



Mike Dunne
SIGNATURE
WINES

Stags Leap, Napa's Bounding AVA

by Mike Dunne | May 2, 2023 | Blog

Napa Valley, the nation's most gilded wine enclave, also is the most conspicuously gerrymandered, a viticultural district drawn not so much to represent geography and culture as politics, especially the marketing party.

In contrast to the traditional standards of defining a winegrowing place by the nature of its soils, climate, elevations and the like, "Napa Valley" embraces far more than Napa Valley, including portions of two mountain ranges, assorted peaks and even other valleys.

It is the upshot of astute lobbying by far-sighted grape growers and winemakers who laid the groundwork for the Napa Valley American Viticultural Area. They recognized the longterm marketing potential of "Napa Valley" and capitalized on it industriously. In short order, federal officials in 1981 sanctioned "Napa Valley" as California's first entry in a system intended to help assure consumers of the credibility of the country's wines. The Napa Valley AVA didn't do that, but it clearly elevated the region's overall profile.

Since then, a correction has been under way. Farmers and vintners here and there in Napa Valley have teamed up to sub-divide the AVA into more logical and meaningful viticultural sections. Today, there are 16 other AVAs within Napa Valley, including several whose names are as magical as "Napa Valley" for the caliber of wines they yield and for the prices they command – Diamond Mountain, Howell Mountain, Mount Veeder, to name but three.

I'll go out on a long cane here to argue that the most historic and significant of Napa Valley's 16 nested AVAs is the Stags Leap District.



It's also the smallest, just a mile wide and three miles long, tucked between the lower slopes of the Vaca Range on the east and Napa River on the west. It straddles Silverado Trail just a few miles north of the city of Napa.

The soils of Stags Leap are largely volcanic over clay, rocky higher up, finer lower down. Radiant heat off the jutting palisades on the appellation's east side provide the zone's vines with all the warmth they need to flourish, while cool maritime breezes off San Pablo Bay to the south preserve the acidity that helps distinguish Stags Leap wines.

Stags Leap has been recognized for outstanding Cabernet Sauvignon since Nathan Fay began to plant the variety in the area in 1961, through grapes first were cultivated in the district in 1878.

Stags Leap leaped onto the world wine stage in 1976 when a 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars won the Judgment of Paris, a blind tasting of California Cabernets and French Bordeaux. The judges were all French. Napa Valley in general and Stags Leap in particular haven't looked back since.

(If California Gov. Gavin Newsom wants to assemble a case of royal Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon to dispatch to Westminster Abbey for this weekend's coronation of King Charles III he could begin and end his search just in Stags Leap District. He could, but probably won't, given that his own PlumpJack Winery is in Napa Valley's Oakville AVA.)

Today, approximately 1200 acres are planted to wine grapes in Stags Leap, around 90 percent of the total Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties like Petit Verdot, Merlot and Malbec.

About that name Stags Leap: No one is sure when and how it originated, with speculation including a Wappo legend involving a wild stag that leaped from peak to peak of the palisades to avoid hunters. A more contemporary version attributes the name to a stag that eluded the marksmanship of an entire generation of hunters.

Early in its modern wine evolution, Stags Leap was populated by an unusually high proportion of willful, visionary and imaginative vintners – Warren Winiarski of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Carl Doumani of Stags' Leap Winery, Bernard Portet of Clos du Val, John Shafer of Shafer Vineyards, Richard Steltzner of Steltzner Vineyards, the Disney family of Silverado Vineyards.

A few Stags Leap wineries remain family owned, but many have been sold to corporations. How is this transition affecting the wines of Stags Leap District?

Let's go find out. Thus, we found ourselves this past Saturday first on the isolated estate of Ilsley Vineyards at the far northeastern reaches of Stags Leap District, then on the lush grounds of Regusci Winery toward the southeastern end of the AVA. They are two of the 16 wineries that constitute the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association, a trade group dedicated to promoting the Stags Leap AVA.

