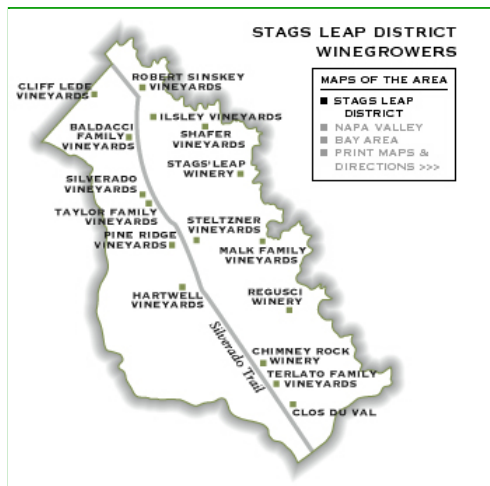


## NOTES FROM THE WINE CELLAR

### EXPRESSIONISM AND STAGS LEAP

By Brian Freedman



For all of their obvious differences in grape varieties planted, winemaking styles, terroirs, climates, and the rest, the great wine regions of the world have a number of important things in common. The best are home to wines that embody a predictable, consistent expression--a sense of place--year after year. They have a track record of producing wines that, even in lesser vintages, are generally still quite good. And their internal divisions, based on years of viticultural and winemaking experience, accurately embody the notion that even seemingly minute differences in the natural environment can leave a significant mark on

the wines that are produced there.

Burgundy is the classic example, whose small villages and estates demonstrate the full range of expression of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. More appropriate, however, is Bordeaux. The region itself, and the appellations within it, all leave imprints on the fruit that you can, more often than not, clearly taste in the juice in the glass.

Napa Valley and its constituent AVAs fit beautifully into that impressive fraternity. Indeed, it's a testament to how far Napa has come in terms of both its own internal development as well as how consumers--at least the most ardent ones--perceive it that its best-regarded AVAs have gained as much traction as they have. Happily, that traction is wholly justified: from Howell Mountain to Oakville, from Rutherford to Stags Leap District and more, Napa Valley is home to some of the most distinct, recognizable Cabernets on the planet. The fact that they are so clearly differentiated is evidence of the potential--and, indeed, accomplishment--of the appellations and of the grape-growers and winemakers themselves.

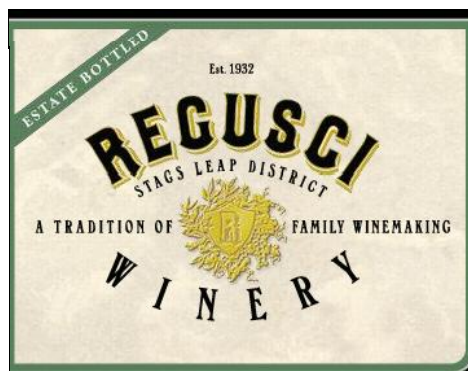
The last of the above-noted AVAs, Stags Leap District, is home to some of the most drinkable and readily expressive Cabernets in Napa. Jim Regusci, who helms the eponymous **Regusci Winery** and also grows grapes in nine other appellations, said, "Our Stags Leap fruit is softer, more supple. It's the type of wine that's universal all the way through--there's a common thread through them all. You can try these wines," he continued, "and they're . . . more approachable and complex when younger. . . . And we're fortunate that they'll [also] hold long enough."

One of the reasons for the consistency of the wines coming out of Stags Leap District is the size of the AVA, a compact area approximately one mile wide and three miles long. As a result, the relatively close proximity of vineyards leads to an expression of fruit that's fairly constant (though there are, of course, obvious differences from producer to producer, and vineyard to vineyard, each year). The soils, as well as the District's often-noted cooling winds, are largely responsible for the expressivity of the wines. According to the Stags Leap District web site, "There is a great diversity of soils within the Stags Leap District but two main types predominate. Soils on the eastern elevation are the result of volcanic eruptions that took place millions of years ago, as well as the slow

erosion of the arid Vaca Mountains. In the lowland area," it continues, "where a much broader Napa River once ran, old river sediments have created a remarkable blend of loams with a clay-like substructure. These gravelly soils, and those of the hillsides, are coarser and retain less water than most resulting in low-vigor vines that yield fruit of great intensity and flavor."

In practical terms that translates to "a combination of real elegance and power at the same time," said Scott Turnbull, Sommelier at The Fountain Restaurant at The Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia. "The wines, I find, are almost like coiled springs in their youth, and then they just really come into their own after a few years of aging. You can just feel the energy and a true sense of place, which is rather the whole point of [identifying an] AVA in the first place."

That intensity of flavor, as well as the wines' early approachability and excellent aging potential, are on clear display in the much-lauded 2005 vintage. In general, I find the wines to possess beautifully expressive dark berry and cherry fruits, terroir-driven notes of minerality, the inimitable hints of mint, eucalyptus, and chocolate that so often characterize the best of Napa Valley, and the velvety texture that Jim Regusci alluded to.





