

Stags Leap District - A Valley Within The Valley

by Tom Flippen

At a blind tasting in Paris in 1976, with an all-French panel of judges and featuring some of France's finest, voted best Cabernet Sauvignon was a 1973 bottling from a winery in an undesignated area of the Napa Valley.

When another winery from that same undesignated area won a second competition in Paris ten years later, the American Viticulture Association took notice, and in 1989 the Stags Leap District was officially designated an American Viticulture Area.

On the east side of Napa valley, opposite Highway 29 and bisected by the Silverado Trail, the Stags Leap District is barely a mile wide and just under three miles long. It is a valley within the Napa Valley, bordered by the Vaca Mountains and, most prominently, the Stags Leap Paliades after which the District is named.

Although the first winery was established there in 1878, Cabernet Sauvignon was not planted until 1961, contrary to conventional wisdom about the District's soil and climate, and when there were a grand total of 800 acres of CabSauv in the entire United States. (Fast forward: some 34,000 acres in the U.S. today, with 9,800 in the Napa Valley).

Limited offerings of Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc are available at some Stags Leap District



Stags Leap District photos by Steven Rothfield

wineries, but it's really about the Cabs. Individual renderings elicit different aspects of the intense flavors from fruit produced by low-yield vines grown in the coarse, rocky soils that are one of the District's distinctions. Climate of course helps: morning fog from the San Pablo Bay stops almost literally at the Silverado Trail sign that marks the District's southern boundary, while throughout the day sunlight reflects off the surrounding palisades for longer doses of warmth.

There are now 18 wineries in the Stags Leap District. Several are either not open to the public or by appointment only – but, all

of them (yes, all!) can be accessed over one weekend in May each year during the Stags Leap Winegrowers Association V2V (Vineyard to Vintner) open house. For example, the Lindstrom Winery is open just those two days (and their '08 Cab gets 94 points from Robert Parker). It's up a steep hill by shuttle for a spectacular view of a total 204 acres, only four of which are planted because of the terrain. Other treats during the V2V weekend include a chance to chat with Bob Hartwell at his namesake winery (he's the co-inventor of Velcro); with Richard Steltzner in caves at his eponymous winery - and note the framed 1987 article where he's states he's "about to break even." Then consider his '05 Cabernet in a 40th anniversary bottle signed by him; and partaking of a BBQ personally prepared before your very eyes by Tom Baldacci at his winery. Goes great with his Four Sons Cabernet (the next bottling will be called "Fraternity" as three sons are now college-aged). Abundanza!

The Stags Leap District offers a visual appeal that complements the unique taste experiences at the small number of wineries located there. Visiting the area, and any of the wineries, addresses all senses, and will not disappoint any.

A list of all wineries in the District is available at the Stags Leap Winegrowers Association website, www.stagsleapdistrict.com.

