

PRIVATE Clubs

A C C E S S T H E L U X E L I F E

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2008

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bring it back home?

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Dream Getaway

Downshift in **Italy's**
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THE GRACIOUS PORCH OF the Old Chase manor house in California's Napa Valley is an open-sided ballroom with columns and low walls of blue stone. Behind it soars the red-rock palisade called Stags Leap. Before it, the idyllic estate vineyard of Stags Leap Winery falls gently away toward the valley floor.

This is one of the venues where wine lovers convene each spring to taste the latest vintage of Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon at a series of Vineyard to Vintner (V2V) tastings and wine-paired feasts hosted by the district's Winegrowers Association. A major goal of many attendees is to get an inside track on rare and fabulous Cabernets called the Stags

The ink was barely dry on the 1982 documents creating the Napa Valley American Viticultural Area when wine connoisseurs began to dissect the valley, defining its geographic components according to perceived differences in the characteristics of wine from various locations. Foremost among them was the Stags Leap area in the valley's southeast quadrant. Named for the monolithic palisade that dominates the one-by-three-mile enclave along the Silverado Trail, the Stags Leap District was one of the first parts of the valley planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, and one of the first areas to be identified as producing a recognizable variation of Napa Valley character, particularly in Cabernet.

I clearly remember tastings of Napa Valley Cabernets in the early 1980s that

terrain. Corridors through the hills tend to accelerate air movements, extending the southern valley's natural air-conditioning farther north than it would otherwise reach and thereby tempering the hot days. Those two factors, the heat and the marine influence, come into extraordinary balance in the District's finest vineyards.

That was apparent to magical effect in the 2004 growing season. It began with a rainy early spring and proceeded into a warm late spring with virtually no frost in most of Napa Valley. No news was good news as the summer developed into the classic pattern: foggy mornings turning quickly into moderately hot afternoons and marine-cooled evenings — "Rutherford days and Carneros nights," as Shafer Vineyards founder John Shafer put it.

The Class of '04

Be among the lucky few to nab an extra-special collection of Stags Leap Cabernets

BY ROD SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG MILANO

Leap District Appellation Collection, which is released each autumn. Comprising 15 bottles of elite cuvées — one Cabernet from each of the association's members — the Appellation Collection is available in a limited quantity (just 500 cases) for \$1,200 on a first-come-first-served basis.

The Collection making its debut this October is more than just an assemblage of Napa Valley's finest Cabernet Sauvignons. Like 11 previous offerings, it is a sensory exploration of the Stags Leap area *terroir*, and a convincing statement of the quality of the area's vineyards and wineries. But this year, for the first time, all of the wines are from the same vintage (2004), making this collection a kind of liquid portrait showing many expressions of a great wine district in one growing season.

evolved into intense discussion of that character. As wines were sipped and re-sipped for comparison and debate, passionate arguments were made for the *typicité* of qualities, such as soft tannins and a seemingly ubiquitous cocoa flavor. Purple lips and teeth framed eloquent rhetoric about how the Cabernet vines responded to the lean volcanic soil, morning fog, lingering afternoon heat, and plunging nocturnal temperatures with a very special combination of bright acidity, velvety texture, and pure, deep, intense Cabernet flavors.

At the region's southern end, the vineyards bask on open slopes inclined toward the afternoon sun. Moving north, this open benchland rises and narrows into a broken, convoluted

For reasons known only to the vines, the crop was generally light, with small clusters of little thick-skinned grapes that yielded deeply concentrated wines in which robust tannins anchored extraordinarily fresh, bright fruit. Many of my notes from barrel tastings in spring 2005 note a fine balance between luscious richness and firm, detailed structure. A success, in other words, along the lines of the magnificent 1999 and 2001 vintages.

For wine lovers and collectors who know Napa Valley wine, this is a chance to spot the Cabernet gems from the Stags Leap District's '04 vintage. For wine lovers who may be just starting a collection or just want to see what all the Napa Valley hype is based on, you have an amazing treat in store. *Salud.* ■

Best of the Best

The 2008 Appellation Collection, 15 Stags Leap Cabernet Sauvignons from the 2004 vintage, is one of the most impressive to date, as a group. But to my taste, these are four standouts. — R.S.

Clos du Val

A voluptuous, yet fine-boned beauty with rich, lingering flavor.

Pine Ridge

A superb balance between bright, focused Cabernet fruit and unctuous chocolaty notes.

Robert Sinskey RSV

An almost unbelievably sensual complex of lip-smacking fruit and silky texture.

Shafer One Point Five

Remarkable purity, intensity, and suppleness.



HOW TO GET IT:

Order the Appellation Collection and register for a V2V online at stagsleapdistrict.com.