Much of that success, in fact, can be traced back to 2004. Mr. Regusci noted that the health of the vines at the end of 2004, as they entered their dormancy, set the stage for a successful 2005. And a solid growing season built well on that foundation. Elias Fernandez, **Shafer Vineyards'** winemaker, noted in a press release that "a perfect budbreak led to a long summer of warm, dry days and chilly evenings, ideal conditions that allowed us to leave the fruit on the vine until it achieved true physiological ripeness."

That ripeness, and the sense of structure underlying it, manifest themselves in wines that are as complex and promising as any I've tasted in a long time. The Regusci, for example, led off with a deep well of blackberries and black raspberries edged with a roasted-coffee aroma and something that vaguely reminded me of yerba maté. Dark cherry and more blackberry--like a perfect summer-berry cobbler filling--exploded on the palate, as well as cigar tobacco, lead pencil, and spearmint. I'd buy a case and follow it for the next 7 - 10 years and beyond.

Showing a bit younger but still full of promise is the **Robinson Family Vineyards** bottling, its notes of fig and chocolate still working to integrate with the oakier end of things. Still, it's ripe, balanced, and exuberant, the fruit countered by enough acid and mineral to indicate a

delicious maturity. Hints of sandalwood on the nose and oolong tea on the palate nod in the direction of an exoticism that I can't wait to see develop.

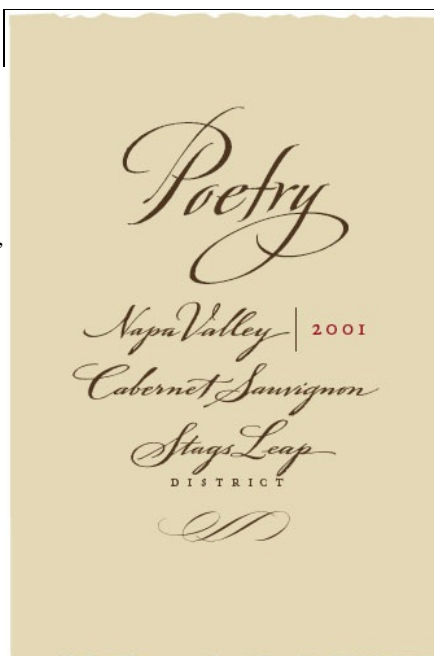
**Malk Family Vineyards'** 2005 offering leans more toward ripe strawberries on the nose and delicious red plum and dark cherry on the palate, with colorado-wrapper cigar and a touch of black pepper lending more complexity. This one still needs some time for all the moving parts to come together, but once they do, it'll be a remarkable wine.

On the higher-toned end of things is the **Cliff Lede "Poetry,"** a high-octane bottling that clocks in at more than 15% alcohol. For all the wine's power and ripe cherry fruit, though, it finds its clearest and most dramatic expression in more aromatic notes of roasted fennel and licorice. Hints of black plums, wild-berry compote, sweet rubber, grilled graphite, and vanilla round it all out.

The Shafer "One Point Five" leans in the direction of exoticism, too, but with more restraint and subtlety. There's mint, star anise, sandalwood, cedar, grilled sage, and something that reminds me of slate on the nose. All this leads to ripe berries and cherries on the palate, as well as gorgeous tobacco flavors. For all its ripeness and expressivity, however, this is a wine very much tied to its terroir, and maintains an exceptional sense of elegance.

The **Robert Sinskey Vineyards "SLD,"** despite its almost hearty nose of hot clay, chocolate truffle, and ripe blackberries, is one of the brighter wines I tasted. The palate, bursting with berry fruit (blackberry, boysenberry) and fig confiture, is complicated perfectly with mouthwatering acidity, cigar tobacco, eucalyptus, and licorice.

Last--but certainly among my favorites--is the **Taylor Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon.** Ripe strawberries and cherries jump from the glass, as do chocolate, black pepper, graphite, asphalt, a touch of sage, bay leaf, and licorice, all of it wrapped up in something almost creamy. This is a wine with grip, as well as perfectly balanced and surprisingly bright acidity; it has the stuffing--and the long finish--to evolve for a decade or more. The mid-palate is explosive, with ripe, concentrated blackberries, black raspberries, and cherries. The finish comes in waves, first showing ripe fruit, then spice, then cedar and vanilla. All these wines, really, offer dramatic testament to the quality of the 2005 vintage in Stags Leap District. That year is, as The Fountain's Scott Turnbull said, "Like an ace up your sleeve. It's one of those wines you can just feel really confident with." He is, of course, talking specifically about this guests' response to them at The Four Seasons, but it applies to retail consumers, too. These wines are, as is the case with great ones from all over the world, both expressive of the unique conditions of a specific excellent vintage and firmly rooted in their special little part of the earth. In that regard, they easily fit into the pantheon of global classics, whether they're from France, Italy, or, in this case, a slender one-mile-by-three-mile sliver of the Napa Valley.



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