

FEATURES



Napa's Stags Leap District Celebrates 20 Years, 1989-2009

Two Decades of Unique Napa Valley Wines



The name "Stags Leap" suggests forging ahead and an unbridled spirit. Indeed, well before Stags Leap became an official [Napa Valley American Viticultural Appellation](#) in 1989, wines from the area sprinted ahead of the pack in the notorious [Tasting of Paris of 1976](#). Heads turned to the Wild West, where the two square mile-large region's distinctive *terroir*, with soils ranging from volcanic to gravelly river sediment, consistently marks the character of its wines. Stags Leap was also the first of Napa's fourteen sub-appellations.

Before we forge ahead, we must point out to careful readers that the missing apostrophe is intentional. A USGS map from the 1950s identified Stags Leap sans punctuation, and so simplicity ruled the district. Better to duck anyway, while two area wineries jockeyed for punctuation position in the courts (as of 1986, they each ride the "s" their own way, [Stag's Leap Wine Cellars](#) and Stags' Leap Winery).



Fast forward to a sunny morning chilled by distant fog hugging San Pablo Bay, with bud break on the vines. Three seminal Stags Leap founders met at the base of the rocky amphitheatre of the Palisades Mountains to reflect on four decades of winemaking. They spoke to enthusiasts gathered to recognize the 20th anniversary year of Stags Leap via the Vineyard to Vintner's event kicked off at [Shafer Vineyards](#). These local legends put a historical spin on the day's

[wine tastings](#), open houses and celebratory grand dinner.

The first of the trio on the scene, Richard Steltzner, settled in Stags Leap in 1964. He appreciated the understated yet constant breeze within the bowl of the mountains. The cool nights, which tame the day's sunlight and retain moisture content in the soil, helped him achieve concentrated [fruit](#) color and intense flavor with relatively minimal management for his Steltzner Vineyards "[cabs](#) and cousins."

[Clos du Val](#)'s Bernard Portet, born and raised in [Bordeaux](#), migrated to Stags Leap in 1968. He, too, noticed the fresh nights and envisioned how they'd lead to fresher fruit in the [Merlot](#), Cab and [Cab Franc](#) he sought to make. He desired a "peacock's tail" in his wines—an explosion at the back end, a dramatic and long finish. The balanced microclimate of Stags Leap could help achieve this characteristic, by allowing more opportunity for grapes to ripen on the vine.

John Shafer left [Chicago](#)'s publishing world in 1972 to become a farmer with a dream in Stags Leap. He grew walnut trees and [grapes](#), tenaciously terracing the steep, rocky hillsides. He released his first wine in 1981, humbly proclaiming himself "new kid on the block." The soft, silky tannins of his [Cabernet](#) fooled the palate, suggesting a Merlot blend—but, no, it was 100 percent [Cabernet](#). This flavor profile, a hallmark of Cabs from Stags Leap, further advocated for a sub-AVA.



The district's pioneers—and their wines—embody the grace and strength of the Stags Leap name. Today, sixteen [wineries](#) comprise the district, plenty for a vacation's worth of exploration. Don't expect a homogenized experience, in the glass or at the wineries. For instance, one can sip [sparkling wine](#) at [Cliff Lede](#), ogling the state-of-the-art production cave in a hillside encased in glass, or swig small-batch [Malbec](#) at homey Robinson Family Vineyard within a dusty cave that still houses Grandpa's original [vintages](#). Anyway visitors go, they can covet the signature varietal, world-class Cabernet that put [Napa](#) on the map and launched America's obsession with "*terroir*-ism." ♦

by Barb Rybicki