

THE

# WASHING

PANEL

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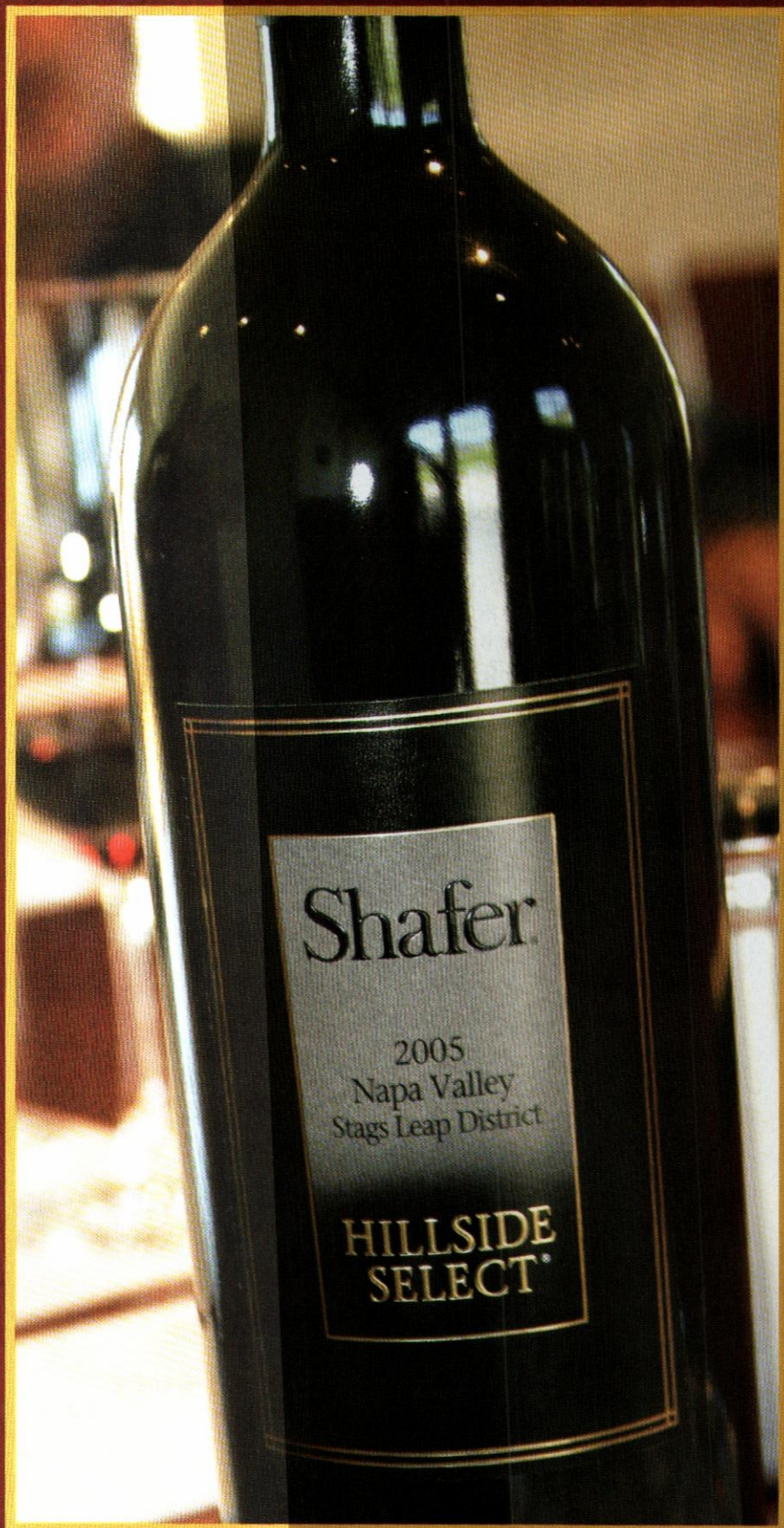


The Tasting Panel's  
Lifetime Achievement Award  
2009 Recipient

# The Cheesecake Factory

Russell Greene, Sr. VP (left)  
leads the executive beverage  
and bakery team of The

# milestone



## Leap of Faith

As Stags Leap District celebrates its 20th anniversary as an AVA, we talk with pioneers and new players in this unique and prestigious Silverado Trail appellation

story and photos by Meridith May

If terroir ever had an effect on creating an AVA, it was in the Stags Leap District. A mere three miles long and barely a mile wide, this special slice of Napa Valley had soil, sun and nature on its side. "The Stags Leap District is the first viticultural area in the U.S. to be approved based on the distinctiveness of its soils," comments Deborah Elliott-Fisk, Associate Professor of Geography at U.C. Davis.

