

[THE SOMM JOURNAL
CAMP]



Preview

SOMM

Great Expectations

GAINING INSIGHT WHILE
PREPARING FOR THE
STAGS LEAP DISTRICT
SOMM CAMP

by Jessie Birschbach

Although we're calling it "stag camp" around the of ce, there will in fact be a lack of "stag somms" attending the Stags Leap District (SLD) SOMM Camp retreat this year. Inspired by the strong female wine-makers and principals leading the camp, *The SOMM Journal* has invited some of the best female sommeliers from around the country. Of course, a few lucky male somms will attend— ve or six to be exact—but the remaining ten will be women. Hopefully the young bucks can keep up!

To prime ourselves for camp at the end of June, we reached out to a few of these women for some personal insight into the SLD and the wines that de ne it.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE STAGS LEAP DISTRICT WINEGROWERS



Remi Cohen,

Vice President and General Manager of Lede Family Wines

After East Coast transplant Remi Cohen received her degree in molecular and cellular biology from U.C. Berkeley, her life took an unexpected turn. Rather than pursuing a career in the medical eld, Cohen obtained her master's degree in the Viticulture and Enology program at U.C. Davis before earning her MBA at Golden Gate University in San Francisco.

These degrees propelled her into working at various levels of winemaking in California, where she went from serving as the Vineyard Manager of Bouchaine Vineyards to taking a position at Merryvale Vineyards as Vice President of Operations. Somewhere in between her time at Merryvale and her current role at Lede Family Wines, Cohen founded her own vinicultural and winemaking consulting company, Vines to Wine.

According to Cohen, both Lede and Vines to Wine prioritize sustainable farming practices, and SOMM Camp guests will have the opportunity to attend a session dedicated to sustainability efforts in the SLD led by her, Jon-Mark Chappellet of Clos du Val, and Russ Weis of Silverado Vineyards. "At Cliff Lede Vineyards,

The corridor in the Stags Leap District helps funnel the cool air from the San Pablo Bay.

Another dominant theme at camp will likely center around the appellation's major geological influences. Aside from its world-class Cabernet Sauvignon, SLD is best known for a rocky outcropping in the Vaca mountain range known as the Palisades; its dramatic image is associated, of course, with the eponymous stag escaping a hunter by leaping over the jagged rocks. "Our Poetry Vineyard is nestled into this rock outcrop and we are fortunate that this vineyard produces wines that are quintessential Stags Leap," Cohen says. "The west-facing rocky façade of the Palisades radiates warmth into the District from the abundant sunshine reflecting on it, producing wines that are ripe and voluptuous."

The dual influence of the Palisades and its close proximity to San Pablo Bay create the bulk of the SLD's geological influences. Cool air from the bay funnels through the SLD corridor's green, rolling hills, which serve as the home of Cliff Lede's Twin Peaks Vineyard. According to Cohen, "this creates a funnel against the façade of the Palisades to draw in cool marine air at night." "The cooler air lowers temperatures in the late afternoon and night so dramatically that we have a very large temperature fluctuation from the afternoon highs to the nighttime lows," she adds.

This climate is conducive to acid retention during berry development, which Cohen says creates wines "with elegance, vibrancy, structure, and longevity." "At Cliff Lede Vineyards, we like to produce wines that are opulent and reflect the abundant sunshine and warmth of the District, yet have an unmistakable sense of place with minerality from the volcanic hillsides as well as age-worthiness indicative of our cool nights," she explains.

Stags Leap District AVA Breakdown

Roughly 3 miles long and 1 mile wide, the SLD is the smallest AVA in Napa Valley.

Roughly 90 percent of grapes planted in SLD are Cabernet Sauvignon or Bordeaux varieties.

Only about half of the 2,700-acre District is under vine.

