

THE STORY IS the Chinese being laid off from work on the Transcontinental Railroad, and their passionate skill with dynamite. Robert Brittan describes in detail how they blasted and dug their way through hard black rhyolite to build the original wine cave at Stags' Leap Winery, circa 1891. How does he know so much about it? Is he psychic? Yes, but that's another story. As Winemaker and General Manager, he's just been through the black face of rhyolite himself, digging his new wine cave.

When he began construction on the new cave in September of 1998, engineers wanted to drill pilot holes to see what they were getting into. Why bother, Brittan told them. You can walk into our old cave and see exactly what's in there. Ordinarily, four to five test holes can be drilled in a day. It took them a week to drill one hole, at which point they told him, "We believe you," and began excavation with a mace rotor, grinding away the softer tuff on the outside until they began to hit black spots.

Two hundred feet into the mountain, two months behind schedule, the rotor breaking down continually, they switched to dynamite. Thirty charges, each six feet deep on a time delay, blasting from the center out, then mucking out later with the rotor, whose striations can be traced on the back walls of seventeen cross bores along the working stretch of the eight hundred foot main cave. The new cave's bore is twelve to sixteen feet. By comparison, the historic cave, used to mature estate Cabernet and Merlot, is 150 feet deep, with a thirteen foot radius.

Brittan designed the cave and chose its location, making room for the care and hand labor that goes into his Cabernet and Petite Syrah. Every month the barrels are opened and smelled, evaluated, topped up. Every three months the barrels are racked. He made sure there would be plenty of space for the constant movement of barrels required to make his wines.



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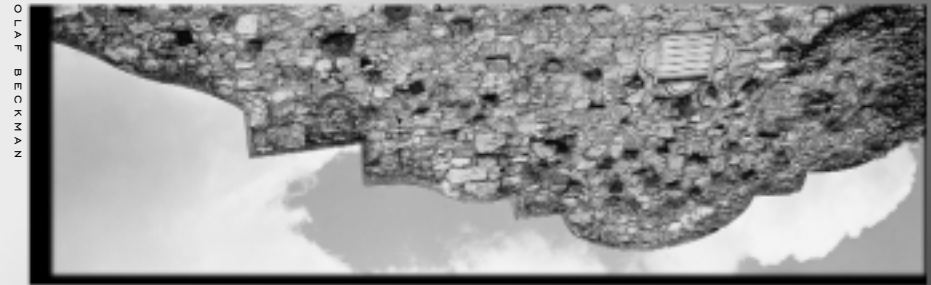
Why go to so much trouble? Historical aesthetics. The vineyard and winemaking techniques he's been fostering since his arrival at Stags' Leap Winery in 1988 are traditional, and there's and extra boost because of this location, a logic and grammar that's fed by the place and its history, and actually, compared with artificial temperature-controlled sheds, caves just make better wine.

Now the fun begins: beautiful wines. A hundred years from now, the descendants of the Chinese who built the original cave will sigh and say, "The story is the Americans..."

Using dynamite or digging by hand, there is no easy way to carve a wine cave into the mineral guts of the Stags Leap Palisades



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SIXTEEN, ACTUALLY. Oldtimers talk about it as a regular occurrence, something by which they could set their rain gauges. You can see the Stags Leap Palisades from directly west, across the valley in Yountville. At a certain point in the rainy season, the earth saturates, and then it begins. For every inch of rain, a new waterfall blossoms across the face of the rock and they have been counted, and named, like constellations, or wandering comets.

The rock face is doing push-ups on a geological time frame, tipping East. Blocking the rising sun, it leaves the buildings and gardens in a cool damp one remembers later in the afternoon with fondness.

In this early cool of the day, on a spring morning, one can surprise a whole hillside of lupine out back of the historic winery. Underfoot: oak fingerlings innocent and limpid as the tender green curls of poison oak.