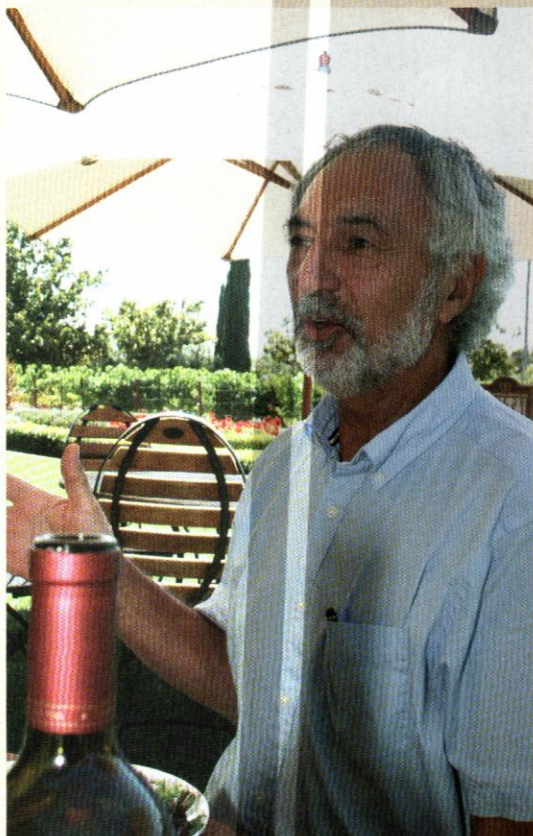
The January 1989 AVA approval by the BATF officially acknowledged what this region's winemakers, land owners and growers had known in their hearts and minds for more than a decade: This land was special, and here Cabernet Sauvignon would show itself as in no other area—not even in the high-end real estate of nearby Oakville, St. Helena and Rutherford.

We applaud these vintners and their faith in a terroir they believe in.

**A stand-alone classic. First released with the 1984 vintage, Shafer Hillside Select has continued to be an iconic Stags Leap District wine. The 2005 (SRP \$215), released in September, is deeply concentrated, with lifted fruit and coffee bean density. Luxurious.**

# The Valley within a Valley

## The Stags Leap District 20th Anniversary Interviews



**Bernard Portet, co-founder and Vice Chairman of Clos du Val, French for "small vineyard in the valley."**

### Bernard Portet • CLOS DU VAL

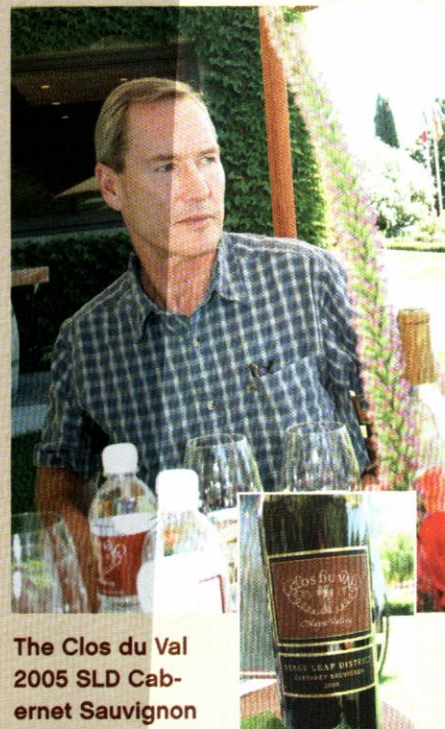
**French-born Bernard Portet** traveled the world for American entrepreneur John Goelet, who in 1970 sent him on a mission to find new territory for growing world-class wines.

"Being born and raised in the Bordeaux area may have tainted my approach," Portet claims; he remembers thinking that the Oakville and Rutherford wines he sampled at the time were too powerful for his taste. However, he knew that Napa had something special.

