



## *Stags' Leap*

### A RHONE WINE FOR THE PEREGRINE

#### *I. The Peregrine*

The day he saw four little fuzzy heads poking up out of a Peregrine nest on the Stags Leap Palisades in 2003, Douglas Bell was overjoyed. Before hiking back down off the rugged terrain to report the news to the winery, he watched as the parent birds fed their young, observing that the chicks, in early June, were only about three weeks old, when most of the other young Peregrines in the area were two to three weeks older, already fledged.

As a falconer himself, and assistant professor of biology at California State University, Sacramento, Bell has been studying California's Peregrines since the spring of 1974, when they were dangerously close to extinction. In the early 1970s, of 110 known Peregrine territories in the state, only 5 had adults present, and of those, only 2 pairs produced young. Almost 30 years later, the single nest at Stags' Leap contained almost as many nestlings as there used to be in the entire state.

On a trip later in 2003 however, Professor Bell found evidence that not all of the 2003 nestlings had survived. He discovered primary flight feathers of at least one juvenile falcon at the base of the rocky Palisades, feathers a young bird does not normally lose in its first year. Bell suspected that the vulnerable young bird, or birds, were killed by another predator. In spite of this setback, he had a good feeling about the health and stability of the nesting pair, which was confirmed in 2004, when he had the good fortune to arrive on the very day that three young falcons were being fledged.

The Stags Leap nest is one of several nests with actively breeding Peregrines in the Palisades. The Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group estimates that there are currently over 200 nesting pairs in the state. This is a cautious estimate due to the rugged terrain in their typical habitats, the amount of impenetrable private land on which falcons may be nesting, and a lack of funding to pay for the technology and manpower required by the methodical and exhaustive verification process.



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Bell makes the drive from his home in Berkeley on a regular basis to monitor as many nesting sites as he can in Napa and Lake Counties, as part of a group that includes dedicated volunteers. While the Peregrine is still on California's endangered species list and remains a fully protected species in the state, it came off the Federal list in 1999.

Bell's reports are very encouraging to winemaker Robert Brittan, mixed as they are. Brittan hopes that in coming years the falcons will continue to hatch out young and to fledge them, and that he'll have the pleasure of watching them take their first flights on the updrafts of the volcanic cliffs behind the winery.

Having spent time working with both the cultivated and uncultivated parts of the property, Brittan has an appreciation for how intimately these two are connected. He has taken steps to see that any unnecessary encroachment on the wilder areas is reversed or kept to a minimum. Cows that at one time grazed the slopes of the Palisades, compacting the soil and introducing nonnative grasses, have been moved elsewhere. The steep grass slopes may never recover to the state they were in before the coming of white settlers in the eighteenth century, but he has seen some native grasses regain their delicate hold on the thin topsoil.

When he makes wine here, he makes it for the Peregrine, a bird emblematic of soaring beauty with a tenuous hold on survival, a species that would be a palpable and tragic loss to any ecological niche, a creature worth nurturing. Brittan senses that what's good for the Peregrines on this property is also good for the wine grapes, and beyond that, it's good for those who come to work at the winery, drawn by its mystical beauty and unique setting.

Watching the Peregrine recover from near extinction has taught Brittan to look at time in longer threads, and to hesitate before enacting any change that doesn't take into account the property's history and integrity. This attitude, and the charisma of place that is Stags' Leap contributes to making it an appropriate site for Rhône wine varietals, in addition to the property's ideal soil and climate characteristics. Rhône wines are wines that can be tricky to make well, and are known for their passionate aficionados.



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### *II. Rhône Wines at Stags' Leap*

Early in his winemaking career, Brittan noticed that the California growers who are attracted to working with Rhône grapes tend to be characters themselves, their personalities matching the varietals. They're not renegades per se, but can be counted on to be refreshingly unconventional when it suits them. He found himself being attracted first to these personalities, and then to the wine itself.

Rhône wines have become his personal quest. For Brittan, Petite Syrah is an exquisite example of California wine. It can outlive, at ten, fifteen, or twenty years, most California Cabernets, and it's far more interesting to drink at any age.

Stags' Leap has a Petite Syrah focus and a long range plan for the estate that includes cultivating and planting new blocks where varietals are deliberately mixed. There's a reason for both of these. The varietal and the technique are historically appropriate to the place, a basic tenet of Brittan's philosophy of winemaking.

When the estate was founded in the 1890s, winegrowers of the time weren't overly concerned about the purity of varietal plantings. It was a very common vineyard practice for the earliest European immigrant vintners to intermingle different varietals in a single block, picking and crushing them together at the same time. This has led Brittan to believe that vineyards in Europe at the time were planted in similar ways.

