



## *Stags' Leap*

### THE SOIL CONVERSATION: GEOLOGY & FLAVOR

“Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clyme,  
Nor houres, dayes, moneths, which are the rags of time.”

—John Donne, “The Sunne Rising.”

She is a million years old, this Napa valley caressed by tractors, tickled by automobiles and diesel trucks using their asphalt prophylactics. Even so, she is youthful on the scale of geologic time, artful, and discrete, the epitome of the older, worldly woman, refreshingly frank and experienced as she conducts seminars in volcanics and erosion.

Multilingual and polytonal, she speaks in layered ballads from which it is not possible to draw restful and efficient conclusions. As residents, we're accustomed to living with the shake, rattle 'n' roll of her faultlines. We take for granted her ongoing stream of consciousness compositions. One dialect of her St. Andreas fault speaks wine, writing eloquent petroglyphs that can be translated into stunning bottles of full-bodied Cabernets and Syrahs by those who know how to listen.

On the western side of her valley, the Mayacamas range, uplifted sedimentary ocean floor. On the east—volcanics—the steep and craggy peaks formed on an ocean floor, then buried, only to be heaved up from below the earth's crust by plate tectonics. The wild sawtooth edges of the ridge have long ago lifted away from the horizontal, and are stretching ever backwards in a yoga posture vibrant with seismic energy. Toward the south end of this series of peaks, lies the valley within a valley that is the estate of Stags' Leap, a depression which some say contains the relics of Napa River silt from a time when the river used to wander over that way.



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While she doesn't speak directly of flavor in wine, she speaks clearly of structure, of red wines whose tannins are supple and fierce, palatable when adolescent, capable of vibrant long life. Whether she implies flavor is a matter of gossip, something which her suitors and critics jealously debate. The compound in plants which humans perceive as flavor cannot be said to come directly from the soil; it does not speak the same molecular language. Flavor compounds come about through a chemical reaction that happens behind closed doors, its participants wearing clever masks.

The land is most generous with those who pay attention to her curves and moods, who are willing to spend time listening and observing and giving back to the soil. To these admirers, she has much to say and much to give. Observe the way she flings out great skirts of alluvial material that fan outwards through the vineyards, and shakes off eroded volcanic rock, interspersing clay loam, river rock, silt, sand, and gravel.

Close up on her flanks and on the east side of the estate, that is where to plant Cabernet, to take advantage of the silky texture Cabernet gets from flirting with shale, rhyolite, and volcanic ash. Down in the bowl of the valley, away from the direct influence of her rock, where the loam is deeper, and sedimentary clay has matured its voice from river silt, let the Merlot send down a few sonnet roots.

An attentive conversationalist, attuned to these mighty and ongoing discussions, might note the knoll on which the coyotes dance and speak even during daylight hours, above the flat of the valley floor, but before the land makes a slight dip and ascends to the steeper rock faces. Let the coyotes call you up there on a rare afternoon, and ask what it is they like about their dance hall.

After studying the knoll's orientation to the sun, its views south to the Bay, its rocks and boulders adding rhythm and nuance, plant a four-acre vineyard among the coyotes, as an experiment, knowing that the land prefers to remain in an open conversation, in a playful mode. Cabernet for the west slope, Cabernet Franc on the northwest, and Merlot facing



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southwest. Normally these varietals bloom at different times, which means they also harvest separately, but within the Coyote Dance Hall, the geological features of its natural pitch and composition conspire to help retard one varietal and speed the other so that all three can be harvested at the same time, allowing them to be fermented together.

A trio of instruments, each with a different timbre. 2002 will see the first harvest from this vineyard and then the next part of the discussion will unfold: is there a desirable quality to be gained from fermenting these grapes together rather than blending them after their character has been established? After all, any good conversationalist knows that it is the intrigue of the questions that drives the most interesting discussion.

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