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INTO WINE COUNTRY:

THE STAGS LEAP DISTRICT



We take a leap into Napa Valley's most iconic neighborhood and explore how the area is returning to its roots after the recent wildfires

By Irene Moore

The Stags Leap District is known for its world-class wines, and most notably, for its distinctive Cabernets. The appellation is located in the eastern portion of the Napa Valley, five miles north of Napa along the Silverado Trail. The District is bounded on the east by the majestic Stags Leap Palisades, to the west by the Napa River, to the north by the Yountville Cross Road and to the south by low-lying flatlands.

Barely a mile wide and three miles long, it is comprised roughly of close to 3,000 acres, worth about a million dollars an acre. Half of the pricey acreage is planted to vineyards, which stretch as far as the eye can see in every direction.

The district was named Stags Leap over a century ago. Theories abound as to the origin of the name, but the most oft repeated is a well loved Wappo tribe legend about a mythic stag that leaped to freedom across the Palisades' peaks as he escaped the wrath of hunters, quickly disappearing into the mist.

Along the Silverado Trail

The District's famed Silverado Trail was barely more than a horse path when the history of viticulture in the area began back in the mid-1800s. Occidental Winery, the region's first, was built in 1878. (It's now the home of Regusci Winery.) In 1893, San Francisco entrepreneur Horace Chase came to the Valley to build the first winery with the Stags Leap name.

A renaissance began when grape-growing pioneer Nathan Fay planted the region's first Cabernet vineyards, 70-odd acres along the Silverado Trail in 1961. At the time, there were only 800 acres of Cabernet planted in the entire U.S. Today, there are more than 9,800 acres in Napa Valley alone. The District gained international notoriety at the famous "1976 Judgment of Paris," when a 1973 Stag's Leap® Wine Cellars' Cabernet Sauvignon won first place in a blind tasting over classified Bordeaux estates such as Mouton-



Photo courtesy of House of Cab Dallas.

Rothschild and Haut-Brion, to the utter shock of the nine French judges. Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, home of the upstart winner, is one of Napa Valley's earliest and finest wine estates. Visitors now come to taste its famous Cabernet Sauvignons and to admire the picturesque Stags Leap Palisades that the nimble stag reputedly leaped across.

Mother Nature's Involvement

So why are Stags Leap District wines such winners? It all comes down to what the French call *terroir*, the sum of every environmental variable that affects a vineyard's site. Erosion from the Stags Leap Palisades is the source of the volcanic soil acknowledged as a contributing factor to the district's famed Cabernet Sauvignon. The soil results in low-vigor vines that yield fruit of great intensity and flavor.

The palisades' rock facades reflect the sun's rays onto the vineyards, heating up the District during the day. As afternoon draws to a close, the hills funnel cool, marine air flowing north from the San Pablo Bay through the Stags Leap District corridor. Temperatures drop off at night rapidly, causing the grapes to achieve an excellent balance of acid and sugar. The end result is a longer growing season — perfect for late-maturing varieties such as Cabernet, resulting in qualities of softness, yet intensity.

Impact from the California Wildfires

Visitors to the area usually spend a day or two enjoying the District's famous hospitality and the many unique tours and tastings at its wineries. Offerings include everything from intimate cave tours with paired tastings to sophisticated educational programs.

As for the recent wildfires that struck the West Coast, only a few of the District's vineyards experienced damage and none of the wineries were harmed. The majority of the grapes in the district had been harvested when the fires struck. While some residential properties suffered minimal destruction, areas west of the Silverado Trail remained untouched.

Remi Cohen, President of the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association, who is also Vice President and General Manager at Cliff Lede Vineyards, found herself right in the thick of the tragedy. She reports, "As the Atlas fire rapidly encroached on the Stags Leap District, it was terrifying to see the flames closing in. Vintners and homeowners were forced to evacuate in the middle of the night. Jim Regusci of Regusci Vineyards and the facilities team at Cliff Lede Vineyards and the Poetry Inn, among others, stayed to protect their properties and their neighbors."





(Above and below) The annual Vineyard to Vintner weekend includes intimate dinners, private tours and barrel tastings hosted by Stags Leap District wineries. This year's event is held **April 27-29, 2018**. Photos courtesy of Bob McClenahan Photography.

