



Wine, Words & Videotape

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Fine Wine Review site

14 Napa Valley: Stag's Leap District
WRITTEN BY JEREMY. POSTED IN CALIFORNIA
SEP



Shafer Vineyards in Stag's Leap District

Out of all the Napa Valley's individual viticultural areas, Stag's Leap District, off the magical Silverado Trail, is surely the best known. The area, pioneered in the 1960s by Nathan Fay, the first to plant Cabernet in the district, shot to fame in the now legendary Paris blind tasting in 1976. The quality of fruit from Fay's vineyard attracted Warren Winiarski to establish Stag's Leap Wine Cellars on adjacent land beneath the rocky promontories known as Stag's Leap in 1970. It was his 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon that French judges placed ahead of Mouton, Haut-Brion, Montrose and Léoville-Las-Cases et al in that tasting. Not bad for wine from vines then less than four years old, only in their second harvest. The importance of the Paris tasting can't be overstated. It was an immediate statement that France didn't have an exclusive right to the best terroir and emphasized that there were exciting vineyard sites the world over yet to be discovered. Clearly the district around Stag's Leap was one of them.

Today the area is home to some twenty different wineries. Geographically the district is one of the smallest in the Napa Valley, covering some 2700 acres [1100ha] of which only 1300 [530ha] or so are planted. The aspect ranges from valley floor to 500 feet [155m] and the soils are volcanic with clay like loams at the lower levels. They suit Cabernet Sauvignon especially and it represents over 80% of the vines planted in the area. If there's a style, it is power with real finesse. At their best they define the 'iron fist in the velvet glove' idiom. The Napa Valley Vintners' summer tasting in London showed mini-verticals from three leading estates in Stag's Leap District: Chimney Rock Winery, Pine Ridge Vineyards and Shafer Vineyards. It provided a fascinating insight into the development of the top wines in this exclusive appellation today.



The vineyards at Chimney Rock

It was the first time that I'd had a chance to taste the wines of Chimney Rock Winery. This estate was established in the early 1980s by a South African couple Hack and Stella Wilson and subsequently purchased by the Terlato family in 2004. The vineyard, now divided into 28 distinct blocs, has been completely replanted since the phylloxera problems of the 1990s and they practice vineyard techniques aimed at encouraging natural balance in the vine, without resorting to excessive crop thinning. Elizabeth Vianna, winemaker here since 2005, took us through their 2008, 2005 and 2002 vintages. Her philosophy is on non-intervention in the cellar. Overall I found these to be balanced wines with emphasis on creamy, blackcurrant fruit characters. The 2002 was fully mature and open, the 2005 a little leaner than its peers, reflecting the cooler [for Napa] year. For me the pick was the 2008. This is enjoyable already, and has wonderful fruit tones, excellent depth and balancing grip.

Chimney Rock Winery, 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon, Stag's Leap District

Deep and dense looking; some chalk, lots of blackcurrant and blackberry tones; attractive and nice freshness here and lift; deep and seductive; creamy and attractive; lots of density and creamy blackcurrant fruit with a little black pepper spice. Lots of attractive bite to the palate. Like this wine a lot, nice ripe fruit but there is balancing life and grip. Very good indeed. Eighteen months in 50% new French oak, 91% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Merlot, 1% Petit Verdot, 14.2% alc. 92+/100 Drink now to 2025

Chimney Rock Winery, 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon, Stag's Leap District

Deep and dense looking; creamy note; blackcurrants and wine gums; feels quite precise; chewy palate, feels a little leaner [by comparison] in the middle. Slightly pinched on the finish. 2005 was described as a cooler year with restraint. Comes through in the wine. May yet fill out. 14.2% alc. 88+/100 Drink now to 2020

Chimney Rock Winery, 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon, Stag's Leap District

Deep and dense; fresh still, spicy herbal tones; nice blackcurrant fruit and holding together very well; little fruit lozenge notes some spice; easy and open on the palate; glossy; mature and maybe a lacking a bit of acid but very open and attractive nevertheless. 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot 14.2% alc. 90/100 Drink now to 2015



Pine Ridge Vineyards

The second mini-vertical was presented by Michael Beulac, winemaker at Pine Ridge Vineyards. This property celebrates its 35th anniversary this year, being established in 1978 by Gary Andrus. The estate has vineyards not only in the Stag's Leap District AVA, but also in Rutherford, Oakville, Carneros and Howell Mountain. I'm a great fan of their Chenin-Viognier blend – all candy, pear drops and fresh cut grass – it is wonderfully refreshing. The Stag's Leap District Cabernet blends overall were a pretty homogeneous set of wines, despite vintage variation and also the reduction in the use of new oak [down from 85% in 2002 to 55% in 2008]. Michael Beulac is a fan of hot and quick ferments preceded by couple of days cold soak. The wines are run off to tank to finish the last degree or so of sugar in barrel. I felt the 2008 looked very promising. Frost reduced the crop here to a degree and the berries were unusually small. It's great to drink now but I suspect it will age well. The 2002 is a wonderful wine with plenty of life left. As with Chimney Rock, the 2005 Pine Ridge Stag's Leap District felt more austere on the palate and a bit pinched by comparison with the others. It was a difficult vintage according to Beulac and high yields led to problems with tank space.

