



Wine Muse – How a Wall Street Fugitive Inspires the World of Wine

Stags Leap District: A Legend in Its Own Time

winemuse

May 6, 2014

Napa Valley, Stags Leap



T.L. Grigsby built the three story, gravity-fed Occidental Winery here ca. 1878 (now Regusci Winery).

All photos by A. Hanami

There was a great exhibit at [SFMOMA](#) three years ago “[How](#)

[Wine Became Modern](#)” that helped me realize the importance of [Stags Leap District](#), not only in elevating the reputation of Napa Valley wines, but in launching the entire world of wine into a brand new era. The exhibit traced the birth of today’s vibrant wine industry of wine criticism, tourism, marketing, design and innovating winegrowing, to a single place and time, the infamous 1976 Paris tasting. It was a blind tasting where esteemed French wine judges chose the 1973 [Stags Leap Wine Cellars S.L.V.](#) over Bordeaux *Premiers Crus Classes* Chateaux Haut-Brion and Mouton-Rothschild, a decision that would inspire legions of Americans to pursue excellence in the wine industry in new and exciting ways.



Stags Leap District 25th Anniversary Perspective at Shafer Vineyards. From left, Michael Beaulac, Elizabeth Vianna, John Shafer, Richard Mendelson, Kelli White, Richard Steltzner, John Conover, Kirk Grace

At a Stags Leap District tasting on April 26 commemorating its 25th anniversary as a formal appellation, pioneers as well as the new generation shared their perspectives on the evolution of the appellation since the 1970s. Constantly innovating, constantly adapting, vintners continue to move

the region forward with but one goal: to preserve the legend of Stags Leap.

The Magic of Stags Leap Wines

Before he began making his own wines in the 1970s, John Shafer, founder of [Shafer Vineyards](#), often socialized with Nathan Fay, a grower in what is now the Stags Leap District. He remembered distinctly the first time he tried Fay's homemade wine, a 1968 Cabernet Sauvignon, which he said "just blew me away." It would turn out that another newcomer Warren Winiarski would also taste that same wine, compelling him to swiftly purchase vineyards right next to Fay's – subsequently named Stag's Leap Vineyard or S.L.V. – in 1970. Being the first Cabernet vineyard planted in Stags Leap, Fay's wine set the benchmark for Cabernet, and quality, in the district.



The dramatic cliffs of the eastern Palisades.

What sets the wine apart is the intensity of fruit with signature freshness. The combination of daytime heat reflected off the rocky eastern Palisades and well-drained

soils with just the right amount of organic matter results in a concentration of fruit. Stags Leap was in fact the first AVA to be defined by its distinctive volcanic and alluvial soils rather than on natural boundaries such as rivers and creeks, according to pioneer Richard Steltzner, who argued the case as a member of the original AVA petitioning committee along with John Shafer.



Stags Leap valley looking north with Palisades rising in the east (from Regusci Winery)

At the same time, the wines are balanced with fresh acidity stemming from the cool afternoon breezes that funnel into this narrow “valley within a valley”, helping to moderate the extreme diurnal temperature swings that can be seen in some parts of the valley floor proper.

Evolution of Farming and Wine Style

In the early days, said John Shafer and Richard Steltzner, they used vigorous but drought-resistant rootstocks such as St. George and AXR #1 which, together with low planting density allowed them to dry-farm. Vines were trellised in a “California Sprawl”, creating a canopy of shade over the grapes.

But big changes arrived in the mid-1980s when AXR #1 succumbed to Phylloxera followed by widespread replanting of vineyards throughout Napa Valley. Low-vigor rootstocks were the rage, as was tighter spacing and neat, upright panels of shoots (VSP) which

exposed clusters and maximized sun penetration. Light was good, concentration great. Problem was, according to Kirk Grace, Director of Viticulture at [Stag's Leap Wine Cellars](#), it sometimes led to too much concentration, high brix, and higher alcohol wines.

Today, Grace said, they're offsetting some of those trends by changing rootstocks and modifying trellising. He said VSP is still necessary for space management but they've added wide cross-arms to create a bit more shade to moderate heat and promote air movement.

The Future of Stags Leap



Representing the new generation of winemakers in Stags Leap, Jeff Owens of Odette Estate, in front of the new winery

John Conover, Managing Director of Stags Leap's newest winery [Odette Estate](#), gave his perspective on the district's promising future based on their own acquisition process. Part of the Plumpjack Group which owns Plumpjack in Oakville and CADE on

Howell Mountain, they literally could have acquired property anywhere in the Napa Valley and made great Cabernet. But they were drawn by the wines' distinctiveness and the district's small size, the smallest AVA by acreage in fact, in the Napa Valley. With only about 20 vintners in the AVA and little room for expansion, its quality and reputation could more easily be preserved.

Odette's long-term commitment to the district is shown in the creation of an all-green estate with organically farmed vineyards and a new LEED Gold winery. They follow the leadership of other growers in the district like Shafer who converted to sustainable farming in the late 1980s and in 2004 became the first winery in the U.S. to run on 100% solar power.

Odette's recent completion of a ca. 775,000 gallon underground cistern is one way the district is addressing the scarce resource of water in this drought-prone region, as is the change to more drought-tolerant rootstocks according to Grace.

A Legend in Its Own Time



Stags Leap District 25th anniversary tasting
Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon spanning 35 years.

At the end of the day, what makes the legend are the wines and how they age. I found the 1977 Cask 23 Cabernet Sauvignon from [Stag's Leap Wine Cellars](#) to be hauntingly beautiful with a complex, earthy nose thick with dried roses, black fruits, cocoa and warm spices – the palate savory yet still lively with fruit, freshness and silky structure.

As it did for those French judges decades ago, this Stags Leap wine reminded me of a fine Bordeaux...

For more information on [Stags Leap District](#), visit their website at www.stagsleapdistrict.com.

Related Posts

[Stag's Leap Wine Cellars – the alchemy of fire and water](#)

[New SFMOMA exhibit “How Wine Became](#)

Modern” begins in the Napa Valley
