

Rot. by Adam Lechmere

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'All of a sudden it connected': Stags Leap District celebrates its quarter century

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Stags Leap District was established as an [American Viticultural Area](#) (AVA) in 1989, and its annual Vineyard to Vintner event, when the region's 20-odd wineries throw open their doors to their loyal public, was chosen to mark its quarter-century. Over the course of a blazing weekend at the end of April, gleaming black limos and minibuses (many with gold hubcaps) swept up and down the three-mile stretch of the Silverado trail that neatly bisects the AVA, carrying Stags Leap enthusiasts from a dozen different states. Texas plates were much in evidence.

The weekend celebrations were kicked off by a seminar on the lawn at Shafer, compered by AVA lawyer **Richard Mendelson**, and **Kelli White**, the chief sommelier at [Press](#) in St Helena. On the panel, **Michael Beaulac** of Pine Ridge, **Elizabeth Vianna** of Chimney Rock, **John Shafer**, **Dick Steltzner**, **John Conover** of Plumpjack (the owners of Odette, the latest addition to the district), and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars vineyard manager **Kirk Grace** talked us through a vertical of vintages, starting with the 1977 Cask 23 (notes below). Mendelson teased out Shafer's and Steltzner's reasons for alighting in the district in the late 60s. For Shafer it was slope: 'I'd researched and my goal was to find hillside,' he said, 'Bacchus loves the hills.' Steltzner: 'I didn't know it was Cabernet land but I knew it was good drained land. I knew it was good for grapes.' He'd been drinking Inglenook Cabernet with duck he'd hunted, he added, so he knew its possibilities in the valley.

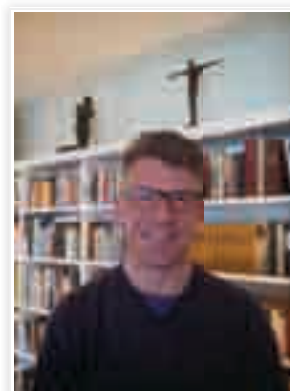
Three miles long and a mile wide, Stags Leap is the smallest sub-district in Napa. It's not the first – **Howell Mountain** was established in 1983, and the one-winery **Wild Horse Valley** in the far south in 1988 – but it is one of the most renowned. This is due in part to the status conferred upon the as-yet-unofficial region when Warren Winiarski's **1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon** eclipsed a clutch of Bordeaux first growths at the **1976 Paris Tasting**.

While the district's bigger properties are gradually being taken over by corporations – Chateau Ste Michelle and Antinori paid US\$187m for [Stag's Leap Wine Cellars](#) a few years ago, [Stags Leap Winery](#) is owned by [TreasuryWine Estates](#); [Mondavi](#), which has substantial holdings of Sauvignon Blanc in the south-west quarter, is owned by [Constellation](#), [Chimney Rock](#) by [Terlato WineGroup](#), [Pine Ridge](#) by the [Crimson Wine Group](#) – Stags Leap District is still dotted with smaller family operations.

There are rich enthusiasts like [Greg Lindstrom](#), who produces 500 cases from a tiny hillside property, or Susie and Tom Jinks' [Robinson Vineyards](#) where the couple's three daughters are very much in evidence, taking orders or handing out pizza on Vineyard to Vintner day, or the Ilsleys, who farm 23 acres (9.3ha) next door to Shafer, where David Ilsley is vineyard manager. Then there is [Baldacci Family](#), and [Regusci Winery](#), formidable family companies both. Even [Silverado Vineyards](#) is family-owned, albeit by the powerful Miller clan, descendants of Walt Disney.

[Taylor Family Vineyards](#) is typical of the smaller property, what could be called a 'mom and pop' set-up if it wasn't for the fact they are sitting on tens of millions of dollars of land. Growers since 1976, they started producing their own Cabernet and Chardonnay from their nine acres next door to Silverado Vineyards in 2002. 'It's been an adventure,' Sandy Taylor, the current president says. You get a sense of pioneering can-do from these families. Tom Jinks at Robinson dug their pocket-sized cellar 'by hand' he says with some

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Old labels at Robinson: LOL

pride, and indeed he looks the kind of person who can wield a pickaxe. It's a far cry from the multimillion dollar makeover at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, less than a mile away.

One of the first people to identify Stags Leap in the late 1950s (for the purposes of clarity the apostrophe-less post-AVA spelling will be used

throughout, irrespective of dates referred to) was **Nathan Fay**, the grower from whom Winiarski purchased one of his most iconic vineyards. Fay sold grapes but made a few barrels for himself, and his 1968 homemade Cabernet seems to have gained mythic status. He gave it to **John Shafer**, who remembers it as 'stunning...rich and delicious with lush dark fruit,' as his son Doug described it in his book **A Vineyard in Napa**.



