouring his

Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon, all hillside fruit and, he notes, "chocolate and some forest floor" in the wine, which is still obviously very young. Judicious oak and, again, those supple tannins. (The Sinskey Cabernet Franc is also a notable success, from their Vandal vineyard, and jammed with ripe fruit, not a green note to be found.)

Just down the trail at Clos Du Val, vineyards and winery operations VP John Clews explains of the area's history, "This entire region was at first thought to be too cold for cabernet." The winery has developed a great cabernet program, though, and the current vintage shows vivid blackberry and some herbal elements. "The tannins are generally mature, and give that silky texture that typifies the district," Clews says. Elizabeth Vianna, winemaker at Chimney Rock, agrees and thoughtfully adds, "I'm not sure how direct the link is between mature tannins in the vineyard and the silky mouth feel we seem to get with the cabernet, but it is something we find on a regular basis. It is fairly typical of the district."

At Steltzner Vineyards, where Tim Dolven makes the wine, a demonstration is in order. "We can look at various barrels, and eventually make a blend and see how the final wine takes shape. The important thing is that we know what certain parts of each vineyard can do, and we can have a final blend that maximizes what nature gives us each year. In the district as a whole, I believe

there are many distinctive wines being made, but I suppose there are some similarities too, at least in the big cabernets, in terms of approachability, softness. What we always aim for here at Steltzner is a drinkable cabernet with plenty of character and some potential in bottle, but always with maximizing what the vineyards give us each year." The barrel sampling process is thorough and lengthy, but Dolven clearly loves his work, and as the wine is "assembled" this day, the various characteristics unique to each individual vineyard are manifestly clear: the district may have an identifiable terroir, but within that, there is still plenty of room for distinct wines.

Pine Ridge Winery is more or less across the street, but the volume here is higher, and the pressures of production dictate decisions, but nonetheless, the winery adheres to the district's uniform quest for quality. Ray Sittig is a veteran of the industry, and clearly enjoys his forays into the winery with guests. But when asked if there is, in fact, something that can definitively be called the Stags Leap style, he nods, and responds in the affirmative: "I think there are differences that are determined by which side of the Trail you are on, but overall, the district does show some characteristics in the cabs that are unique, and totally different in my mind than, say, the wines made over in Yountville or in Rutherford. I do think the tannins are softer here, and I think the wines are much more approachable early on than elsewhere in the valley. Maybe I'm prejudiced, but I really love the Stags Leap cabernets for their big fruit and easy drinking, while still being classy all the way."

This is a natural segue into Taylor Family Vineyards, where grape-growing has been in the family for decades, with much of the fruit going to Pine Ridge and to a Napa "cult" wine or two. But as trends developed, the Taylors decided to basically keep their grapes and make their own wine.

It is a very low-production winery, intent on making wines that are completely typical of the specific vineyard sites they have farmed for so many years. At the family kitchen table, as we taste through the bottlings, with the resident Rottweiler (friendly, if taciturn) observing from afar, it is clear they have some terrific fruit, and the wines show great extraction, wonderful cabernet fruit, only hints of herbaciousness that in sum create a fabulous bottle of wine. The labels, many of which reflect the elder Taylor's career as an Air Force pilot with service in the Korean War to his credit, are intriguing, and the wines themselves are, on the whole, massive, built to last. Mr. Taylor says nonchalantly, "These wines are definitely Stags Leap. Couldn't come from anywhere else."

Another tiny-production family operation, at Ilsley Vineyards, tells much the same story. The famous Shafer Vineyards is just

across the ridge from Ilsley, and in fact David Ilsley is Shafer's vineyard manager. But the family has some quite esoteric vineyard sites carved out of the hills and slopes on their property, and they hand-harvest the fruit and make a few cases of wine. It is barely into the commercial volume category, but, like other small-production wineries here, the wines are sought-after, and show their own unique character while being well within the range of what can be called appellation-specific character. The Ilsleys agree with the Taylors that the wines are eminently approachable at a young age, and that they show great mouth feel and ripe, black fruit.

Hartwell Vineyards is another case of growers turning to making wine. In this case, it is Bob and Blanca Hartwell, who came to the valley in the early 1960s but didn't pursue commercial winemaking until recently. The winery itself has magnificent views of the southern end of the district, and has something of an old-world feel to it. The tasting room, all stone and wood, is

similarly old-world, and in fact the wines show very much a high-tier bordeaux growth calibre. The wines are somewhat more restrained than others in Stags Leap, but with even two years' bottle age they will clearly open up. Still, like Cliff Lede's Poetry, the Hartwell Estate is elegant, lengthy, complex, and has that chocolate note and supple approach that one can find in virtually all the wines from these parts.

Is this idea of a district appellation in any part of California, let alone in a small part of the Napa Valley, simply a marketing ploy, and an attendant stretch of the imagination? On balance, the answer has to be no, not at all. While there are wines of immense appeal and immense individuality, as Elizabeth Vianna says, "There is no doubt in my mind when I blind-taste cabernets from Napa, or from California generally, when I have a Stags Leap District wine in my glass. We all do different things with our fruit—in vine-

yard management, in terms of when we harvest and when we get it into the cellars—but the soil here is a terroir all its own. I think that's fair to say."

What does this all mean? Well-structured wines with depth and concentration, but amazingly drinkable at an early age. Generally cool-climate, hillside vineyards, so the vines have to really work at producing their fruit, which in turn yields wines that show their origins clearly. Very seldom is oak the star here, and the notion of mature tannins cannot really be overstressed, since it makes it possible for these wines, even the biggest of them, to drink well out of the barrel, while boasting excellent cellaring potential. It seems like the best of all worlds, but the way to determine this is to take a trip to the region, spend a few days, taste around, and have the time of your life. ●



STAGS LEAP DISTRICT WINEGROWERS