



## Stags Leap

### THE STAGS' LEAP RHÔNE COLLECTION AND THE ESSENTIAL LEAP

“Hecho de ritos, de minerales negros\*” sang the poet Neruda, “made of rituals, of black minerals.” Such is the 60-year-old estate vineyard from which **Petite Syrah** is made, watched over by the Stags Leap Palisades, from which it gets its soil. This Little Syrah, its character comes from being picked and fermented together with its companions, for the plot is interplanted with other Rhône varietals. As one of four wines in winemaker Robert Brittan’s new *Rhône Collection*, it shares traditional winemaking techniques and handpicking with the Syrah, the Amparo Rosé, and the Viognier. As for **Viognier**, we don’t pronounce it so much as we just enjoy it, but if you’d like to write a Shakespearean sonnet using Viognier, you can rhyme it with hay, lay, or Mandalay Bay. A perfume under the nose and a delight in the mouth, a small amount of Chardonnay adds to its silkiness. Brittan cloned **Syrah** grapes from the field-blend Petite Syrah block and has been making Syrah ever since, discovering that it responds to a higher temperature at fermentation, and that small amounts of Petite Syrah and Viognier complete its earthy aromatic palette. The **Amparo Rosé**, made from the Grenache grape, is dry, soft, gentle and delightful, a pleasure for afternoons, bringing up a story Alice Waters has told about the beautiful selection of rosés at Chez Panisse: it was the wine that first startled her into her fabulous career, in the French countryside. Afterwards she took a nap. The rest is history.

Gathered under the banner of *The Essential Leap* are three varietals that have gained the Napa Valley its international reputation: Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon. **Cabernet**, the flagship wine of the Stags Leap district, has found its home in the rockier soil up against the mountain, and is fermented in small lots, hand-punching the caps until it gives up its rich color and tannins. The ‘coyote blocks’ have given us a classic **Merlot**. Maddeningly patient, Brittan waited and waited for the 1998 grapes to tell his mouth when to pick. Eighteen and a half months in French oak, with additions of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, it presents itself with all its fresh red fruit, chocolatey, sweet-clove spice aromas and flavors. “Death’s charm,” says Adélia Prado, “its disastrous spell/is due to



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life...\*\*” Reading her poems, the afternoon becomes overly hot and the porch looks better, a little cooler, and anything startling would intrude. The **Chardonnay** fits there on the corner of the table and murmurs of its journey. Harvested later than normal, the 1999 was ready all at once, mischievously giving the usually busy Crush an additional bustle, vinified in new French oak barrels, with all traditional techniques, it now rests proudly in the bottle, and just as the Viognier gains from a small addition of Chardonnay, so the Chardonnay is rounded out by a trace of Viognier.

\*from Pablo Neruda’s, “Juntos Nosotros” *Residencia en la Tierra*, translated from the Spanish by Donald D. Walsh as “We Together,” *Residence on Earth*, New Directions, 1973

\*\* opening lines of “A Man Inhabited a House,” *The Alphabet in the Park*, selected poems of Adélia Prado, translated from the Portuguese by Ellen Watson, Wesleyan University Press, 1990

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