



## Stags' Leap

### IF PROUST CAME WALKING: A COLLECTION OF RHÔNES FOR A MAN OF PARTS

“...but with more vitality, more unsubstantial,  
more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste  
of things remain poised a long time,  
like souls, ready to remind us...”

—from Marcel Proust’s madeleine reverie,  
*Remembrance of Things Past: Swann’s Way*

A flâneur is, by definition, a boulevardier who dreams, a connoisseur of the cityscape much as a naturalist is a connoisseur of the countryside. He is the one who strolls the city streets with a bemused air, who might appear at the opera, but off in a corner, admiring the latest fashions from a safe distance. He reverences the many intimate corners of the city, each with their delights: the predawn opening of the flower markets, the multistoried antiquarian shops, the haunts of poets and lawyers, students, sausage vendors, and investment counselors.

The type originated in Paris, a city made for such strolls and daydreams, and Proust may have epitomized the personality of the flâneur, whose most common activity would be, of course, flâneury, the direct pursuit of such idle strolls and daydreams. A contemporary version would certainly find San Francisco and Berkeley likely haunts. Periodically, of course, he would need to visit the nearby countryside to take in the sights, and in a pleasant way contract to replenish his wine cellar from the source.

As he enters the estate of Stags’ Leap on his quest, we are to imagine him strolling up the avenue lined with walnut trees looking dapper in his tailored walking suit and his



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bowler hat, delighted by the beauty of the spring vinescape. He is keenly interested, as who would not be, in the venerable Petite Syrah vines growing beside the drive. Over 70 years these vines have exerted themselves here.

Being the man of parts that he is, learned and well read, or in this contemporary scenario, perhaps well educated and wired, he steps into the vineyards and notes that among the head trained vines are a mixture of grape varieties: a field blend which includes companionable clones of Grenache, Mourvèdre, and Syrah. Charming. In his cellar he can certainly find room for a wine that came from this vineyard.

As he continues his walk, he passes another, younger, block of Petite Syrah. Stopping to speak to a vineyard worker who is finishing the last of the pruning, he is told these vines were grafted directly from the old block, after careful genetic research to confirm their quality.

His step increasing its pace a bit, our friend feels a gentle excitement tingling under his collar. This could be just the place where the Rhône varietal has been carefully considered and tended to. He might even hazard a hope that upon tasting wines made from these grapes, he will have resolved his cellar needs. Up the slope now he steps, perspiring lightly, his pearl-handled walking stick proving quite useful in the rocky soil, until he has risen up and over the immediate rooflines of the inhabited area of the estate and has entered something wilder, quieter, pastoral.

He sits on a bit of downed tree trunk (after first laying out his handkerchief) and surveys the busy activity of the winery below. From here he can see a new vineyard, one that is populated by more than the usual amount of stones.

A passing member of the cellar crew informs him that this vineyard was not just cleared to be planted. It was created, layered from the ground rock up. With soil and rocks



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excavated from the heart of the mountain behind them during the construction of the new wine cave, this vineyard was formed by crushing, mixing, and layering the volcanic rhyolite and humus. Periodically, backhoe pits were dug to see that the soil was well mixed. Samples taken in this unplanted vineyard confirm that the soil is over 90% rock. Now the vines are to go in. Proust's palm pilot is rapidly calculating the date when he would need to return to taste the first new wine from this adventure: 2008. He makes an appointment to return.

The cellar worker has pointed out the original cave, dug in 1893, and the new cave, now completed, with many times the capacity of the original, and upon whose roof he realizes he is now sitting. Across from the entrance to the new cave, he makes out a modernized winemaking facility, discretely tucked away in a wide ravine that follows a stream bed up into the hills. He notes the generous drives and expansive layout, how this makes possible the smooth transfer of grapes to crusher and fermenting vats, and the upgrades in refrigeration which all this gleaming steel indicates. From the fermentation area, barrels are tucked neatly into the new cave. He will not be let down. The grapes will be carefully vinified, the temperature precisely controlled. He is gratified and he is thirsty, so he makes his way to the manor house porch, and as a guest of the winemaker, samples the wines.

He confesses to be looking for something almost grail-like in nature: a wine to accompany his famous madeleine, the cookie which launched his career. He has the great good fortune to be sitting across from the man responsible for the contemporary replanting of the estate vineyards. Tripped by his instincts into allowing the old block of Petite Syrah to be center stage, winemaker Robert Brittan fell in love with the Rhône varietals which sparkle around him on the table, from the melon spiciness of the Viognier and the fresh Amparo Rosé, to the deep bellied Syrah, a haven for all the gestures that could arise from notes and repercussions of black cherries and flinty anvils of drinkable stone.



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But the glass he slides across to his guest is the estate blend made from the field mix of the Petite Syrah old block: Ne Cede Malis. Proust bows his head to set the lip of the crystal to his mouth. He closes his eyes. His expression betrays nothing. His foot pumps up and down a bit because he is irrepensible, and because the wine is at once tender and resounding within him. He nods. Ne Cede Malis, Latin for “never give in to misfortune.” Nay KAY Day Mah Lees.

Repeating this prayer, our gentleman tips his hat and departs, stepping into the deepening blue of the evening sky in imitation of a Magritte painting, making signs to the birds as he goes, patting his breast pocket wherein lies the bill of lading with his wine purchase carefully recorded.

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