Driving up and down the Silverado Trail, on the valley's eastern flank, Portet took notice of how the temperature would drop significantly here in the afternoon. "It happened every time I passed that hill," he says, pointing across the road from the Clos du Val winery. "I found an area where the nights were cooler and, therefore, where we could get more ripe elements and freshness in the wines."

In the spring of '72, the vineyards were developed and the first 50 acres put under vine. Portet decided to grow Bordeaux varieties; when Goelet asked him to plant Chardonnay in 1973, Portet refused.

"I came to realize that there was a common thread among the wines from this area: balance, elegance and complexity. While styles of wine change according to the winemaker, there does exist a typicity here: round, full, well-centered, silky and yet long-lasting aging potential."



**The Clos du Val 2005 SLD Cabernet Sauvignon is well-centered.**

"We're not aiming on being the biggest wine," says winemaker John Clews. But the wine is certainly French in style and quite pretty, with hefty fullness as well as a floral arrangement of violets and rose petals."

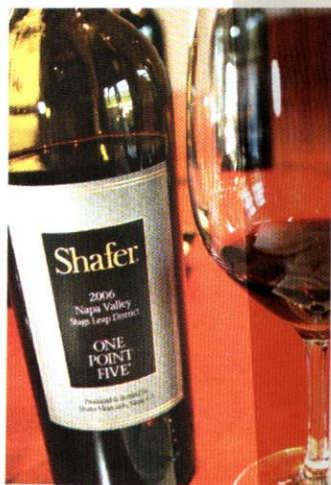
## John & Doug Shafer SHAFER VINEYARDS

**Anthony Dias Blue, now** THE TASTING PANEL's Editor in Chief, was among the first journalists to put pen to paper about the uniqueness of the Stags Leap District. "It was the 1980s," recalls Shafer Vineyards founder John Shafer; "Andy referred to the wines as big yet elegant. Yes—that really sums it up."

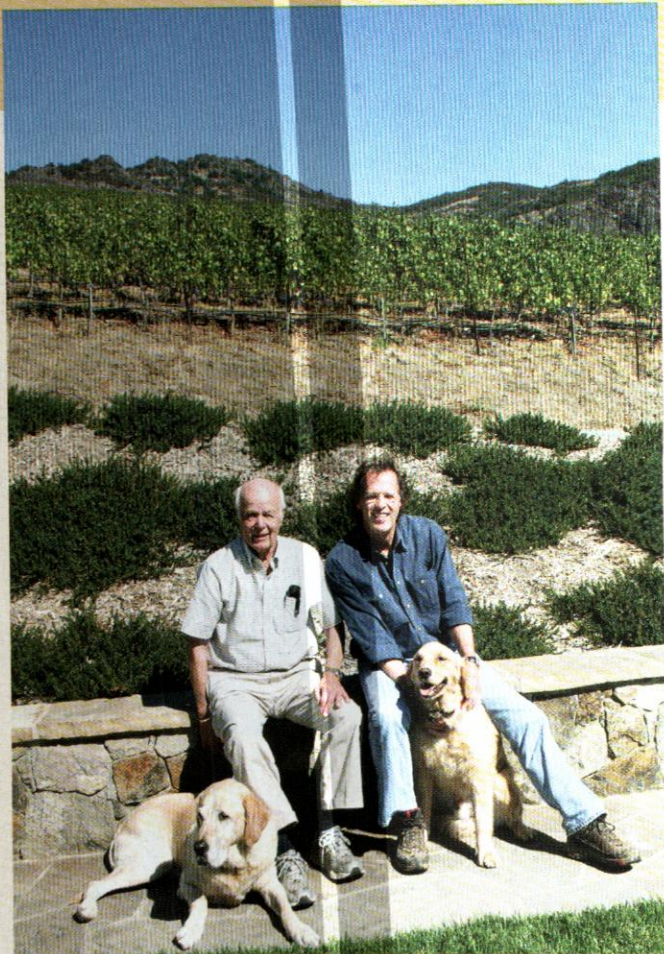
Shafer Hillside Select Cabernet is one of the most respected wines of the district and a continual testament to the region. The steep hillside vineyards surrounding the winery, with their thin, volcanic soils and quick drainage, were developed in the early '70s, after Shafer left a career in book publishing in Chicago and moved his family to Napa Valley. "I decided to change the course of my life before I was 50," he notes, adding, "I was motivated when Bank of America published a profile of the California wine industry as an area of growth for investors. I also wanted to be my own boss. I read the tea leaves and knew it was time to get in. Glad I did it early enough!"