The event was "Vineyard to Vintner," an almost-annual gathering limited to 200 persons who this year paid \$1250 each for three days of tours, tastings, dinners and the like. We were invited guests for the Saturday sessions, including a tasting at which member wineries were pouring 44 wines, most of them Cabernet Sauvignon.

Two asides:

First, the invitation specified that fitting attire for the day would be "Napa Valley casual," with shoes sturdy enough for vineyard exploration. We had no idea what "Napa Valley casual" means these days, but we learned: Men in Bermuda shorts of a quiet pattern, blue shirts, headgear ranging from fedora to bowler, with only a rare baseball cap (winemakers stood apart for the breadth of the brims of their hats, some approaching sombrero, given that they know how intense the Stags Leap sunlight can be once the fog lifts). For the most part, women were in long drapey skirts running to mid-calf, also in soft prints, floppy hats, and at the outset shawl or jacket to cope with the foggy morning chill. A French impressionist should have been on hand to record the smart

attire.

Second, the event was surprisingly free of Napa Valley's notorious hubris. The day's attitude was entirely welcoming, gracious, relaxed, modest, candid and funny, from the several winemakers on hand to the smiling, gleeful servers from the restaurant Farmstead at Long Meadow Ranch of St. Helena, which catered the tasting. We chatted with several couples who had signed on for the three days, and found that they almost invariably were returnees, and not a single one was from California, with Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Florida, Nevada and Utah all represented.

The Stags Leap grape-growing and winemaking community long has described its Cabernet Sauvignons as packing the punch of an "iron fist in a velvet glove." Nice, if intimidating. The slogan is an attempt to alert consumers and collectors that Stags Leap Cabernet Sauvignons deliver both drive and hearty yet serene fruit.

We made our way from station to station, pausing for bites of such lunch fare as plump and sweet arancini of morel mushrooms and spring peas, focaccia topped with burrata cheese and green garlic, deviled eggs finished with caviar, yakitori-grilled duck with maitake mushrooms, fried chicken with farro salad, and no end of assorted chocolates by Woodhouse of St. Helena.

What we also found were Cabernets of fresh juiciness, assured structure, recharging acidity and finely woven suggestions of cherries, berries, olives, herbs and spice. Some were fleshier than others, some more firm, but virtually all were aromatically open and inviting, balanced and long. Their acidity and tannins reaffirmed the Stags Leap standing for Cabernet Sauvignons built to age, but they also were positively drinkable, especially when paired with food. Corporate ownership looks to be recognizing and respecting the district's legacy for wines of finesse and endurance.

The most unusual wine of the day was a first-ever wine, the **Stags Leap District 2021 Winegrowers Cabernet Sauvignon Collaboration** (\$275), a joint effort involving the organization's 16 member vintners. (That explains the label art – a 16-point buck.) Each of the 16 vintners contributed portions of their most prestigious lots from 2021 for the wine, then five of them blended the resulting release.

One of them was Elizabeth Vianna, winemaker of Chimney Rock Winery, who said the group's goal was to come up with a "terroir-driven" wine to highlight "the hedonistic texture of Stags Leap District,





the finesse and age-worthiness of Stags Leap Cabernets, and the sheer beauty of the aromatics and acidity of the 2021 vintage.”

The wine, unfinned and unfiltered, does all that, with no braying heat from its potent level of alcohol – 15.5 percent. It’s a very deeply colored Cabernet Sauvignon, with the enveloping and tantalizing fruit aroma we had come to appreciate in Stags Leap interpretations of the variety through the day. It conveyed a layering of dark and juicy cherry and berry fruits, a medium-bodied build, a dry delivery, well-threaded oak, renewing acidity, and a gloriously long finish. Most surprising was its easy drinkability even without a skewer of yakitori-grilled duck in hand.



Chimney Rock winemaker Elizabeth Vianna

I had several other favorites:

The **Regusci Winery 2019 Stags Leap District Block 3 Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$95) was a veritable backyard swing set taken over by youngsters bent on seeing who could go the highest, it was that energetic and joyous, and clearly one of the more tantalizingly aromatic releases of the day.