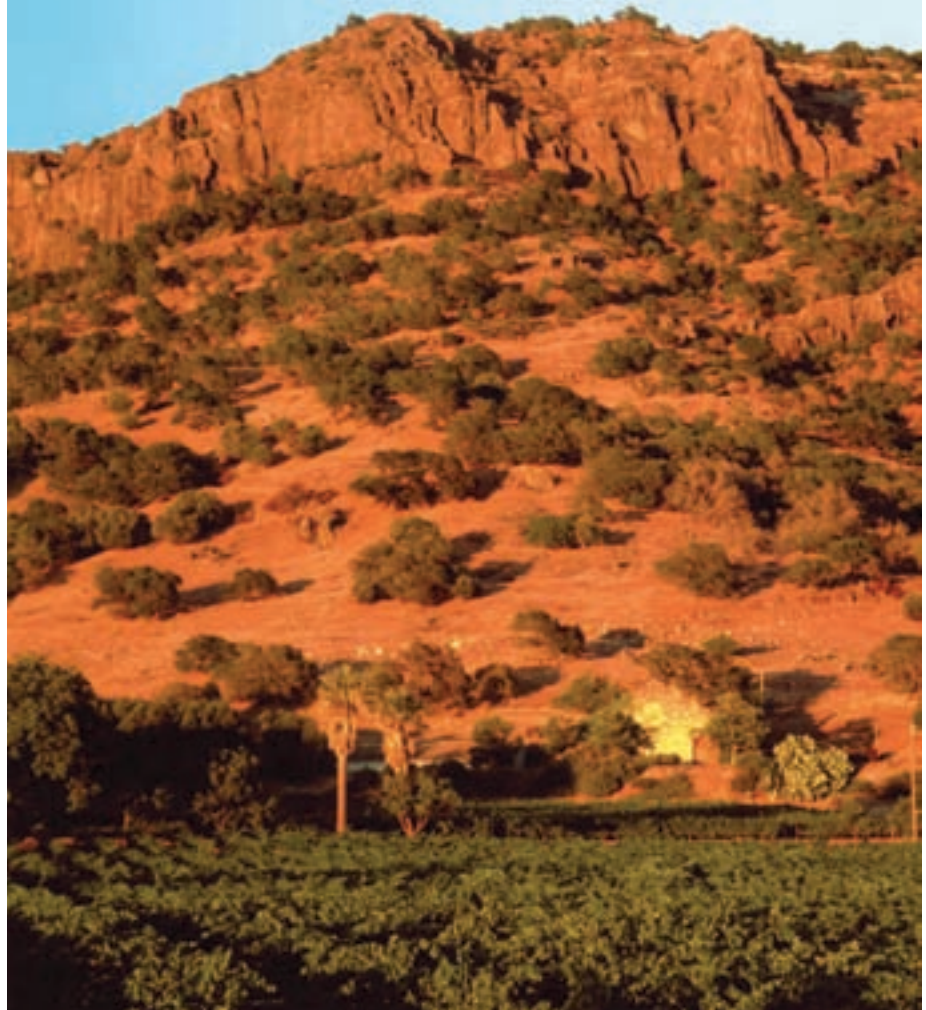
Established in 1989, SLD was the first AVA in the U.S. to be approved based on its soil profile.

At the famous Judgement of Paris in 1976, first place was awarded to the Stags Leap Wine Cellars 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon.

The two dominant soil profiles of the SLD AVA are: **volcanic**, found in the eastern elevation; and **river sediment**, a blend of loams with clay substructure found in the lowland area.

SLD experiences a longer growing season due to the cool marine airflow from the San Pablo Bay.

The west-facing rocky façade of the Palisades: a natural symbol of the Stags Leap District AVA.





Elizabeth Vianna, Winemaker at Chimney Rock

As a biology major at Vassar College, Elizabeth Vianna—much like Remi Cohen—was on the path to medical school. But after being exposed to good wine in New York, namely a glass of 1985 Château Sociando-Mallet, Vianna chose to attend U.C. Davis to pursue her master's in enology instead.

After graduating, Vianna advanced from Enologist to Assistant Winemaker at Napa Wine Company, where she learned the craft alongside incredible winemakers like Pam Starr and Heidi Barrett. After starting at Chimney Rock as the Assistant Winemaker in 2002, Vianna assumed the role of Winemaker in 2005 before being named General Manager in 2011.

In addition to serving as the Head Winemaker at the Stags Leap District estate winery, Vianna somehow manages to find time to serve as President of the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association. Her steadfast dedication can clearly be attributed to her love of the AVA.

"I've been making wines here for over 16 years now. When I started at Chimney Rock, I remember watching [former winemaker Doug Fletcher] giving a tour and saying something like, 'The Stags Leap District makes some of the best Cabernets in the world.' I come from a New York perspective, where it's a very kind of Eurocentric wine-drinking community in a lot of ways, and remember thinking, 'Wow, that's pretty confident,'" Vianna recalls. "But I think I didn't really understand Napa Valley wines yet at that stage in my career, and then I had this kind of an 'aha moment' maybe three or four years later after realizing that the wines really are beautifully balanced and there is something here that is unique, like any great appellation." ❧

CAMP HIGHLIGHTS

"The camp will be a deep immersion in the history, geology, and wines from the SLD, but most importantly, it will be a chance for the somms to connect with the land and the people who make the District special and unique." —Remi Cohen

"The biggest takeaway any time you visit a wine region, of course, is really tasting through its wines. But just as valuable, they'll know so much more of the story behind those wines and that's what connects us to them—the people. I think these somms will be getting a perspective on the diversity of wineries in the District from some of the newer producers to some of the long-term and multi-generational family growers." —Elizabeth Vianna

"Included also in the itinerary is a segment called 'Clearing the Air – A Barrel Crawl,' a fun play on a pub crawl. Participating winemakers will taste the sommeliers through their 2017 barrel samples. Our intended goal is to literally clear the air and mystery around the vintage due to the wild fires. The vintners look forward to sharing the appellation's high-quality 2017 Cabernets with the somms so these industry leaders can spread the word." —Nancy Bialek, Executive Director, Stags Leap District Winegrowers

Look for a full report of the Stags Leap SOMM Camp in the August-September issue of The SOMM Journal!