

THE GRAY REPORT

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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2016

How well does Stags Leap District wine age? Thoughts on a 25-year blind vertical tasting

Earlier this month I attended an interesting blind tasting held by Stags Leap District Winegrowers. We tried 18 Cabernet Sauvignons from 13 vintages dating back to 1991. It was an unusual setup because the wines were from 18 different wineries.

Even so, it was easy to track the progression in ripeness in Napa. The wines from 2003 on were mostly made with different intentions than the earlier wines. Most had more up-front fruit that tastes darker, and I wonder how they will age. That's not the goal of most of Napa Valley anymore -- or for that matter, of most wineries in the world -- and I'm not here to pretend that it should be.



Digital art by [Daniel Eskridge](#)

The older wines in this tasting were cherry-picked *because* the wineries think they're still tasting good. It's very different from going to a winery and tasting 10 vintages in a row. The two oldest wines in the tasting were two of my favorites, but that doesn't mean those wineries consistently make age-worthy wines. Once in New Mexico I tasted a 10-year-old Pinot Noir that was fabulous and I wondered why the winery had stopped making still wines. "That was the only good one we made," the winemaker told me. So you never know.

But that said, here were the highlights, some lowlights, and random thoughts from the tasting.

★ **Steltzner Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 1991:** This lovely wine was my favorite of all, with nice mature dried cherry and pomegranate fruit yet still a liveliness on the palate. Elegant, with a long finish. This is what we hope for when we put a bottle away for 25 years.

★ **Clos du Val Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 1992:** Clos du Val never followed the fashion for extreme ripeness and I often like its wines in blind tastings. On the simple side, but the tannins are now nice and gentle.

★ **Silverado Vineyards Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2002:** The best of several wines from the first part of that decade. Lively with bright fruit, and only the softening of the formidable tannins signals the palate that this is an older wine. This might be a star of the same tasting in the year 2025. [You can actually buy this vintage of this wine here!](#)



★ **Malk Family Vineyards Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2007:** This is [the second time I've picked a wine from this tiny winery](#) out of a blind tasting. The winery is owned by South African Brian Malk, who bought the vineyard next to the famous Fay Vineyard. It has good freshness and some minerality that was lacking in most of the wines from the latter part of the tasting. Malk, whose real business is commercial real estate, only makes 400 cases of wine per year.

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Stag's Leap Wine Cellars vs. Stags' Leap Winery: There was a famous copyright infringement lawsuit between these two under previous owners, who were people. Both have been sold and now relations between the new owners, who are corporations, are frosty over a wine called The Stag that Treasury Wine Estates, which owns Stags' Leap (the apostrophe matters), wants to introduce with grapes from outside Stags Leap Wine District. Neither wanted to talk to me about a rumored lawsuit. I tried the Stag's Leap from 1995 and the Stags' Leap from 2009. The '95 Stag's Leap was too old; the '09 Stags' Leap was too dense and rich for me. So for me, hold the apostrophe please.

There was **a winery where the PR people kept interrupting me from other interviews** to meet the winemaker but I really hated his 2009 wine -- one of the most recent -- so I kept brushing them off. I don't want to name this winery because the wine was awful, but it rhymes with the essential accessory in the photo at right (which is a clickable nice Christmas gift for apartment-dwelling wine lovers.)

Shafer Vineyards Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2004: Doug Shafer always says Shafer makes wines to drink now. Believe him. After tasting this, I urge you to go drink the Shafer wines in your cellar. This is not to say I disagree with Shafer's philosophy: I like Shafer's wines. Just not this old.



Of the 18 wines I tasted, I gave 90-plus scores to just four, the first four listed above. Is that good or bad? For current-release wines it would be pretty good, but in theory these wines should have been chosen for their current drinkability. I think Doug Shafer might just be right in general. If you're a California wine fan and want to avoid disappointment down the road, drink now and don't forever hold your piece. Put that piece down.

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