Pine Ridge Vineyards, 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon, Stag's Leap District

Deep and saturated look; nice layers to the nose; creamy blackcurrant fruit; some cassis; earth; lush; very ripe, forward and lush on the palate too; big, ripe and sweet. 91% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Petit Verdot, 1% Merlot, 55% French new oak 14.7% alc. 92+/100 Drink now-2020

Pine Ridge Vineyards, 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon, Stag's Leap District

Deep looking; some lift; spice and cream; more delineated than 2002; some spice & menthol tones; feels a little leaner, less lush than '08; some austerity and feels a little pinched by comparison. Some chew on the finish. 89% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Petit Verdot, 5% Merlot, 75% new French oak 14.1% alc. 88+/100 Drink now-2017

Pine Ridge Vineyards, 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon, Stag's Leap District

Deep looking; spicy blackcurrant tones on the nose; nice and lush; full and still fresh; like the purity here; nicely done on the palate with some sap and chew. This works very well. 86% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Petit Verdot, 5% Malbec and 3% Cabernet Franc, 85% new French oak, 14.7% alc. 93+/100 Drink now to 2017



Doug Shafer

The final Stag's Leap District vertical was presented by Doug Shafer of Shafer Vineyards and consisted of the same set of vintages [2002, 2005 & 2008] of their Hillside Select Cabernet – a mouthwatering prospect. The wines didn't disappoint and neither did Shafer with his wit and matinee idol good looks. Doug took over winemaking in 1983 from his father John, who first established the property in 1972 after leaving behind a publishing career in Chicago. The rest, as they say, is history. Shafer has become one of Napa's leading producers of Cabernet [they also do a pretty good job with Merlot and Chardonnay]. Yes they like to push the ripeness

here. The wines are rich and full and take no prisoners. Hillside Select, which Doug Shafer described as their 'pride and joy', usually weighs in at around fifteen degrees alcohol but still the wines retain a sense of balance and drinkability.

This is explained partly by the terroir. The Hillside Select grapes are sourced from a 54 acre [21ha] hillside vineyard shaped around an amphitheatre like block of rock which gives a variety of exposures. This, along with cooling afternoon breezes, allows the grapes to retain acidity, while thin soils encourage the development of small berries and thick skins. With only 2400 cases produced each year, Hillside Select is priced on release well above the \$200 mark a bottle. Overall the Hillside Select wines were a delicious, powerful and complex set of wines. 2008 looks very good indeed, with lots of layers and complexity. The 2005 is fleshy and flashy and clearly too much of a good thing. It must be considered a real success in a tricky vintage. The 2002 is dense and powerful and potentially immortal. The only problem I can see is being able to afford the wines. With recent Robert Parker perfect scores for the 2001, 2002 and 2003 vintages, back catalogue prices presumably have only headed one way.

Shafer, 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon, Hillside Select, Stag's Leap District

Deep and saturated look; creamy blackcurrant tones on the nose; some new oak; nice density and layers to the nose; fruit pastel notes; nice grip from tannin and extract; somehow has freshness too; feels pretty big but works. Very nice texture on the palate if a fraction warm on the finish which suggests the alcohol [15.5%] but somehow there is still freshness. 94+/100 Drink Now-2025

Shafer, 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon, Hillside Select, Stag's Leap District

Deep and saturated look; very lush and open; wonderful blackcurrant and cassis tones; real saturation and black fruit tones; still not heavy though; deep and lush on the palate; lots of flesh; more open than '02 already. Maybe almost too much of a good thing – but that's hardly a criticism. Excellent length at the end. 95+/100 Drink now-2020

Shafer, 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon, Hillside Select, Stag's Leap District

Deep and saturated look; blackcurrants; cassis; still pretty dense; very nice density – wow this wine still feels like it has a long way to go; layers to the nose; lots of extract and material on the palate; still pretty tight with tannin to resolve. Long lived. Really good density. Can be drunk now if decanted in advance but deserves a few more years and most likely will prove immortal. Terrific stuff. 97+/100 Drink now-2030+

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