And down out of these mineral theaters comes the liquid form of the mountain, soft paws, molten color to its fur, waiting for no sun. Pacing down over the rock, crushing the same grasses and flowers. Pausing at the entrance of the new wine cave, listening, smelling within. The mountain being curious about itself. The creatures who dig caves and stain their shirts with freshly crushed grapes excavating until they reach the moment of awe: Puma, mountain, human.

NOTE: edited excerpts; read the complete versions at stagsleap.com

"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. As one of four wines in winemaker Robert Brittan's new *Rhône Collection*, it shares with its companions traditional winemaking techniques. As for **Viognier**, we don't pronounce it so much as we just enjoy it, but if you'd like to use it in a Shakespearean sonnet, you can rhyme it with hay, lay, or Mandalay Bay. Brittan cloned **Syrah** grapes from the field-blend Petite Syrah block and has been making Syrah ever since. The **Amparo Rosé** is dry, soft, gentle and delightful, a pleasure for afternoons.

Gathered under the banner of *The Essential Leap* are three varietals that have gained the Napa Valley its international reputation. **Cabernet Sauvignon** has found its home in the rockier soil up against the mountain. 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. Reading poems, the afternoon becomes overly hot and the porch looks better, a little cooler, and anything startling would intrude. The **Chardonnay** is right at home there on a corner of the table, murmuring of oak...



PHOTOS OLAF BECKMAN TEXT THERESA WHITEHILL



THE WHITE UNICORN'S exquisite value for humans is its rarity. It is not common as Chamomile. *Anthemis nobilis* will grow even in abandoned city lots. A unicorn will only lay its head in the lap of a virgin, an issue of trust, and sexuality. In the apothecary garden at Stags' Leap Winery, Chamomile is given its place on earth, framed with consideration, deliberately planted, as if a unicorn could see into the future or might occasionally have a lost weekend.

The garden is best navigated on the knees, not because of being sorry about anything, but because that is the level of most fragrance. Two archangels are taking inventory of the life forms. "Meyer Lemon," one murmurs to the other, "Chocolate Cosmos, Scented Geranium with the following fragrances: ginger, staghorn oak, peach, chocolate, apple, rose, nutmeg." "How many lavenders do we have?" the one with the clipboard and the barely concealed radiance, asks the other. "We have White Lavender, Tarragon, Muscatel Sage. We have honeybees, mocking jay birds, baby rattlesnakes."

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In the center of the garden, an armory sphere. At each of the four corners, columns of field stones trapped inside cylinders of iron bar, trellises waiting to be grasped and coated with honeysuckle tendrils. Created on the scale of human footpaths, explains the archangel Roberto, not automobile paths, and he gestures to the

drive which sweeps past the gardens up and around the 1890s manor house with its columns of mortared field stone.

Artist Roberto Rovira wanted his trellis sculptures to echo the use of stone elsewhere on the estate, not just the mortared pillars of the manor house porch, but also the whimsical setting by a waterless basin, once a swimming pool, framed by mortared stone columns. It was the first artificial fresh water plunge in the Napa Valley. The estate, later owned by Frances and Clarence Grange, was leased by the US Navy as a place for officers to rest on their leaves from Mare Island Naval Base, twenty minutes to the south. An era when, some say, Canary Cottage first had its ghost, still warm, still breathing the fleshy blue air. The unicorn blinks.

The unicorn here is a stag. A stag that leapt to freedom while being chased by Wappo hunters, a stag that leapt to its death rather than be hunted down, a man named Staggo who lived just south of the estate at the time of

its establishment, a figurative euphemism devised by Horace and Minnie Chase during their honeymoon, an English placeholder inspired by the number of deer in the area when they drove up the drive from their society wedding. After the honeymoon was over, they never did document their reasons for the name, or if they did, the piece of paper, or the oral confession, never survived. It has become a legend, a mystery, an adaptable fact, a gift of the fragrance and the light.

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