The Shafer's first 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, from the 1978 vintage, was released in 1981 with a label that read "Napa Valley," as Stags Leap District was not yet an AVA. "It was by far the best vintage of the decade, and the grapes were all from here [in the Stags Leap District]." As proof, the wine won every tasting competition it entered.

"I'll never forget the Napa Valley Vintners 1981 Wine Symposium and the official debut of our '78," Shafer reminisces. "Because I was the new kid on the block, all the big shots of winedom were coming by to taste our first release [Mel Dick and Robert Balzer among oth-



**The Shafer 2006 One Point Five SLD Cabernet Sauvignon (\$70) refers to "a generation-and-a-half"; John and Doug Shafer created the name to describe their long-term working relationship. Ripe cranberry fruit and compote, roasted meat and a rounded sa-teen texture speak of the exquisite land.**



**Side by side. Father and son team John and Doug Shafer, with dogs Tucker and Tanner.**

ers]. Commenting on how well-developed and soft this Cabernet was for a wine that hadn't been released yet, many asked the same question: "How much Merlot did you add?"

"None," I would reply and receive a look of frank skepticism. The truth was that I made it with 100 percent Cabernet because that was all I had. But the tasters kept prodding me about the blend.

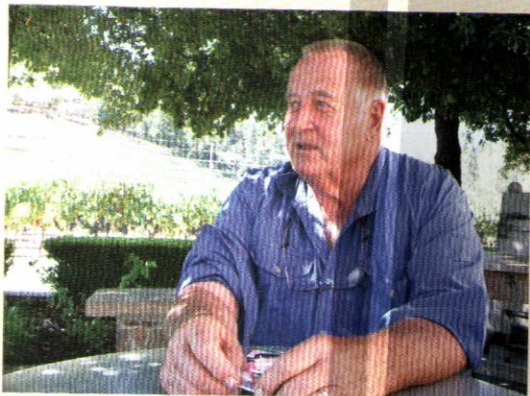
"One of them, a wine buyer named John Barclay of Scott's Seafood in San Francisco, was especially persistent. Returning a second time, he slipped behind my table, lowered his voice and swore to secrecy if I let him in on it: 'How much Merlot did you blend in?'"

"What I realized later was that the buyers were identifying the most prominent attribute of Cabernet Sauvignon grown in the Stags Leap District: the silky, supple, velvety tannins that don't require softening with the addition of Merlot.

"It was that distinct character, so clearly identified with this region, that would prompt me four years later to head up a committee of neighboring growers and vintners in petitioning the government to designate this region the Stags Leap District AVA, now recognized worldwide for its Cabernet Sauvignon."

Soon after, Doug Shafer joined as winemaker, and the father-and-son team has created some of the most sought-after wines in the world.

## Richard Steltzner STELTZNER VINEYARDS



**Richard Steltzner** corrects me as soon as I ask the question. “What was the ‘Eureka!’ moment when you realized Stags Leap District was home to the best wines in the world?” In a gruff tone, he replies, “You mean *distinctive* wines; there are no *best* wines of the world.”

Steltzner sits with us on the patio outside his tasting room, where we sip a Steltzner 2005 Pinotage Rosé with winemaker Tim Dojvin.

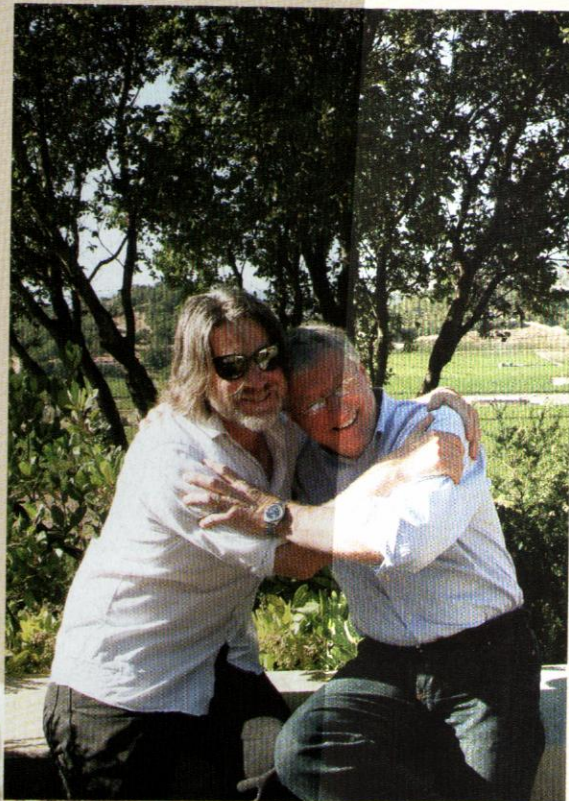
It was legendary enologist André Tchelistcheff who informed Steltzner about “the valley,” and in 1965, Steltzner Vineyards was founded on the Silverado Trail. “It was in the 1970s that we knew we had something different here, a unique climatic bowl, a valley within a valley.”

