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Stags Leap: A Hidden(ish) Piece of Paradise Within Napa

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In many ways, the Stags Leap AVA embodies everything the Napa Valley is most celebrated for: a heterogeneous mixture of soils, elevation and climactic influences, with a steady Mediterranean climate. This area also avoids some of the clichéd criticism of too much traffic, flash and cash often lobbed at the Valley by critics.

A recent visit to Stags Leap—landing in late April on the AVA’s annual Vineyard to Vintner weekend, when Spring was just coming into full bloom—provided a fascinating look at how this one slim slice of the Napa Valley is using sustainable farming methods to accentuate and deepen its unique pocket of terroir. The celebration this year was special, because it commemorated 30th anniversary of Stags Leap being awarded formal ATF appellation status. And I gained a renewed appreciation of Cabernet Sauvignon, when tasted through an Old World style filter of restraint and calm, made with terroir driven farming methods.



Have you heard the tale of the stag leaping over a mountain? According to native Wappo legend, a buck came upon a rocky canyon while running to escape hunters; cornered, with nothing but sheer cliffs below, the stag paused, then jumped and soared across a gaping chasm to freedom. One of the most iconic wineries in the United States, and the AVA in which it perches, Stags Leap was named after that shrewd and gutsy buck.

There are innumerable myths surrounding Napa Valley, visited and critically lauded wine regions in the world. The 30-mile long, sunny Napa Valley AVA contains 16 distinct AVAs, 400+ wineries, 95% of which are family owned and operated. Tucked inside is the Stags Leap AVA, the first US appellation to be designated an AVA based solely on its unique terroir. It also happens to be the place that first drew the (Old) World's attention to the upstart American wine industry back in the 1970s.

And yet, strangely, the Stags Leap AVA still flies somewhat under-the-radar. Almost everyone who's heard of wine knows Napa Valley, and many are familiar with either Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, or Stags' Leap Winery. (And frequently, they confuse the two, which is a story in and of itself (<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/stags-leap-winery-district-explainer-55350>)). But the Stags Leap AVA? Until recently, it usually drew a shrug.



Napa itself is, in many ways, a victim of its own bold-faced success. Most visitors to the region in general, and Stags Leap AVA specifically, stay “downtown” because of its array of world-class hotels, dining options and shopping. Napa is the largest of Napa Valley’s five towns, and the county seat. This scant two-mile-wide strip of vineyards draws hordes of visitors from all over the globe. But in the past decade, a surge in development has turned the once sleepy Napa city downtown into a buzzing mini-metropolis, which locals have mixed feelings about, and which they are dealing with by fending off further development. In recent years, some of the strictest [land-use regulations \(https://napavalleyregister.com/news/local/need-a-scorecard-of-key-players-in-napa-s-land/article_375413ad-a874-534c-ae4e-041829688997.html\)](https://napavalleyregister.com/news/local/need-a-scorecard-of-key-players-in-napa-s-land/article_375413ad-a874-534c-ae4e-041829688997.html) in the world have been enacted there.

In the center of the town is the [Oxbow Public Market \(https://www.oxbowpublicmarket.com\)](https://www.oxbowpublicmarket.com), an intoxicating array of gustatory and sensual pleasures. Walking through, you smell cocoa, Cabernet Sauvignon, cheeses — and cash. With its mesmerizing mixture of artisanal chocolate shops and vertiginously priced, impeccably tailored Napa casualwear, a lovely wine bar and restaurants, you almost forget why you came to Napa (the vineyards!) Down the street, there’s the award winning luxury hotel, [Westin \(https://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/sfonw-the-westin-verasa-napa/\)](https://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/sfonw-the-westin-verasa-napa/) Verasa (<https://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/sfonw-the-westin-verasa-napa/>), Or, for boutique hotel fanatics, there’s the [White House Napa Valley Inn \(https://www.whitehouseinnnapa.com\)](https://www.whitehouseinnnapa.com), named one of the best in the country by *Architectural Digest*; [Archer Hotel \(https://www.facebook.com/ArcherHotelNapa/\)](https://www.facebook.com/ArcherHotelNapa/) is probably the most cosmopolitan option, with big city amenities like a rooftop bar and a Charlie Palmer Steak restaurant. Oh, and the food Downtown, oh

God, the food! The Westin features La Toque restaurant, with accolades from Wine Spectator and Michelin. Then there's Cole's Chop House, Morimoto Napa, Miminashi, Kenzo and more, and more. There's never not a parade of Porsches and Bentleys vying for spots Downtown.

