

Napa Valley's Stags Leap District: Cabernet Sauvignon and More

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Some of the very best cabernet sauvignon on Earth

The Stags Leap District in [Napa Valley](#) is most famous for [cabernet sauvignon](#). There's a very good reason for that: The vineyard sites in the Stags Leap AVA (American Viticultural Area) produce some of the very best cabernet sauvignon in not just Napa Valley, but in the world. Of the 1,200 acres planted to vine, 90 percent are cabernet sauvignon. While the soil and climate are well suited for cabernet, economics drive the grapes dominance as well: Cabernet sauvignon fetches much more per ton than any other grape. A number of other grape varieties do well there too. The impact of the Stags Leap District is all the more impressive when you realize it's the smallest AVA in Napa Valley.

[The Stags Leap District Winegrowers](#) has found a number of ways to highlight what their members are up to and how very good the wines are. Each year a collection of one cabernet from each winery is released in what they call the Appellation Collection. This limited-production set is a brilliant way to take the Stags Leap District home and recreate the experience of an AVA-wide tasting tour. Countless events all over the country are another way they spread the word. The signature event held every spring right in Stags Leap is the "Vineyard to Vintner Weekend."



Photo by Bob McManis

Consumers fly in from all over to soak in all things Stags Leap for the three days of V2V Weekend. Over those days a myriad of great events take place. The weekend begins with wineries grouping up to host vintner dinners on site at winery properties on the Friday evening. Producers often highlight library wines at these events, so you can experience how their wines age. Saturday is a full day of open houses, with each winery hosting events that go above and beyond their normal tasting experiences. Several member wineries are not normally open to the public and V2V Weekend stands as the single opportunity to visit them each year. Finally, on Sunday there's a closing picnic-style lunch at one of the member wineries. Each of the producers brings a couple of their wines and you can spend several hours walking around, eating, tasting, enjoying music and re-living, with others, the highlights of the weekend.

This year I attended the [2018 Vineyard to Vintner Weekend](#) as a guest of the Stags Leap Winegrowers Association. Over the years I've spent a lot of time in Napa Valley and plenty of that in Stags Leap. However, the 2018 V2V weekend highlighted for me how spending a handful of back-to-back days in one small area really allows you to soak in its charms and learn as much about it as possible. Nothing compares with standing among the vines, meeting the people who grow the grapes, and tasting the end result with them, just a few feet away from where they sprung to life. Sampling older vintages carefully paired with delicious bites also showcased not only the benefit of cellaring great wines but also the joy of wine, food and camaraderie coming together. Over the three days I tasted so many wonderful wines, and here's a look at nine of my favorites.

The travel, food, wine and lodging that are the subject of this review were provided at no cost to the writer.

Recommended bottles:

Baldacci Family Vineyards "Frederich" Gewürztraminer 2017 (\$25). This wine, produced by Baldacci in Stags Leap, is made from fruit they source in Carneros. It's well worth including here as it's such a lovely example of gewürztraminer. Anjou pear, white pepper and peach aromas light up the nose. Flavors of apricot, Granny Smith apple, and spices drive the palate. Wet limestone and a hint of mesquite honey provide a crisp, mouthwatering finish.

Stags' Leap Winery Petite Sirah 2015 (\$47). Petite sirah is one of the secret weapons of Napa Valley. Year after year, this offering from Stags' Leap Winery showcases petite sirah at its best. Blueberry, violet and blackberry aromas emerge from the brooding nose. The palate is stuffed with a bevy of dark fruit flavors such as blackberry, plum and cherry. Oodles of spice, bits of earth and sour black cherries are all present on the finish. This is one of the most elegant, structured and age-worthy petite sirahs around.

Regusci Winery Zinfandel 2015 (\$55). There was a time when there were more acres of zinfandel planted in Napa than cabernet. That has long since changed, but there are still some wonderful zins produced in Napa. Many of the Regusci's zinfandel vines date back to the 1930s. Blackberry and pepper lead the aromatics. The palate is a who's who of dark berry fruit flavors, spice and a dusting of sweet dark chocolate. Black raspberry and bits of boysenberry are evident on the long, spicy finish. This is a classic example of zinfandel.

Steltzner SLD Sangiovese 2015 (\$55). At fewer than 100 cases, this sangiovese represents a tiny production for Steltzner. This wine is a fine example of the sangiovese grape, and exhibits classic elements of the variety. Rose petals and ripe red raspberry aromas burst forward, and the palate is littered with strawberry and raspberry flavors which are underpinned with bits of spice. A hint of vanilla emerges on the finish. This is the very definition of "Cal-Ital" in a bottle.

Cliff Lede Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 (\$78). Bits of vanilla, red fruit and violets are evident on the nose. Black fruits, spice, and minerals drive the full-flavored but well-proportioned palate. The finish is long, layered and remarkably complex. Firm acid and medium tannins provide grip and structure. Delicious today, this wine will also drink well for at least a dozen years.

Malk Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 (\$80). This tiny, family-owned producer is one of those that only opens to the public for V2V Weekend. Red and black fruit aromas mark the nose. The palate is loaded with black cherry, bits of graphite, and dusty cocoa. Earth, minerals and wisps of chicory mark the long and impressive finish.

Silverado Vineyards “Solo” Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 (\$125). This is entirely cabernet sauvignon from the Silverado-Disney Heritage clone, and is one of only three such Heritage clones in California. This is a wine of singular distinction. From the first whiff to the last sip, there is character and fruit to spare here, all the while maintaining proportion and tremendous grace. Spice and red fruit aromas lead the way. Red cherry, plum and a core of spices drive the layered palate. Crushed cherry, hints of earth and a dusting of cocoa marks the finish. Firm acid and medium tannins provide excellent structure.

Taylor Family Vineyards Estate Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 (\$125). This offering is composed entirely of cabernet grapes, from the Taylor Family Vineyards property in the heart of the Stags Leap District. Black fruits, hints of dark chocolate, and a touch of toasty oak are evident on the nose. The palate is stuffed with blackberry, black raspberry, vanilla bean, and black currant. Hints of black cherry, pomegranate and subtle mineral notes are all evident on the long finish. Firm acid adds to the structure and mouthwatering nature of this wine. Drink it over the next 15 years.

Shafer Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon 2008 (N/A). At a decade old (2013 is the current release), Shafer’s flagship wine hardly betrays a bit of its age. Dark fruit rules the day from the big, welcoming nose forward. Black cherry and blackberry dominate the palate with bits of leather offering a counterpoint. Sweet dark chocolate and oodles of spice mark the prodigiously long finish. It’s drinking well right now, but there’s no rush, because it will hold another two decades. Looking for more interesting selections? Here’s a [great mix of new wines, from both prominent and little-known wineries](#).