Steltzner explains that the recurrent afternoon breeze, which appears in the Stags Leap District before any other Napa Valley location, causes trans- evaporation and air movement, creating smaller leaves on the vine and naturally thinning canopies (“before we even knew about canopy management”) planted on deep, well-drained volcanic soils.

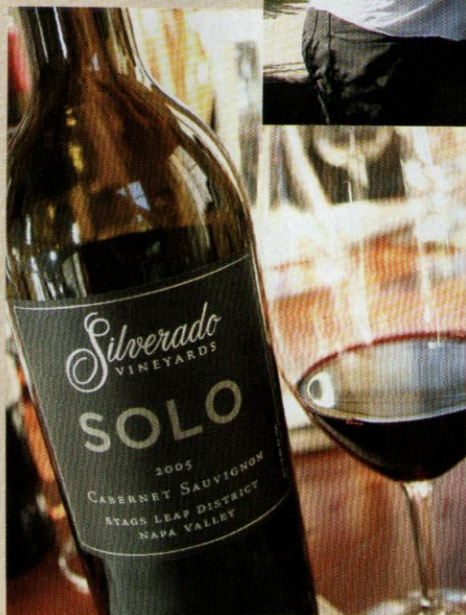
Steltzner was part of the group that petitioned for the AVA. “We wanted to add ‘Stags Leap’ to our labels back in 1977, and we did for three years—until the BATF informed me we couldn’t anymore.” He points to top wine law specialist Richard Mendelson as the person who provided legal services to influence the granting of the AVA. “We started to organize a group—belligerent neighbors—to talk about contour lines and borders. It wasn’t easy. Mendelson helped lead the way.”

## Jon Emmerich and Russ Weis SILVERADO VINEYARDS

“The Cabernet program is what we think about all the time,” states Russ Weis, General Manager of Silverado Vineyards, founded in 1981 by Walt Disney’s daughter Diane and her husband, then Disney CEO Ron Miller. The winery farms six properties, with a third of the total acreage in Stags Leap District. The site surrounding the winery is Silverado’s Stags Leap District Vineyard, where five distinctive clones of Cabernet and three clones of Merlot are grafted to six different rootstocks. These grapes contribute



**Winemaker Jon Emmerich and GM Russ Weis of Silverado Vineyards.**



**Ron and Diane Disney Miller built Silverado in 1981; the Home Ranch, where one of the district’s three original Cabernet plantings from the 1960s took shape, is now the source of Silverado’s Stags Leap District SOLO, their flagship SLD wine.**

to all three of Silverado’s Cabernets, as well as to the Stags Leap District Single-Vineyard Selection.

“Our job as a 30-year-old winery is to give buyers and somms something to think about,” Weis says as we taste the 2005 SOLO Cabernet (\$85), the single-vineyard estate wine off the Home Ranch property. This heady red shows evolved characteristics of grilled meat, lavender, pomegranate, coffee bean and deep stone fruit.

# milestone

## Doug Fletcher • CHIMNEY ROCK & TERLATO FAMILY VINEYARDS

**Doug Fletcher has been** making wines from the Stags Leap District since 1978. As VP of Winemaking for Terlato Wine Group, he reflects back with us as we visit Chimney Rock Winery.