But a shout away, the Stag's Leap AVA appears, in placid silence. It's a world unto itself, seemingly a universe away from Route 29 traffic and the buzz of downtown. Instead of the Disneyland for adults that Napa has become (and we're certainly not dissing Disney), Stags Leap offers a pocket of lush quiet, six miles north of downtown, crouched on the Valley's eastern side.

Three miles long and one mile wide, the Stag's Leap AVA occupies a strip of the Valley separated from the rest of the broader Napa AVA by a range of hills that run north to south. Nineteen wineries reside within these bounds, leaving little room for anything more than access roads and a smattering of winery buildings. Surrounding the green, fertile valley within the valley are the Stags Leap Palisades to the east, with jagged rock outcroppings baking in the sun. To the west, gentle hills and the Napa River. To the north, Yountville Cross Road, a mere country byway compared to busy Highway 29. To the south, flatlands on the valley floor.



A Piece of the Old World

Of the 19 wineries in the AVA two—Stag's Leap and Stags' Leap—embody the history and forward-looking, youthful spirit I discovered over the weekend. Members of the public and media were invited for an array of intellectual and sensual delights, including educational deep dives, special dinners, access to the (usually too busy to chat with the public) winemakers, owners and vineyard managers, vineyard walks and extensive tastings through the 2016 vintage and library wines.

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars is widely credited with making French oenophiles sit up and take (horrified) notice of the California upstarts actually crafting decent wines. The pearl-clutching moment came in 1976, when Stag's Leap Wine Cellars won the Judgment of Paris with a 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon. (The [winery](https://www.cask23.com) (<https://www.cask23.com>) was founded in 1970). While it's impossible to trace the entire impact of the California wine economy to this one wine, it is not hyperbolic to say that it initiated a wine revolution not just in Napa, but across the state, and later the entire country, the reverberations of which are still being felt today. According to the U.S. Tax and Trade Bureau, it is [estimated](https://discovercaliforniawines.com/media-trade/statistics/) (<https://discovercaliforniawines.com/media-trade/statistics/>) that annually, the California wine industry contributes \$114 billion to the global economy, and creates 786,000 jobs across the country.

Stag's Leap could coast on its legacy, but instead, when I visited, I discovered the director of vineyard operations, Kirk Grace, hard at work in the vineyard. Pausing to give us a tour of the vineyards, he spoke passionately about the extreme measures he and his crew take to create wines that are “an iron fist in a velvet glove,” with a softness and restraint that the Napa Valley is often accused of not having. (Hot sun + Cabernet Sauvignon = big, bold, powerful reputation).

To enable winemaker Marcus Notaro to accomplish that, Grace has to provide him with ripe, yes, but not too ripe grapes, ones that have been cultivated carefully, protected from excess sun exposure and frost.

“We use Old World grape cultivation methods, but we're not afraid of technology,” Grace explains. Stag's Leap irrigates the vines conservatively by using recycled wastewater piped in from Yountville; he measures the relative hydration and health of individual vines with drone technology; he uses ur-organic compost tea spray and pest-management techniques (such as installing bird boxes to target specific pests) in lieu of conventional pesticides.

“Because of our farming techniques and Marcus' winemaking philosophy, the wines themselves are able to express the intricacies of the terroir,” Grace says. Critics seem to [agree](https://www.cask23.com/our-story/acclaim) (<https://www.cask23.com/our-story/acclaim>) with his assessment.

The “intricacies” of the terroir—defined, in this case by its soil, climate and natural geologic features—of course, are the entire reason the Stags Leap AVA was created. The west-facing hillsides of the Palisades bring additional warmth to the AVA, but its location in the southern half of the Napa Valley, and its proximity to San Pablo Bay and the river draw in cooler temperatures at night, allowing an unusually complex balance of round ripeness and tart acidity to develop in the grapes.

At Stags' Leap Winery, established in 1893, the wine and vineyard crew are also working to reflect the unique microclimate of the region, while reining in some of the wilder exuberances that the Mediterranean climate can nurture.

Winemaker Christophe Paubert, a Bordeaux native who has made wine in Chile, Navarra, Spain, the Medoc in France and New Zealand, arrived at Stags' Leap in 2009, and he saw an opportunity to elevate Stags' Leap simply by bringing it back to the land and embracing a terroir-driven approach to winemaking.

