

## A Look at Stags Leap Cabernet Sauvignon

*Inside Napa Valley's prized district*

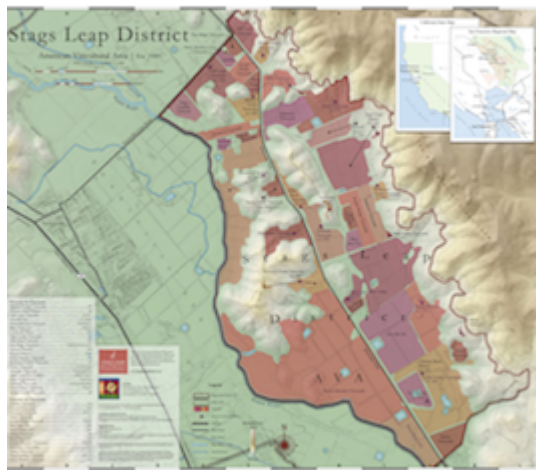
September 30, 2011 By Gregory Dal Piaz

**Tags:** history of wine, Napa Valley, Wine Reviews, Gregory Dal Piaz, wine regions, Cabernet Sauvignon, California

Once upon a time, and it wasn't that long ago, you only needed to know about Napa Valley. Being a long valley opening virtually directly onto the San Pablo Bay, it's not surprising that people have slowly realized that there are a myriad of mesoclimates in the valley, not to mention soil types, expositions, elevations and all the usual factors that can affect a vineyard's production.

Of all the AVAs now found in the **Napa Valley**, the Stags Leap District may have some of the most compelling justification.

It was back in 1961 that Nathan Fay began the rehabilitation of the district, though as far back as 1878 Stags Leap was winemaking country. Today, we have to work very hard to identify the best spots for planting vineyards. Back in 1878, it was a whole heck of a lot easier, seeing as there were no competing vineyards. In fact, there was very little competing anything, allowing the pioneers of the day to simply find the best spot. Period.



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Those old timers knew a thing or two. Consider the famed To Kalon vineyard. While not in the Stags Leap District, this vineyard was planted in 1868 and simply illustrates the ability of those early farmers to identify the best spots to plant grapes.

So why is Stags Leap special? What could Terril Grigsby have known when he built his Occidental Winery (now home to Regusci)? A simple look around helps to reveal the region's secrets.

First, there is the soil. Coarse and volcanic, it is debris from the hills that make up the eastern edge of the **Napa Valley**. This soil drains well and is poor, well suited for the great vitus Vinifera grapes that have always produced the world's finest wines.

And then there were those hills. While the Napa Valley is certainly a warmer region of the world, the Stags Leap District occupies a rather unique position. The eastern border is the so-called "Stags Leap Palisade", an imposing feature that rises steeply above the valley floor and offers two advantages to the zone.

The first is some cooling shade in the morning, which affords the vines a bit more cool time to rest than the less shaded regions of the valley floor. The second advantage comes from the sheer mass and position of the Stag Leap Palisade. It reflects the sun's heat towards the valley floor, radiating heat through the early hours of the evening. The soil, loose and dry as it is, may lose its heat rapidly, but the Palisade radiates off heat slowly, adding a small buffer against the cooling influence of the San Pablo Bay.

That buffer is needed because of the hills that form the western edge of the AVA. These modest hills may seem inconsequential, but they are shaped in such a way as to funnel those cooling breezes right through the Stags Leap District.

So what you ask? Well what are Stags Leap **Cabernets** known for? Richness and ripe tannins yet with vibrant acids. This combination of warmer days and cooler nights is what creates the opportunity for wines that have all the richness that the Napa Valley is known for, yet are perhaps brighter, softer and more approachable than many other wines from the valley. It's this approachability, the innate yet balanced softness, that makes Stags Leap Cabernet so distinctive, and an appellation worth exploring.

If you're interested in tasting these wines, and several additional labels, you might want to explore the 2007 Appellation Collection put together and sold through the Stags Leap District Winegrowers. 16 bottles of wine, from famous, well known and emerging wineries, all produced from the fruit of the 2007 vintage. This set makes for a great tasting, and could be a wonderful gift if you know of someone so inclined.

If this seems excessive, don't worry, there are plenty of great Stags Leap District wines on offer at your local retailers or on the Internet. See which one sounds like a winner to you and get to know what the district is all about.