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TRAVEL, CULTURE, & CALIFORNIA
LIFESTYLE

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HOW TO REALLY EXPERIENCE NAPA VALLEY



When visiting Napa Valley for the first or fifteenth time, the number of wineries and, quite frankly, the prices can be overwhelming. How to know which Napa wineries are the best to visit? Which ones are especially worth the \$30-50+ tasting fee?

One way to get the most out of an experience in Napa Valley is to focus on one area and, better yet, attend a special event that gives you exclusive access to the wineries. I recently had the opportunity to attend Stags Leap Vineyard to Vintner(<https://www.stagsleapdistrict.com/v2v.php>) and would highly recommend it for anyone who wants to know Napa Valley better.



The Stags Leap District is located in eastern Napa Valley along the southern portion of the Silverado Trail. It's best known for cabernet sauvignon; in fact, the Stags Leap Winegrowers' Association(<https://www.stagsleapdistrict.com/>) calls itself "Napa's neighborhood for world-class Cabernet." It includes 17 wineries in the Stags Leap AVA: Baldacci Family Vineyards, Chimney Rock Winery, Cliff Lede Vineyards, Clos Du Val, Ilsley Vineyards,

Lindstrom Wines, Malk Family Vineyards, Odette Estate Winery, Pine Ridge Vineyards, Quixote Winery, Regusci Winery, Shafer Vineyards, Silverado Vineyards, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Stags' Leap Winery, Steltzner Vineyards, and Taylor Family Vineyards.



The history of the Stags Leap District goes back to the mid-19th century when the Silverado Trail was just a quiet horse path. The first winery, Occidental, was built here in 1878 (now the current home of Regusci Winery), and winemaking developed here until phylloxera and Prohibition took their toll on the Napa Valley wine country. But in 1961, the region's first Cabernet vineyards were planted here—at a time when there were only about 800 acres of Cabernet in the whole United States! Later, in 1976, the Stags Leap District became instantly famous when, at a now infamous blind tasting held in Paris, nine French judges awarded first place to the 1973 Stags Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon.

The Stags Leap Vineyard to Vintner event takes place over a weekend in April. We opted for the winery open houses on Saturday. Our first stop of the day was an early one, at 9:00 a.m. for a “Vineyard Walk and Talk” called “Stories from the Frontline” at Regusci Winery:

Regusci Winery



The family of Regusci Winery offered us coffee & pastries before heading into the vineyards where they recounted stories from the night the Napa fires came within feet of their property. As Jim

Regusci walked us around the property, he told stories of how, with the help of family and the community, they were able to fight off the fires and eventually bounce back.



Jim's wife also took us on a mini tour of her spectacular garden (she holds a Master's degree in horticulture) and showed us the produce stand that is always available for the vineyard workers and guests.

Learn more about Regusci Winery
[here\(https://www.regusciwinery.com/\)](https://www.regusciwinery.com/).



Tip: Make Clos du Val your first stop once the open houses begin at 10:00. They serve delicious breakfast crepes that would make a nice introduction to the day before the richer foods served at the other locations.

We didn't really want to leave Regusci Winery, but we had so many

more places to explore! We decided to try a couple of places located a bit off the beaten path, and I'm so glad we did! Just down the Silverado Trail, we came to the sign for Quixote and Stags Leap Winery and took a small road that leads into the hills. As we approached Quixote, we drove through a tunnel of walnut trees that leads to the unmistakable architecture of Quixote Winery.

Quixote Winery



Quixote is a small boutique winery set in the hills off of the Silverado Trail. What struck me first about the winery is the unique architecture. It took me a couple of minutes to place it but then remembered the work of Hundertwasser(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedensreich_Hundertwasser) that I saw during my time in Europe and my art history undergraduate studies. The rounded shapes, bright colors, soft geometric patterns and quirky details are unmistakable. (And this is his only design in the United States!).



But the winery also stood out for its small production Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah — a favorite of us both! (I'm trying it from the barrel below.) Plus, the vineyards are organically farmed.



