

PalateXposure

IN VINO VERITAS



Appellational Series – Top 10 Wineries Of Stags Leap District

📅 Oct 25, 2014

Stags' Quantum Leap

A lot of us know Stags Leap District as the appellation that made history in 1976 by putting American wines front and center. At a blind tasting that became known as the "Judgment of Paris," nine French judges awarded first place in a blind tasting to the 1973 Stags Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon. It surpassed French superstar wines such as Mouton-Rothschild and Leoville Las Cases. It was the most stunning upset in wine history. Years later, history repeated itself during a reprisal of the tasting, when yet another wine from Stags Leap, Clos Du Val Cabernet, won the tasting.

Stags Leap's name was supposedly inspired by a stag who successfully avoided hunters by disappearing in the district's peaks and valleys. The first vines were planted in the 18th century; sadly, the original vineyards fell victim first to Phylloxera, and then later to Prohibition. Post-Prohibition, Nathan Fay is credited with planting the first vineyards along the Silverado Trail. His were some of the first Cabernet Sauvignon planting in the United States. Fay sold fruit to Joe Heitz, who designated it as "Fay Vineyard" on his label.

A combination of volcanic and gravelly soils produce fruit known for its electric intensity and lengthy, round flavors. A long growing season, with dramatic temperature swings – rapid heat early in the day that give way to cool San Pablo Bay breezes, make for a deft balance between sugar and acidity.

Cabernet Sauvignon remains the dominate variety of the Stags Leap District; with some Merlot, Petite Sirah, Sangiovese and Chardonnay rounding out the plantings.

My top ten are:

Chimney Rock Winery

I have followed Chimney Rock, which was founded in 1980, for over a decade. Their wines have always been very good; but with the arrival of winemaker Elizabeth Vianna they have been elevated to a whole new level. Elizabeth's creations are authentic, sophisticated, supple and elegant; with an unmistakable sense of terroir in every sip. They known for their estate Cabernet Sauvignon and Bordeaux blends. However, I am equally fond of their white wine, Elevage Blanc – pure seduction in a bottle.



(<http://www.palatexposure.com/top-10-wineries-stags-leap-district/chimney-rock/>)

(Image credit: Chimney Rock)

Cliff Lede Vineyards

Cliff launched his namesake winery, art gallery and luxury boutique hotel with one goal in mind – uncompromising quality blended with exceptional hospitality. Cliff Lede gatherings have become legendary among the members of the wine trade. His flagship wine, Poetry, is only made during exceptional vintages. A state of the art winery and meticulous vineyard management, insures that any bottling you acquire with the Cliff Lede label is bound to be stellar.

I am a big fan of their rock block series. Cliff is an avid rock 'n' roll enthusiast and has named each block after a classic rock song. If you want the wine to "Light Your Fire", you have come to the right winery!



(<http://www.palatexposure.com/top-10-wineries-stags-leap-district/cliff-lede/>)

(Image credit: Cliff Lede)

Hartwell Estate Vineyards

Located in the heart of the Stags Leap district, Hartwell is a boutique winery that has been winning accolades from trade and press since its first vintage. Bob Hartwell was a wine collector, before he became a vintner. His love for Cabernet Sauvignon led him to establish a partnership with Dick Grace. Hartwell – Grace bottling quickly achieved cult wine status.

Hartwell – Sunshine bottlings perennially deliver inky, massive, concentrated wines of character and distinction. Hartwell's current winemaker, Benoît Touquette, a protégé of Michel Rolland, took over the winemaking reigns from Andy Erickson (of Screaming Eagle fame) in 2006. He also makes wine at Realm Cellars, Beckstoffer Vineyards, and Bernard Magrez Napa Valley.



(<http://www.palatexposure.com/top-10-wineries-stags-leap-district/hartwell/>)

(Image credit: Hartwell)

Ilseley Vineyards

I have been coming to SLD for years, yet I only recently discovered that its hidden gem. The Ilseley's are a third generational grape growing family. They grow fruit for Shafer Vineyards' Ilseley Vineyards Cab. After selling their highly sought after fruit for decades, they decided to bottle some Cabernet Sauvignon themselves. Their wines are made from their finest block selections. I first tasted their wine at the *Vineyard to Vintner* event and I was extremely impressed.



(<http://www.palatexposure.com/top-10-wineries-stags-leap-district/iisley-stags-leap-district/>)

(Image credit: Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association)

Lindstrom

SLD's best kept secret award goes to Lindstrom Vineyards. Located on a steep 20-acre hilltop property, their gorgeous site is home to some of Napa's most exciting Cabernet Sauvignon. The vineyards are hand farmed and broken down into eleven selected blocks. Celia Welch, superstar winemaker, makes tiny quantities of Nicali Vineyard Cab from rigorously selected grapes. It is a wine of unbridled power and concentration. The Lindstroms also produced a small amount of delicious Pinot Noir.



