

# Stags Leap, Napa's Most Elegant Address



*(Pictured: Regusci Winery, home to the Stags Leap Districts only Ghost Winery)*

Back in 1985, when John Shafer was leading the charge to establish the Stags Leap District as an official appellation, it wasn't even certain that the name itself would stand, as so many lawsuits had been centered around the words *stags* and *leap*.

That's when a famous compromise between two wineries with very similar names was struck, an agreement punctuated by the placement of an apostrophe.

**Stags' Leap Winery**, owned then by Carl Doumani, and **Stag's Leap Wine Cellars**, where Warren Winiarski had made his winning Cabernet Sauvignon for the famed 1976 Judgment in Paris blind tasting, settled their differences. Their obvious similarities, however, meant distinctions would forever have to be made.

With the pioneering vintners in the budding region on the same page, grammatical specifics were foregone as they defined the characteristics they could collectively call their own.

This included the unique airflow from the San Francisco Bay that would whoosh between the Vaca Mountains and Stags Leap Palisades to the east, and the small series of round hills to the west, the two-lane Silverado Trail in between.

“It's all about the Palisades, the volcanic rock outcrop of the Vaca range,” says Remi Cohen, vice president and general manager at **Cliff Lede Vineyards**.

“It's a particularly steep and jagged rock formation that reflects afternoon sun and heats the region more

than surrounding areas, making the district one of the most southern areas within the Napa Valley for growing ripe, opulent Cabernet.”

Two of the rolling hills that surround Cliff Lede and frame its valley-floor vineyard, Twin Peaks Ranch, create a funnel that draws in marine air, cooling the district quickly in the evening. The two geographical effects create some of Napa’s warmest days and coolest nights, giving it a large diurnal temperature swing.

“Cool nights slow acid metabolism,” Cohen says. “The hallmark Stags Leap Cabernet has the seductive ripeness and delicious fruit characteristics people love about Cabernet, along with intense vibrancy and freshness due to the acidity, which also adds finesse and ageability.”

The challenge is then protecting grapes grown on the Palisades and on the western face of the Vaca Mountains from intense afternoon heat. The steep volcanic rock is well drained and limiting in terms of yields, producing intensely concentrated and complex Cabernet like Shafer Hillside Select.

With the terroir defined, John Shafer, Dick Steltzner, Ernie Ilsley, Angelo Regusci, Charles See, Jerry Taylor and others formed the appellation committee, many of their names still prominent on district bottlings.

Together, they drew the boundaries of the AVA westward to the Napa River and north to the Yountville Cross Road, encompassing a swath of about 2,700 acres, the details of which were finalized in 1989.



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This was considerably late in the game, given the burgeoning fame of many of the producers. The first Shafer Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon came in 1983, perhaps the most powerful expression of the region's magical mix of intensity, firm acidity and forward lushness.

“A Cabernet from Stags Leap will be softer and a bit more enticing at a younger age,” says Doug Shafer, John's son and the winery's president. He served as winemaker from 1983–94.

This certainly seemed to be the case at the 1976 Judgment in Paris blind tasting, when a Stag's Leap Wine Cellars 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon was picked the favorite of a panel of European judges, a decision that rocked the wine world.

The grapes had come from the winery's S.L.V. Vineyard, a site that had been planted just three years before. The Stag's Leap Cab beat out first growths from legendary producers Château Mouton Rothschild and Château Haut-Brion, among other California and Bordeaux wines. Today, a bottle of the 1973 Stag's Leap Cab stands in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Nikki Pruss made the Stag's Leap Wine Cellars wines alongside Winiarski. She began as an intern in 1998, and was the head winemaker from 2005–13. Today, Pruss produces her own small-production Cab through her brand, Nicolette Christopher.

“From the winery's home ranch, you could dial in on the nuances of the district on a daily basis,” she says. “One mile by three miles, from the span on the west side, the soils are gunmetal grayish-brown, and as you head east into the hills they become reddish, more volcanic. It's a painter's palette of Cabernet.”

She finds that the volcanic soils on the eastern side provide sizeable structure to the wines.

“In Stags Leap, site trumps clone,” Pruss says. “[Winiarski] always said wine was about the ground, the grapes and the girl or the guy making the wine. There's a beautiful alchemy in the district you can't replicate anywhere else.”

***Read on for more of the Stags Leap district's history >>>***



*(Pictured: Clos du Val, located in the Stags Leap AVA)*

A few years ago, Pruss tasted Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars Cabernets from the 1970s through the early 2000s to learn if the fingerprints of the vineyard were consistent, despite their differing winemakers. Each exuded the subtle perfume of violets, was velvety smooth and rich in notes of black cherry and cassis.

“There are still families in the district who have been here for a very long time—Fay, Robinson, Steltzner, Ilsley, Taylor, Disney,” Pruss says. “People who have always been doing the right thing and not banging the drum, keeping at it.”

In a district of slow and steady change, Shafer remains a consistent draw for visitors and collectors, as does Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, bought in 2007 by Ste. Michelle Wine Estates and the Antinori family for a cool \$185 million.

As the winemaker for **Chimney Rock**, in the southern section of the district, Elizabeth Vianna successfully blends the old with the new. She tells the story of cool and hot through her wines, sourcing from vast estate vineyards surrounding the winery.