Towards the Silverado Trail from Lindstrom's knoll

'That's what started the Cabernet movement,' Dick Steltzner – who planted his Cabernet vineyards in the early 70s and together with Shafer was one of the architects of the AVA – told me over lunch. 'They [Shafer, Winiarski, and Joe Heitz as well] tried Nate's homemade wine and all of a sudden it connected.'

Winiarski was so taken by the wine he bought a 36-acre prune orchard (prunes were big business in the region - at one time they were fetching higher prices per ton than grapes) 'as close to Fay's vineyard as I could get it' he told me. That was in 1970. He planted a portion to Cabernet Sauvignon and called the vineyard SLV, sending one of the first vintages, the '73, to Paris in 1976, and straight into the history books.

At the same time, John Goelet, a descendent of the Bordeaux negociant family Guestier, was looking around for prime Cabernet land and with the help of Bernard Portet also bought plots next to Fay, producing the first **Clos du Val** vintage in 1972.

Any discussion of what makes Stags Leap different comes back to land. 'It was founded solely in the soil and the geography,' Allison Steltzner, sales director of the family winery said. The **Palisades**, the craggy range that marks the eastern boundary, have a peculiar inward curve, Steltzner says, that circulates cooling winds from **San Pablo Bay** in the south.

This creates different growing conditions from the rest of the valley, Dick Steltzner puts in. 'Because of our air movement we have smaller leaves, so we have more sunlight on the fruit.' Earth, wind and sun come together in the perfect combination. The volcanic alluvial soils of the lower hills – what they call the benchland – are light, and give more stress to the vines, the grapes are more exposed to the sun, but cooled by the wind. Stags Leap District winemakers reckon they have more hangtime than the rest of the valley, giving the grapes more phenolic ripeness, which coupled with cool nights allows acid retention. 'You get that velvety texture to the wines.'

Every vintner in the world makes claims for the uniqueness of his or her region, of course, but – at their most elegant – the wines of Stags Leap do have characteristics that set them apart from, say, those of neighbouring Rutherford or Oakville. 'There is a common thread that runs through them,' Vienna reckons. 'It's in the nature of the fruit profile. There's a backbone of black fruit, and there's more structure.' For others it's acidity. 'It gives tension and vibrancy, and wonderful ageworthiness' to the wines, Remi Cohen, the winemaker at Cliff Lede Vineyards, says. Winiarski himself talks of the 'mystical unity' of terroir and winemaker.

By the time Shafer and Steltzner got together in the mid-80s to discuss their AVA

proposal, it was obvious that Stags Leap District was Cabernet territory, but they had no plan to restrict plantings. 'It was a marketing ploy,' John Shafer said. The only boundaries to the AVA were horizontal and vertical, with an upper limit of 400ft (122m). Newcomers like Lindstrom (2005), Cliff Lede (2002) and Odette (owned by the Plumpjack group) are testament to the openness of the appellation. Doug Shafer:

'When [new owners] came in, people asked me if I was worried, and I said, "No, it's great, bring it on. They're our neighbours, they've got Stags Leap on the label and they're making really good wine". This is America and you can plant anything you want.'



Stags' Leap Winery's motto - 'Yield to no misfortune'. Apt, given the many tragedies that have afflicted successive owners

The creation of the AVA wasn't all Californian laissez-faire. 'It was controversial,' Richard Mendelson, the lawyer who worked closely with Shafer and Steltzner on the proposal told me. 'There were issues about the name, a long litigation process.' Both Warren Winiarski and Carl Doumani, then owner of Stags' Leap Winery (he sold it to Beringer in 1997 and started Quixote) had had their own battle over the name, a case which was settled in 1986 by apostrophe – Stag's Leap Wine Cellars but Stags' Leap Winery). Winiarski, a keen supporter of the idea of an AVA was nevertheless against calling it Stags Leap, thinking it would be confusing for consumers to have two wineries and an appellation with the same name.

There were other issues, particularly about the land which lies to the west of the Silverado trail. 'The boundary was the most controversial,' Mendelson said. Steltzner and Shafer wanted the Silverado Trail to be the western boundary on the basis that the heavier soils nearer the Napa River, to the west of the Trail, were not suitable for Cabernet. Silverado Vineyards – founded by **Diane and Ron Miller** in 1978, and one of the first to plant Cabernet – contested that decision and managed to get the size of the district doubled, to include Silverado and also the 400 acre Wappo vineyard owned by Mondavi, mainly planted to Sauvignon Blanc. How much of a controversy was it at the time? Not that much, Silverado's general manager Russ Weis told me, 'ours was a foundational vineyard in establishing the reputation of Cabernet Sauvignon in the district. The original decision was just an oversight.'