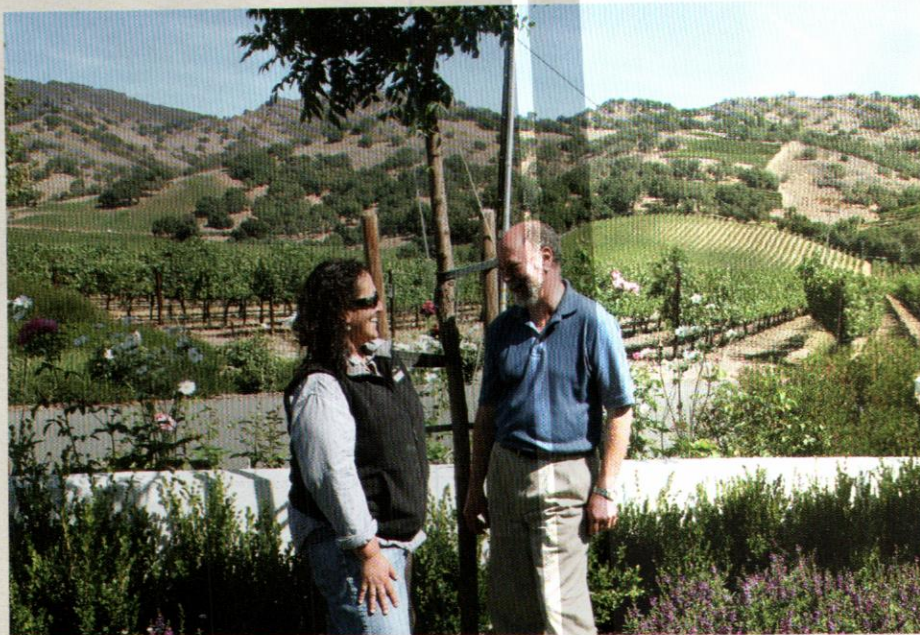
“The fruit just stood out as being different,” Fletcher tells us, explaining that at the time he was working for Martin Ray Winery, where some of the fruit was sourced from the district. “We bought our fruit from Dick Steltzner and a couple of other places. The Stags Leap fruit was always . . . well, *better*, and we didn’t have to manipulate it at all.”

With a combination of bright fruit and soft tannins, Fletcher admits that it was, and still is, difficult to get tannic wines from SLD. “I like to make wines that are enjoyable early on, and the Stags Leap District wines are a good example of wines that taste good now but are also ageable.”

Last year, Fletcher was part of the 30th Anniversary Paris tasting. “Stags Leap District came in ahead of Bordeaux—but so did all five of the California wines entered! That’s vindication,” he laughs.

“What we are doing here [at Chimney Rock] is working with natural raw material, and consumers tend to gravitate to these wines, whether they realize why or not.”

When Tony Terlato, Chairman of Terlato Wine Group

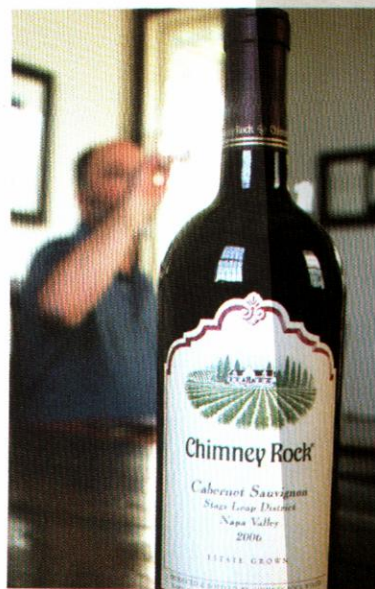


**Winemaker Elizabeth Vianna and Doug Fletcher, VP of Winemaking, Terlato Wine Group, at Chimney Rock, located at the southern end of the Stags Leap District.**

and owner of Chimney Rock, wanted to expand varietal horizons within California to produce a collection of wines under the Terlato Family Vineyards label, he also gravitated to fruit from the Stags Leap District.

“Tony chose appellations to focus on,” explains Fletcher, “such as the Russian River for Pinot Grigio and Pinot Noir, Dry Creek for Syrah and, for Cabernet Sauvignon, Stags Leap District.”

We walk outside, surveying the vines that lead up to the eastern hillsides. Fletcher points to the bare rock outcropping along the cliffs—known as the Stags Leap Palisades—that retains and reflects the afternoon sun, warming nearby vineyards and causing temperatures to rise more quickly than they do in Napa Valley flatlands. While the rocks re-radiate the heat, breezes off the Pacific blow through the small, narrow valley like a funnel, running into barriers of hills and mountains on three sides of this valley within a valley.

