



## *Stags' Leap*

### A FIFTEEN YEAR SURPRISE: THE STEWARDSHIP OF ROBERT BRITTAN

The story begins when he first arrived at Stags' Leap in the spring of 1988. Robert Brittan was looking to make wine, and the property took that in stride, but it also had other plans. He was in for a surprise. It has turned out to be a gratifying and extremely complex surprise which has continued to unfold over the course of fifteen years.

Brittan was attracted to the property for its intrinsic natural beauty and the potential of the location for winemaking. The fact that he stayed is testament to the ability of the property to hold him, persuasive as it is with secrets embedded in stone. The secrets did not explain themselves to him directly, because it is not in the way of natural things to explain or justify themselves. Rocks in general, as Ursula LeGuin has pointed out, aren't living in the same way or at the same pace that we are.

The first and defining surprise came from a block of old vines that he considered no longer viable, head-trained Petite Syrah mingled with other Rhône varietals, planted in the same decade as Prohibition. It was an old-fashioned idea, he thought, the field blend. All of his training up to that point in his life advised pulling and replanting. And while he did replant most of the estate vineyards, that block is one which he did not. Instead, he nurtured the mixed population, because of its ability to charm him with the wine it produced.

So he made the decision to understand the grapes, and to respect their historic nature. In that decision he turned from being a simple winemaker to becoming a steward of the property, a caretaker of the soul of the land.

Brittan has spent a lot of time over the years walking the property, hiking slopes that rise up to the jagged palisades, exploring the wildlands that limn the inhabited area,

populated with creatures and plants, with simple facts of living and dying, water and rocks, trembling grasses, and the slow movements of reptiles.

During those walks, he gradually crafted the way in which he approached the vines. He began to see and treat the winemaking as part of this larger continuum, which includes Peregrine Falcons, apricot-colored coyotes, wild mint, and stately Buckeye trees. The vines have benefited from being cared for in this larger context. They have become an increasingly direct expression of the land, speaking instruments, redolent with an almost communicable mystery. Rolling a mouthful of Stags' Leap Syrah in the mouth releases some of this mineral justice, which invites a longer acquaintance.

He likes to joke about it, the fact that he nearly pulled out a block of vines that now defines his winemaking vision. This sense of humor underlies his ambitious projects, any one of which by themselves would be a considerable accomplishment.

In Brittan, the property has found a champion with a rare combination of dynamism and patience, someone who can be passionately stung by the possibilities inherent in a historic estate, and who also has the thoroughness and tenacity to see his projects through over the course of years. He works with an experimental attitude, always restless with new plans, fascinating and maddening in their scope and creativity.

Some of the larger manifestations of his thoughtfulness have become touchstones of his stewardship, defining the contemporary estate. The winemaker's apothecary, or sensory, garden, grew out of his curiosity about the fragrances of the wines he was making, and is designed to include plants that contain those fragrances. The plantings include a dizzying number of scented geraniums, espaliered fruits, herbs both exotic and humble, a source of entertaining education for visitors.

When increased storage was needed for his winemaking, Brittan modeled the new cave, finished in 2002, on the original wine cave blasted out of volcanic rock in 1891. Among all the choices available to a modern winemaker, and in spite of the technical challenges of blasting through rhyolite, he felt strongly that it was the right thing to do environmentally, historically, aesthetically. In spite of all those reasons and because of all those reasons a wine cave dug into a mountain also makes good wine, maturing barreled

vintages in the most steady temperature-controlled environment available on the planet, along with optimum humidity oozing from the living rock.

With the guts of the mountain dredged during the cavemaking, he then had a vineyard made up almost entirely of stone, a rare opportunity to forge a vineyard from the bedrock up, and a laboratory in which he can observe directly the effect of the native stone in a raw state on vines that have taken well over a century to acclimatize to this place.

It was on walks up the mountain to observe birds and cloud patterns that he began to shape the idea of a vineyard that could trick the light, surprise the vines themselves, cultivating varieties that normally do not ripen together, except for the fact that he positioned them on different slopes facing and turning away from the sun at given times of year. Once ripened together, they can be crushed together, a more sophisticated version of the field blend, a more sophisticated surprise, and one that he can hand back to the vines with satisfaction, an elegant debt repaid.

Reference to the lifestyle of rocks by Ursula LeGuin, from *Always Coming Home*, 1986, Bantam Books, New York

Copyright ©2004 Theresa Whitehill, All Rights Reserved

Written for Stags' Leap Winery

Spring/Summer 2004 Newsletter, Volume Four, Number Two, April 2004

For more newsletter articles, see: <http://stagsleap.com/art/literature.html>

Stags' Leap Winery 6150 Silverado Trail, Napa, CA 94556

<http://www.stagsleap.com/> [stagsleap@BeringerBlass.com](mailto:stagsleap@BeringerBlass.com)

(800) 640-LEAP (5327) (707) 944-1303 Fax: (707) 944-9433