"I don't feel that more is always better," Paubert explains. "Power can make more of an impact when it is restrained. When I arrived here, my goal was to revive the soil, which brings all of the magic to the wine. Without good soil, good wine is not possible."

He also wanted to protect the grapes from excess sun exposure, which results in "tannins that are too hard," Paubert says. "We also used more cover crops to reinvigorate the soil, plus compost, which rebuilds the soil and allows it to retain water and release it slowly to the plant," he says.

Stags' Leap Winery, like Stag's Leap, also works to utilize natural pest-management techniques.

"There is nothing worse than insecticide in the vineyard, because it kills the good and the bad, and the soil becomes lifeless," Paubert explains. "To control a moth that eats our fruit, we put out pheromones that prevent it from mating, and we also plant flowers to attract good insects that will kill pests."

Paubert seals in the land and soil's hard work by picking earlier than many other growers in the valley.

"That way, we get more freshness and a truly accurate reflection of the terroir," he explains. "Some wine-makers let the fruit hang for longer, with the belief that really ripe fruit brings more flavor, which is true, but not always what I'm seeking."



A Forward-Looking Approach

Two relatively new wineries, Odette Estate and Cliff Lede, meanwhile, honor the past, while looking ahead, and thinking of the generations of children who will—they hope—inherit the land they're farming.

Cliff Lede Vineyards (<https://cliffledevineyards.com>), was founded in 2002 by Cliff Lede, with the goal of creating a “multi-generational family business that could be passed on to his children and their children,” explains CEO Remi Cohen, also the President of the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association. “So there was an immediate commitment to quality and sustainability.”

In addition to being Napa Green certified (which means the watershed is protected and chemicals aren't used), Cliff Lede devoted acreage to plantings that would attract a “diverse array of flora and fauna that bring beneficial insects to the vineyard,” Cohen explains. “They prey on vineyard insect pests, which allows for us to reduce or eliminate insecticides. Allison and her vineyard team have also built and installed bird boxes that attract bluebirds and owls, which feed on vineyard pests as well.”

Like Stag's Leap, Cliff Lede also monitors soil moisture, greatly reducing the need for irrigation, and also using water recycled from their winery to irrigate the two or three times annually that Cohen and her team deem necessary.

Odette, which has 35 acres under vine and opened its doors in 2012 after John Conover, Gordon Getty and Gavin Newson purchased it in the fall of 2011 from the Steltzner family, decided that everything—from energy use, to farming—would be done with the next generation in mind.

Paying it forward by reducing waste and energy usage—through solar power, and barrel storage in caves—are also part of Odette Estate's founding philosophy, something that General Manager John Conover explains was also inspired by their children.

“The millennial generation gets criticized for so much, but they actually inspire what we do here at Odette,” Conover explains, walking around the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold certified Odette Winery. To be certified LEED, a building has to meet internationally-recognized standards for renewable energy, water efficiency and innovation in design.

“We converted to organic farming immediately,” Conover said. “Farming organically adds about \$200 an acre to our costs, and constructing to LEED standards entailed an additional 3%, we estimate. But we did it because not only is the right thing for the next generation, but because it makes better wine.”

Odette saw an almost immediate payback.

“Our first vintage, which was the first vintage Jeff Owens made by himself, earned 100 points from Robert Parker (<https://www.wine.com/product/odette-estate-reserve-cabernet-sauvignon-2012/190845>),” he says.

Karma courtesy of Mother Nature? Who knows? I do know this: there's a gorgeous gem hidden in the middle of one of the shiniest wine metropolis' in the world. Like the buck it was named after, you almost can't believe it's there, until it's gone.

By The Numbers

1,200 acres of grapes under vine in the Stags Leap AVA

90% of the grape varieties planted are Cabernet Sauvignon or other Bordeaux varieties

Member Wineries

- Baldacci Family Vineyards
- Chimney Rock Winery
- Cliff Lede Vineyards
- Clos Du Val
- Isley Vineyards
- Lindstrom Wines
- Malk Family Vineyards
- Odette Estate Winery
- Pine Ridge Vineyards
- Quixote Winery
- Regusci Winery
- Shafer Vineyards
- Silverado Vineyards
- Stag's Leap Wine Cellars
- Stags' Leap Winery
- Steltzner Vineyards
- Taylor Family Vineyards

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