As if the location, architecture, wine and organic farming weren't enough, Quixote also ended up being my favorite stop of the day because of the food pairings that were offered: veggie tapenade on pesto crostini, arancini with pea puree, Moroccan chicken with lemon tahini sauce, Asian marinated short ribs with micro greens, and a cheese platter that was hard to keep away from.

Learn more about Quixote Winery
[here](http://www.quixotewinery.com/)(<http://www.quixotewinery.com/>).



Stags' Leap Winery



One of the area's historic wineries, Stags' Leap Winery welcomes visitors for an intimate view of the winery for this event. After

eating wood-fired pizza and strolling their beautiful gardens, we were invited to walk around the inside of the 1891 manor house, including the underground speakeasy.





This winery also served as a reminder of how much we love the people of Napa Valley. Everyone was welcoming and friendly and happy to share the property and classic Stags' Leap wines with us.

Learn more about Stags' Leap Winery

[here\(https://www.stagsleap.com\)](https://www.stagsleap.com).



Pine Ridge Vineyards



I don't have as many photos of our time at Pine Ridge because the visit takes place inside the caves (which we loved!). Here we were treated to a comparison tasting of three of their Cabernet Sauvignons while listening to live music and snacking on small bites including delicious pork and cinnamon empanadas. The cave tasting room is cozy and beautifully decorated with lights and Chihuly glass.

Barrel tastings and a cave tour were also available, but we were beginning to run out of time and decided to skip that portion.

If you visit Pine Ridge, tastings of five current wines are available daily for \$45. Learn more about Pine Ridge Winery [here](https://www.pineridgevineyards.com)(<https://www.pineridgevineyards.com>).

Chimney Rock



Chimney Rock and Clos du Val, the last two stops of our day, are located on the valley floor on the east side of the Silverado Trail. What stood out to us about Chimney Rock was the relaxing outdoor space. With a jazz trio playing, fountain bubbling, and comfy outdoor chairs to relax into, we happily soaked up the

atmosphere and honestly wanted to stay the rest of the afternoon.



Tastings at Chimney Rock normally start at \$50. Learn more about Chimney Rock [here](http://www.chimneyrock.com/)(<http://www.chimneyrock.com/>).

Clos du Val

When Clos du Val first appeared on the wine scene in Napa Valley, they started with a bang. The legendary debut 1972 Cabernet Sauvignon was one of only six California Cabernets selected for the Judgment of Paris Tasting in 1976. For the Vineyard to Vintner event, the winery chose to honor their Cabernet tradition by offering tastings of three Cabs, each about ten years apart.



If you visit, I recommend relaxing under the canopy of the old olive trees, but be sure to check out how the winery blends the old with the new with the contemporary design of the indoor tasting room. And a new visitor center is opening later this year with a huge indoor-outdoor space in front of the winery.

Tastings start at \$35. Learn more about Clos du Val [here\(https://www.closduval.com/\)](https://www.closduval.com/).

My takeaway from the day was that 1) it's best to plan to spend the entire day and perhaps a night there to get the most out of the open houses and not feel rushed, and 2) the cost of the Vineyard to Vintner event is really a great deal when you consider all the wine and food that's included. The cost of two tastings plus lunch is easily the same as the \$195 Saturday event pass, but with this event, you not only try special wines (library wines, barrel tastings, etc.), you also get food pairings and an intimate peek behind the scenes at these incredible wineries. Plus, focusing on just one area, especially one that's as special as the Stags Leap District, means

that you can leave with a good understanding of what makes that particular area unique.

Tickets for the April 2019 Stags Leap Vineyard to Vintner go on sale next February. You can find more information about the event, including the Friday dinners and Sunday lunch, at www.stagsleapdistrict.com/V2V(<http://www.stagsleapdistrict.com/V2V>).

Our visit was complimentary. Thank you to Stags Leap District for the invitation!

What I wore to Napa Valley on a cool spring day:



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