Block Five, known as the *Ne Cede Malis* block, is a grouping of venerable head-trained mixed varietals, mostly Petite Syrah, dating back to the late 1920s or early 30s. In educating himself about mixed varietal plantings in California's winegrowing history, Brittan became reasonably certain that the *Ne Cede Malis* block has material that goes back even further, to the nineteenth century. In this vineyard, he realized he has a snapshot of living material from another era. Petite Syrah, known to Europeans as Durif, came along with the wine pioneers of the time and went into the mixed field blends. The remnants of those nineteenth century plantings are some of the oldest selections of genetic grape vine material in this country.



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Assistant winemaker Danielle Cyrot enjoys the fact that in making the Stags' Leap Syrah, she is helping tell more of the Petite Syrah story. Along with Peloursin, Syrah is one of the parents of Petite Syrah. Working intimately with both varietals, Cyrot is impressed by how different they are, in spite of their close genetic relation.

### *III. Porch Wine & Fence Wine: The Making of the Viognier*

The vines of Block Five, the 1920s era *Ne Cede Malis* block, include Carignane, Grenache, Syrah, Petite Syrah, Peloursin, Cinsault, Mataro, Muscat, and Viognier. Of these varietals, Carignane, Petite Syrah, and Muscat are not typically found in a vineyard in the Rhône region of France. Yet the Rhône blend that comes straight out of the mixed ethnic population of Block Five is remarkably similar to a Châteauneuf-du-Pape. This gave winemaker Robert Brittan the clue that the similarity between the wines has a lot to do with their nature as blends.

Following a path of disciplined experimentation, Brittan began separating out these different interplanted varieties, taking material from the old block and from UC Davis' DNA vine project, growing out the principal varieties on separate locations on the estate so that he could learn what they each contributed. This has led to his contemporary program of deliberate mixed varietal plantings of Bordeaux varietals, along with the Rhône program.

As test cases, Brittan made up each of the Rhône varietals from Block Five as casual porch wines, produced in small quantities for the pleasure of visitors and friends of the winery. Carignane, Grenache, a Grenache Rosé, and the Viognier all made their debuts in this way with more or less success. The Stags' Leap Viognier remains a uniquely spicy, fragrant glass of wine and was released to the public in 1998.

Brittan thought the structure and spiciness of the Viognier would be interesting, and initially set out to make it for use as a blending wine with his red Rhône. Tasting Viognier wherever he could, he realized it would be a difficult wine to make well. The flavor of a Viognier is very specific to its growing site. It also has wild variations in winemaking style.



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His effort to find enough Viognier grapes took him far afield, eventually to Lodi. One of his growers, a supplier of rootstock, had some Viognier planted along a fence. Brittan obtained bud wood and top-worked some Chardonnay vines on his own property in Napa. In 1994, he harvested grapes off his property and off the fence in Lodi and made a blend, using some in his Petite Syrah.

Viognier from that first season went into the 1993 Petite Syrah Reserve, the precursor to *Ne Cede Malis*, the Stags' Leap estate grown Petite Syrah proprietary blend. Ever since, he's been using it in the Petite Syrah, the Syrah, and the *NCM*.

Like Gewurztraminer, the Viognier grape needs a lot of sun to ripen. Unless it's allowed to hang until it's almost overripe, the fermentation will often stick, stopping short of converting all its sugars to alcohol, leaving too much residual sugar in the wine. The wine can develop the off odor of hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S). There is also a natural bitterness to the Viognier grape and a heaviness, almost an oiliness, that needs to be properly handled.

As assistant winemaker Danielle Cyrot puts it, Viognier has an incredibly aromatic fermentation. It's just luscious, really enjoyable to be around, and then at the very end of the fermentation cycle, it can take a nose dive into something quite stinky. She monitors the tanks carefully, and has learned to rack if off the lees immediately, as soon as fermentation is completed.

In California, Viognier style often tends to err on the sweet side in order to cover these characteristics and difficulties, which also, of course, tends to erase the best of what Viognier can deliver, its piquant spiciness, and its ability to be rich in texture without being overly sweet. It requires meticulous vineyard operations.

Which all goes back to the Peregrine, or upward, depending on your point of view. The care and tending of a property to ensure it can nurture a nest of fledgling falcons to maturity can also give the skill and training, the patience and willingness to coax along a tricky grape. When the work has succeeded, there's nothing like that flash across the afternoon sky of a



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Peregrine who has decided it's time to finish the hunt, trusting in its amazing air speed and wing contour, and there's nothing like the quiet gasp of pleasure that attends that first sip of cool spicy Viognier in a thirsty mouth, sitting on the manor house porch late on a summer afternoon, with the vines well-tended, and the day's work tucked into its barrels.

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Stags' Leap Winery 6150 Silverado Trail, Napa, CA 94558

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

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