The **Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars 2018 Stags Leap District FAY Hillside Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$190) uncannily evoked a vision of the entire AVA as it might be seen from a drone – precisely maintained rows of lush vines, deep red dirt, rocky hillside, searing sunlight banishing the last traces of morning fog. Fresh and unusually silken for a Stags Leap Cabernet Sauvignon, it was all expansive and layered cherries and olives, instantly blooming in aroma and flavor, then lingering with grace and persistence.



The **Shafer Vineyards 2019 One Point Five Stags Leap District**



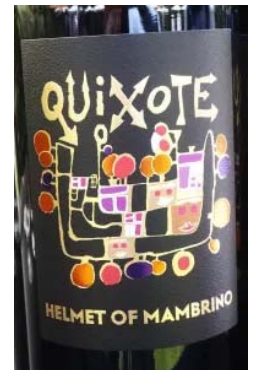
Cabernet Sauvignon (\$110) was one of the more classically built, aromatic and flavorful wines of the tasting, standing out for its equilibrium and elegance. (One Point Five refers to the 35-year father-and-son partnership of winery founders John and Doug Shafer; the winery now is owned by Shinsegae Property of South Korea, though Elias Fernandez, Shafer's winemaker for 40 years, remains in charge of the cellar.)



The **Cliff Lede Vineyards 2019 Stags Leap District Roundabout Midnight Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$110) was unusually lithe and amicable by the district's standards – no iron fist here – but it stood out for its propulsion and complexity, the latter of which starts with a trellis heavy with flowers redolent of wisteria and violets, and ends with terraces given over to a blackberry patch here, a cherry orchard there, all at prime ripeness. (At Cliff Lede, wines and vineyard blocks are named after winery founder Cliff Lede's favorite rock songs and albums. Thus, "Roundabout," after a Yes song of the same name, is from the estate's Twin Peaks vineyard, while "Midnight," from Eric Clapton's "After Midnight," is from the estate's Poetry vineyard.)

The **Quixote Winery 2017 Stage Leap District Helmet of Mambrino Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$225) seemed to be cut from the same cloth as the Cliff

Lede, throwing exceptional exuberance and charm in its youthfulness and candor. It was as silken and flowing as one of those long "Napa casual" skirts floating across the tasting grounds. It was one uncontrived wine, so likeable you wanted to wander into the vineyard to meet the vines that gave up such forthright and accommodating fruit. "Helmet of Mambrino" refers to the fictional Moorish king Mambrino and Don Quixote's quest to find the king's helmet, believing it would make him invulnerable. As a metaphor for this wine's durability, it works.



The **Ilsley Vineyards 2019 Stags Leap District Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$175) opened quietly but grew more vocal with each sip, and by the time the glass was empty was shouting all about black cherries, cassis, plums and licorice. Its layering may be due not only to the estate's gently rolling setting but the unusually high number of Cabernet Sauvignon clones with which the estate is planted.



The **Baldacci Family Vineyards 2019 Stag's Leap**



District Brenda's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (\$200) was one of the more vivid, athletic and expressive wines of the day, showering the palate with all sorts of aromatic and flavorful suggestions, from Bing cherries and vanilla to tobacco and tar, all welcome and enticing. "Brenda"

would be Brenda Baldacci, mother of the estate's director of winemaking and vineyards, Michael Baldacci, and wife of founder Tom Baldacci.

Take away: While "Napa Valley" as an American Viticultural Area is monumental and ambiguous, the region's sub-appellations show that there is something to be made of terroir when it is intelligently outlined and defined. Each of the valley's sub-appellations has its own statement to make, and for Stags Leap that statement comes down to Cabernet Sauvignons of exceptional release and adroitness, combining up-front enchantment with enduring verve. Nearly 50 years after the Judgment of Paris, Cabernet Sauvignon out of Stags Leap District looks to still possess the sinew, bones and soul to be mistaken for Bordeaux, even by French judges.