Although the only legal limits are geographical, in reality the appellation is self-regulating. Ninety per cent of the district's 1300 acres (526ha) of vineyard are planted to Bordeaux varietals, of which 80% is Cabernet Sauvignon. Stags' Leap Winery, with its extensive Petite Sirah plantings, is an anomaly that would never happen today. At Odette, a strip of fallow land marks where a parcel of Pinotage was recently grubbed up, to be replaced by Cabernet. 'It would make no financial sense to plant anything else,' marketing director Christian Ogenfuss says.



The chai at Cliff Lede Vineyards

Indeed. We don't know what **Jean Phillips**, formerly of **Screaming Eagle**, paid for the 114-acre (46.1ha) vineyard next door to Odette which she bought in 2012. She would have bargained, as the vendors, Pillar Rock winery, had had trouble with taint, but top Stags Leap land can go for up to US\$1m per acre (US\$2.47m/ha), and is seldom less than half that. As for Cabernet grapes, if you can find them you'll be paying US\$7,500 a ton, way above the Napa average of US\$5,500. But it's academic, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars president Steve Spadarotto says, as there are hardly ever any Stags Leap District grapes on the market – the wineries use up everything they own, and any growers are tied in to long-term contracts.

Rising land and grape prices mean rising wine prices. 'There is such a limited supply of Stags Leap fruit,' Spadarotto says, 'the economics are screamingly obvious.' US\$120-150 wines are now the norm. In the 25 years of its existence Stags Leap District has become, in Ogenfuss's words, 'the financial appellation.'

Stags Leap District tasting notes

This is a highly selective list of wine tasted during three days in Stags Leap in April 2014.

**tasted at the Shafter seminar

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cask 23 1977**

Earthy fresh bright lifted nose with cherry fruit and savoury, saline, even beefy notes. Such beguiling sweet fruit with spice cinnamon and clove, forest floor, old book leather and red apple skin. Soft tannins and lovely gentle length.

Steltzner Cabernet Sauvignon 1980**

Aroma of ozone on the nose, mossy wood sunk in river mud, pencil lead. Bright acidity on the palate, fruit falling off but present and full of charm, light dry tannic length and some juice to the finish with great grip on the end tannins, though losing their elasticity and juiciness. On the downward curve, the ghost of bright youth remaining

Shafer Hillside Select 1988**

Light perfumed nose, violet and very old cigar box. Lovely bright tannins, the fruit moving to autumnal flavours – dark cherry, ripe plum, raisins, port, a hint of ripasso. A beautiful old wine heading into elegant old age



Doug and John Shafer, inscrutable, and Hillside Select 91

Shafer Hillside Select 1991**

One of the finest Napa Cabernets I have had, and that is with some competition. Gorgeous perfumed sandalwood nose, fine earthy aromas, fine minerality, soft tannins with lingering grip, lovely perfumed juice on the middle palate alongside bright fruit, perfect weight

and balance. The whole fresh, long, and very much alive. Delicious

Pine Ridge Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon 1999**

Bright cassis on the nose, cherry wood and sun-warmed earth with hints of chocolate. Blackberry and blackcurrant with higher notes of raspberry on the palate, secondary flavours coming in – hints of raisined fruit, some sweet porty notes - tannins dry and dissolving into juice. Bright finish

Chimney Rock 2002**

Cherry and mentholypus, some herb and mown grass, salinity, ozone, hint of sea-mud, then hay on the palate, dry tannins with juice on the mid-palate, very structured with lovely juicy length which persists. Secondary flavours underpinned by still-young tannins and brisk acidity



The elegant curved roof of the new Odette winery

Odette Cabernet Sauvignon 2012**

The district's newest addition, created in 2012 when Plumpjack bought 46 acres of Dick Steltzner's vineyard on the eastern edge of the Silverado Trail. 'I don't know how much you paid for it in 1965, but it was certainly a hell of a lot less than we did,' John Conover of Plumpjack joked.

Bright lifted nose with cherry, chocolate notes. Instant tannic grip on the palate, very sweet dark cherry and sandalwood, dry dissolved tannins leading to juice and freshness, very fine perfumed length, food friendly, persistent for a good minute. Young and vibrant

1. **Clos du Val Cabernet Sauvignon 2010**

Very discreet, earthy dark fruit nose with hints of tobacco. The palate has sour plum, coffee, high notes of tobacco, very fine cigar leaf. The tannins are fine-grained releasing juice in a long, elegant finish. Complex and structured

Cliff Lede Vineyards Stags' Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2011

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot

Formidable 55acre operation founded by Cliff Lede in 2001, with David Abreu in the vineyard and Remi Cohen in the winery. Also buys fruit from Andy Beckstoffer's To Kalon. Every vineyard named after a classic rock anthem, Stairway to Heaven, Bohemian Rhapsody, Born to be Wild and so on. Music blasts between the tanks at tastings. Intense earthiness on the nose and then a juicy centre. Powerful concentration of fruit and big, bold tannins but with a nervy precision. Huge and unusual (given Lede's rock 'n' roll style), not jammy, almost a hint of rusticity.