(<http://www.palatexposure.com/top-10-wineries-stags-leap-district/lindstrom/>)

(Image credit: Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association)

Malk Family Vineyards

With only two acres under vine, Malk Family Vineyards is the smallest producer in Stags Leap. Meticulous farming and tight yield control make for wines that are ripe and hedonistic. Yet, their broad flavor spectrum and plush, round tannins, make these Cabs excellent candidates for long-term cellaring. Their wines are made by Robbie Meyer, whose resume includes stints at Peter Michael Winery and Lewis Cellars.



(<http://www.palatexposure.com/top-10-wineries-stags-leap-district/malk-stags-leap-district/>)

(Image credit: Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association)

Pine Ridge Vineyards

A 30 year veteran, Pine Ridge Vineyards crafts classic wines that are benchmarks of consistency. Boasting 200 acres of prime estate vineyards across the Napa Valley Pine Ridge SLD bottlings are distinct with some offerings representing a great value for the consumer, given their pedigree. The Epitome, their flagship blend, is indeed an epitome of intensity. Overflowing with red and black fruit, its flavor profile encompasses the entire varietal spectrum. The exotic spices pushes one's palate over the edge, only to gracefully lift the freefall of ecstasy with a lengthy, leisurely, luxurious finish.



(<http://www.palatexposure.com/top-10-wineries-stags-leap-district/pine-ridge-stags-leap-district/>)

(Image credit: Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association)

Shafer Vineyards

I have been obsessed with Shafer Vineyards for nearly two decades. John Shafer moved to Napa Valley from Chicago in 1972 and embarked on an adventure that would result in one of the most important wineries on the planet. Their first Cabernet Sauvignon was released in 1978.

Elias Fernandez was hired as assistant winemaker in 1984 and is the brand's winemaker to this day, a near impossible occurrence in the industry.

Every time I drive up to the property and take in the rugged hillsides and lush valleys, my heart skips a beat. Shafer Hillside Cabernet Sauvignon has been my number one wine since my first sip. Simply put, it changed my life. I challenge you to find a Napa Valley wine of this caliber at this price. It can't be done.

The epitome of what Stags Leap can deliver, Shafer Hillside has consistently earned the highest praise (and 100 point scores) from Robert Parker and Wine Spectator. Bold, lush, and elegant, this seductive wine is truly phenomenal.

In addition to the highly allocated Hillside Select, Shafer vineyards produces five other wines that are well worth seeking.



(<http://www.palatexposure.com/top-10-wineries-stags-leap-district/shafer-the-wall-street-journal/>)

(Image credit: The Wall Street Journal)

Stags Leap Wine Cellars

Established in 1970, the young winery was thrust into stardom when the 1973 S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon upset the establishment and won the 1976 Paris Tasting, to the shock and dismay of the French judges. The winery continues to produce wines of distinction to this day. Stags Leap Wine Cellars' Cabernet Sauvignons, CASK 23, S.L.V. and FAY are the early "cults" of California wine making history. Nicki Pruss, winemaker strives for wines of balance, restraint and ageability.



(<http://www.palatexposure.com/top-10-wineries-stags-leap-district/stags-leap-wine-cellars/>)

(Image credit: Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association)

Taylor Family Vineyards

The Taylor family planted a nine acre vineyard to Cabernet and Chardonnay in 1980. Having initially sold their fruit, they decided to produce their own wine in 2002. Staunch subscribers to the theory that "the wine is grown in the vineyard," they practice meticulous, hands-on farming.

Winemaker Gustavo Brambila, (remember the movie *Bottle Shock?*), crafts terroir-driven wines of purity, richness, redolent with classic Stags Leap aromas.



(<http://www.palatexposure.com/top-10-wineries-stags-leap-district/taylor-family-vineyards/>)

(Image credit: Taylor Family Vineyards)

One of my favorite wine events, *Vineyard to Vintner*, takes place each April. It is a food and wine extravaganza, showcasing Stags Leap's overflowing largesse.

Vintners dig deep into their cellars and throw lavish dinner parties to kick off the event. The Valley's most renowned chefs create inspired wine pairing menus. The wineries' open houses define the meaning of hospitality. The event culminates in a Sangria brunch catered by none other than three Michelin star restaurant, Meadowood. This event is the ideal way to savor all the Stags Leap has to offer.

All wine lovers must, at some point, make a pilgrimage to this region. Take a friend or lover and leap into the pleasures of Stags Leap wine country.