She adds, "In the end, the Stags Leap District was very lucky, as the fires, in most cases, stopped right at our vineyards and doorsteps. Cal Fire and the emergency responders made tremendous efforts to protect our valuable land, and it was remarkable how the vineyards served as a firebreak in many instances."

According to Cohen, tourism in the area is finally returning to normal. "Wineries were closed for most of October during the peak harvest tourist season and reported a decline in visitation through November as well," she says. "Napa continues to be a great place to visit, offering its natural beauty and world-class hospitality, and although the winter months are usually slower, we are seeing normal visitation for this season. Everyone is grateful the fires have passed, winter rains have replenished our soils, the hillsides are returning to their verdant color, and our valued guests are returning to the region."

Nearby Yountville, with its world-renowned restaurants, is also beginning to see business pick up after visitation slowed late last year. Before the fires, at the popular French Laundry, reservations could be obtained only by booking months ahead. And if you stopped by Keller's Bouchon Bakery on a chilly, foggy morning, there was always a crowd waiting in line for hot coffee and tasty pastries. The bakery experienced some damage but has since resumed normal business hours. Yountville's Bouchon Bistro (also part of the Thomas Keller Restaurant Group), Bottega and Bistro Jeanty are also now open and the crowds are coming back.







Photo courtesy of Russ Widstrand. ©2010

But How Did the Wines Fare?

Now for the question on everyone's mind: Were any of the District's coveted cellared wines affected by the fires? Luckily, they weren't. According to vintners, carbon dioxide is a byproduct of the wines' fermentation, which helps protect them. After fermentation is complete, winemakers can close their tanks with airtight seals. Wines aging in barrels have an almost perfect seal against smoke, protecting aging wines from being affected by wildfire conditions.

Testament to this, the eagerly awaited, recently released 2014 vintage Appellation Collection of wines from the Stags Leap District offered 17 handcrafted Cabernets from several prestigious wineries and winemakers.

Antonio Galloni, wine critic, founder and CEO of *Vinous*, an influential wine publication, said in *Vinous*, "My first tastings from the barrel suggest that Napa Valley's producers have a highly promising vintage on their hands. The best 2014s are aromatically expressive, rich and energetic, with striking balance and plenty of potential. Napa Valley has delivered another exceptional vintage." 🌙



Vineyard to Vintner, 2016. Photo courtesy of Robert Bruno Photography.

MUST-VISIT WINERIES

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars

Why not begin your tour at the district's mecca of fine Cabernet Sauvignon, home of the winner of the 1976 Tasting of Paris?

Take a Sip: Our favorites are their three estate-grown Cabernet Sauvignons — S.L.V., CASK 23 and FAY. These wines are among the most revered and collected Cabernet Sauvignons worldwide.

cask23.com

Silverado Vineyards

Located in the heart of Stags Leap District, the Silverado Vineyards offers a variety of tours and boasts a gorgeous terrace with sweeping 180-degree views.

Take a Sip: We love the Silverado Vineyards Estate wines and their flagship SOLO Cabernet, which honors this historic vineyard and its unique "Heritage" vines.

silveradovineyards.com

Pine Ridge Vineyards

With knowledge developed over 30 years, Pine Ridge Vineyards produces award-winning wines in a distinctly classic style. Book the Elevated Tour to enjoy current releases in the intimate atmosphere of the winery cave.

Take a Sip: Epitome Cabernet Sauvignon, their flagship blend, is the epitome of fine wine. Its flavor profile of red and black fruit encompasses the entire Cabernet varietal spectrum.

pineridgevineyards.com

Cliff Lede Vineyards

This is the winery for true rock 'n' roll fans. You get a "backstage pass" for access to limited-production wines with each of the 39 vineyard blocks named after a rock song.

Take a Sip: Experience the Cabernet Sauvignon Poetry blend — made only during exceptional vintages — of primarily Cabernet Sauvignon, blended with Cabernet Franc and a small percentage of Merlot and Petit Verdot for balance.

cliffledevineyards.com

Clos Du Val

Clos du Val's Cabernet was one of only six California Cabernets selected for the famous 1976 Judgment of Paris Tasting. As of late, the winery has begun to produce reds in a richer, more velvety style that "embrace the Napa Valley-ness" of the wines.

Take a Sip: Try their small portfolio of estate-grown wines, with an emphasis on the Cabernet Sauvignons that first catapulted Clos Du Val to fame.

closduval.com