Cliff Lede Vineyards Moondance Dream 2011

Cabernet Sauvignon with small proportion Petit Verdot

Amidst the cassis and chocolate and tar on the nose is a waft of fresh green mown grass which lifts the aromas. On the palate, black olives and nettle-green, suave tannins (unexpected again – there's something almost camp about these wines – brash but oddly feminine)

Lindstrom Wines Cabernet Sauvignon 2011

Celia Welch (of Rutherford cult Scarecrow fame) is winemaker at this 500-case family operation, established in 2005 on a high rocky knoll in the middle of the district. Fresh green on the nose – hay and blackcurrant. Really splendid juice on the palate, lovely weight and mouthfeel, precise, intense ripe blackcurrant and damson, chalky tannins carrying through to a fine finish

Robinson Vineyards 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon

Another homespun (if you can use such a word in Napa) small producer, growing since the 70s but making the first vintage in '98. Tom Jinks dug the pocket-sized cellar 'by hand', he told me

Red fruit getting darker on a complex nose, then blueberry on the palate, and tight, close-knit tannins. A big,

tannic wine with grip, but freshness of acidity persists throughout saving it from jamminess



On the lawn at Robinson Vineyards

Ilisley Vineyards Malbec 2011

Just down the hill from Shafer in the northern district. David Ilisley is vineyard manager at Shafer

Very fine dark ruby hue, bright cherry and sweet damson on the nose, grainy fine tannins with more cherry, damson and plum. Good concentration, bold, open palate with wonderful juiciness and perfume

Baldacci Family Vineyards Brenda's Vineyard Cabernet 2010

Established 1997, growers supplying Mondavi and others, until first own vintage in 2000. Also have 20acres in Carneros

Tar and chocolate, spiced damson, intense dry, tight tannic grip, powerful but fine acidity giving freshness and lift. At the finish the tannins explode into juice, literally mouthwatering wine

Malk Family Vineyards Cabernet 2010

South African born Brian Malk bought a tiny 2-acre plot on the eastern slopes of the district in 1998. His first vintage was 2003, made by winemaker Robbie Meyer. Fresh berry and chocolate on the nose, ripe and spicy with soft, easy tannins and good length. Classic but unadventurous, the tannins too soft to add much-needed grip

Regusci Winery Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2011

Jim Regusci (whose resemblance to the late, great James Gandolfini – or Tony Soprano - is so marked that he is frequently stopped in the street for photographs) makes a range of bold, classic wines in one of Stags Leap's most historic properties, the handsome 19th century stone Grigbsy-Occidental Winery bought by his grandfather in 1932.

As so often the case, the top-end cuvées were rather hot and extracted for my taste, but this lower-level Estate 2011, with 4% Merlot, had much more restraint. Bright nose with some leather and attractive damson fruit. The palate is surprisingly exotic, with a perfumed nettle greenness at the end, along with classic juicy tannins.

Hartwell Vineyards Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2011

A high-end, sophisticated operation owned by septuagenarian millionaire Bob Hartwell, the winery counts Heidi Barrett and Celia Welch among its winemakers. Also a Sauvignon Blanc from Carneros. Bob told me when he was looking for Cabernet land in Napa, he was advised, 'get as close as possible to San Francisco Bay, but not as far south as Carneros, which is too cold for Cab.'

The estate Cabernet has 15% Petit Verdot. Bright woody nose, lovely juice on mid-palate with ripe plum, black cherry, powerful spice and violet perfume. Fine finish.

Stags' Leap Winery Twelve Falls Estate Red 2010

Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah, Merlot

Lovely elegant decay on the nose, powerful acidity, tart blackcurrant very dense and concentrated, green pepper notes, chalky tannins, juicy warm length and dense tannins



The superlative Ne Cede Malis 2010

Stags' Leap Winery Ne Cede Malis 2010

Petite Sirah, field blend inc Tannat, Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc, Muscat

Lovely sweet cooked raspberry nose with balsamic strawberry, medicinal and fragrant. The body is tight and structured with intense dense tannic heft. Very juicy, with leather and minerality. Intense, concentrated, precise, an

anomaly in the district that would be unlikely in today's Cabernet hegemony

Taylor Family Stags Leap Cabernet Sauvignon 2011

24 acres, 10 in vine. The Taylors bought their plot next to Silverado Vineyards in 1976, and started their Cabernet vineyards in 1991. Also make a Yountville Sauvignon Blanc High dark fruit tones on the nose – blackcurrant and wild blackberry predominant. Dense grippy grainy tannins, dark fruit notes move to high-toned raspberry leaf on palate. Very fine length