To the north are the hotter sections, culled into wines called Clone 7 (hillside), Clone 4 and Ganymede Vineyard, where the property’s oldest vines reside, planted 23 years ago under the Palisades in stressed volcanic soils.

To the south are the vineyard sections known as Alpine (hillside) and Tomahawk (valley floor). There are some 20 different soil types running from north to south within Chimney Rock’s 103 acres.

Standing in Tomahawk on a warm spring day, the swirling coolness of air coming from the south is starkly felt. That wind is real.

“With Clone 7 or 4, you get muscular tannin, tighter tannins and structure and more concentrated dense fruit, even black pepper,” Vianna says.

“With Alpine, it’s a different texture. The tannins are...velvety and there’s more red fruit.”

The longer the hangtime, Vianna says, the softer the tannins, so grapes in a site like Alpine are cooled enough each afternoon to ripen slowly.

“When I started out as a winemaker, I paid attention to aromatics and structure,” Vianna says. “Stags Leap has made me very aware of texture, that’s the *there* there. It is power and grace at the same time, the yin and yang of the cool and the warm.

“It’s a special place. The wines stand up to a lot of different regions in their completeness.”



(Pictured: Stags' Leap Winery)

Growers like Regusci, Ilsley, Taylor and Robinson continue to farm a significant portion of the acreage here. Wineries like Chimney Rock, **Clos du Val**, **Pine Ridge Vineyards** and **Silverado Vineyards** trace their lineages back to the 1970s and early 1980s, when red Bordeaux varieties began replacing older Chardonnay and Riesling plantings.

These days, the only Chardonnay in Stags Leap exists at Pine Ridge, which goes into its exquisite Le Petit Clos, planted on a 1.7-acre hillside spot. Winemaker Michael Beaulac makes it in a crisp style to capture its acidity and minerality.

He takes a similar approach with his Cabernet, which he makes every year from Stags Leap as well as Oakville, Rutherford and Howell Mountain.

“What we do is tame the power,” Beaulac says of Stags Leap. “You can taste the difference, the terroir is accurate. In Oakville, you get more tannin and structure, but lack the elegance we get here due to the same cooling breeze in the afternoon that allows us to have Chardonnay on this property.”

With four estate vineyards within the district, a total of 47 acres, Beaulac says he gets color intensity and high acidity across the board, along with dark fruit characteristics of plum and black cherry.

**Robert Mondavi Winery** retains a large vineyard in the southwestern section of Stags Leap, close to the Napa River, where it grows Sauvignon Blanc in addition to Cabernet Sauvignon.

Robert and Margrit Mondavi used to live right above the vineyard on Wappo Hill in a home with a swimming pool in the living room, owned today by Gina Gallo and Jean-Charles Boisset.

Lindstrom, **Hartwell Estate Vineyards**, **Malk Family Vineyards** and Cliff Lede, at the northern extreme of the appellation on the Yountville Cross Road, are newer additions. Odette Estate, the third Napa Valley winery for the PlumpJack Group, is an even more recent arrival.

Built on the former 45-acre site of Steltzner Vineyards, Odette will release its first wines this year: a 2012 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon and 2012 Estate Reserve made by Jeff Owens. He echoes the sentiment of Stags Leap’s ability to produce “finesse with power, in addition to silky tannins and refined fruit.”

Oakville-based Futo has the 5500 Estate in Stags Leap District, a steep, hillside vineyard in the southeast corner of the appellation where a rock quarry once stood.

In 2011, Jean Phillips, who founded Screaming Eagle in 1986 before selling it to Stanley Kroenke and Charles Banks in 2006, bought Pillar Rock, a 114-acre vineyard in the heart of Stags Leap, though not the winery or the brand.

Still, while newcomers take root in Stags Leap, it remains true to its original roots, a small enclave of

quality-minded people.

“The wineries here all play nice,” Beaulac says. “It’s a little neighborhood.”

***Discover Stags Leap's top Cabernet offerings >>>***



## **Top 2012 Stags Leap District Cabernets**

After cool vintages in 2010 and 2011, the 2012 vintage in Napa Valley would’ve been described as the vintage of decade—until 2013 and 2014 followed. Still, the 2012 Cabernets are ideal representations of the appellation’s combination of brawn and beauty.

**Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars 2012 Fay Cabernet Sauvignon;** \$125, 95 points. ***Editors’ Choice.***

**Baldacci 2012 Black Label Cabernet Sauvignon;** \$75, 94 points. ***Cellar Selection.***

**Odette 2012 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon;** \$98, 94 points. ***Editors’ Choice.***

**Pine Ridge 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon;** \$125, 94 points. ***Editors’ Choice.***

**Regusci 2012 Estate Bottled Cabernet Sauvignon;** \$50, 94 points.

**Shafer 2012 One Point Five Cabernet Sauvignon;** \$80, 94 points.

**Stags’ Leap Winery 2012 The Leap Cabernet Sauvignon;** \$85, 93 points. ***Cellar Selection.***

**Chimney Rock 2012 Ganymede Vineyard; \$135, 91 points. *Cellar Selection.***

**Silverado 2012 Solo Cabernet Sauvignon; \$110, 91 points. *Cellar Selection.***

**Clos du Val 2012 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon; \$80, 90 points.**