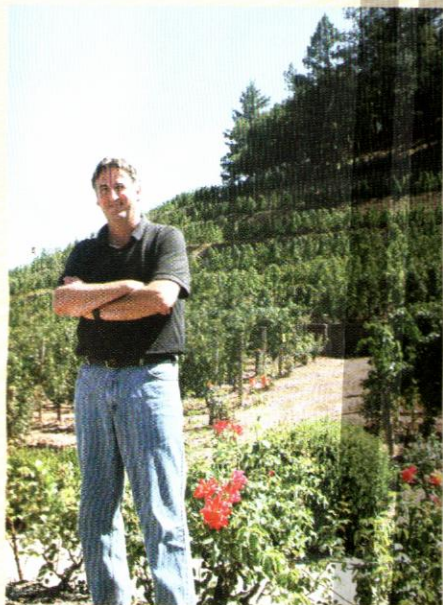


### Chimney Rock and Terlato Family Vineyards SLD Wines

Carving out four acres of vineyard space at Chimney Rock, winemaker Elizabeth Vianna crafts a rosy, lit-brightly-from-within red in the **Terlato Family Vineyards 2005 Stags Leap District Cab**; it reflects young vines with pomegranate spice and silky texture.

Since 1990, Fletcher has brought out the best of Stags Leap District with the **Chimney Rock Elvage Red**; the 2005 is lush and OMG opulent, a winding road with curves of dimension.

The **2006 Chimney Rock SLD Cab** is denser yet. Violets and dark chocolate with gamey savories and a nice weight: power without the edge.



## Michael Beaulac • PINE RIDGE WINERY

**Michael Beaulac is the new** winemaker and General Manager for Pine Ridge, the estate winery founded in 1978. "This is a huge change for me," he says, referring to his eight-year stint as winemaker for St. Supéry in the Napa Valley.

Beaulac, standing tall against the pines along the ridge on the Stags Leap District estate, explains that the winery is "appellation driven," making wines not only off the SLD estate property but also from four other Napa Valley appellations.

"This is my first venture with Stags Leap fruit," he admits. "I came here, not to fix a problem [he replaced Stacy Clark, who was winemaker at Pine Ridge for 25 years], but to shift the focus. I love making wine, but I also enjoy taking control in the vineyards, working closely with our vineyard manager. To put my fingerprint on the property seemed like a good thing to do."

Beaulac's goal with Pine Ridge is to ensure more balance in the vines. "I want to put the vigor back. We have exceptional vineyards, but I think they have been overly stressed. I'm expecting to see more prominent fruit from our Stags Leap District property."

Michael Beaulac is the new winemaker and GM at Pine Ridge Winery.

## Sandy Carlson • TAYLOR FAMILY VINEYARDS

**Taylor Family Vineyards started** as growers in 1976. "My dad [Jerry Taylor] thought it was a great idea to have his kids doing the labor in the vineyards," quips Sandy Carlson, who heads up sales for the small-production winery.

Winemaker Gustavo Brambila, who also has his own wine label and was portrayed in the movie *Bottle Shock*, crafts dense, chewy, fruit-forward wines that are huge but handle-able.

"We love to taste with our customers," says Carlson. "Our Wine Club is all-important. We know all our customers. That's the number one way we sell our wines."



Sandy Carlson and her nine-month-old Rottweiler, Taz, at Taylor Family Vineyards.

## The 2005 Stags Leap District Appellation Collection

Now available through November 30 is the limited-edition 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon Appellation Collection from the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association. In its 13th release, the Appellation Collection is comprised of one bottle from each

of the Association's winery members: Baldacci Family Vineyards, Chimney Rock Winery, Cliff Lede Vineyards, Clos du Val, Hartwell Vineyards, Ilsley Vineyards, Malk Family Vineyards, Pine Ridge, Regusci Winery, Robert Sinskey Vineyards,

Robinson Family Vineyards, Shafer Vineyards, Silverado Vineyards, Stags' Leap Winery, Steltzner Vineyards, Taylor Family Vineyards and Terlato Family Vineyards. SRP is \$1,375 per case. Contact Nancy Bialek at 707-255-1720.