



## *Stags' Leap*

### WINE CAVES AT STAGS' LEAP, THEN AND NOW

Let's go to the old caves first, he says, and talk about holes in the ground in general. You mean graves? No, he says, amused, but funny thing, graves were one thing we never found on this property, no human remains. What about the mummy? That's...another story.

The story is the Chinese, their being laid off from work on the Transcontinental Railroad, their passionate skill with dynamite. Robert Brittan, Winemaker and General Manager, describes in detail how they went about it, what they experienced, digging and blasting their way through the hard black rhyolite that characterizes this area. Little documentation exists about the original cave's construction, only its approximate date, 1891, shortly after Horace Chase established the estate. How does he know so much? Is he psychic? A magician? Yes, but that's another story. He's just been through the black face of rhyolite himself, digging his new wine cave.

Rhyolite gives Stags Leap its character. A cave dug into its mass has a stable temperature year-round for ripening wine in the barrel. It creates the soil that ends up in the bowl of the valley. It's the soul of the property, a rock formed by sedimentary and metamorphic processes, crushed by horrific pressure, and now tilting away from the horizontal, toward the vertical, as he says, "tipping East."

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. Only one other cave in the valley has been dug into rhyolite, predating Chase's original cave. Schramsberg and the Beringer brothers had also dug their caves before Chase, but that was the Mayacamas range on the west side, lifted sedimentary ocean floor. Ocean sea forms have been found fossilized in those hills. No other caves had been dug on the southeast side of the valley from the end of the nineteenth century until the end of the twentieth, and those were all in tuff, a soft white



## *Stags' Leap*

volcanic ash that resembles white sandstone. The engineers were being practical, methodical.

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 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 so that the rock collapsed on itself, 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 800 foot main cave. The new cave's diameter is twelve to sixteen feet. With each 55 foot storage bay holding about 400 barrels, there is room now, in the 28,000 square feet, for storage of 7,000 barrels. By comparison, the historic cave, used to mature estate Cabernet and Merlot, is 150 feet deep, with a thirteen foot radius, holding 300 barrels.

Following in the footsteps of the Chinese, duplicating a thought process over a century old, Brittan stands at the intersection of the entrance tunnel and the main cave and cups his hands to draw attention to the fact that the cave walls are not straight; they curve inward. This adds structural strength, as any builder of a Gothic cathedral would appreciate. In fact, right at the beginning of the main cave, excavation hit a fault that intersected another fault, and by boring through the rock and making a cross tunnel at that point, essentially giving it two sets of curvaceous bearing walls, it is now more stable than before excavation began. The new cave has taken thirty months from start to its current state of near completion in the spring of 2001 and is due to be finished by the fall.

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



## *Stags' Leap*

smelled, evaluated, topped up. Every three months the barrels are racked. He made sure there would be lots of space for the constant movement of barrels required to make his wines.

Why go to so much trouble? Historical aesthetics. It's how things are done here. The vineyard and winemaking techniques he's been fostering since his arrival at Stags' Leap Winery in 1988 are traditional, and there's an extra boost because of this location, a logic and grammar that's fed by the place and its history, and actually, it just makes better wine. A cheaper temperature-controlled artificial shed would have accomplished the same thing, but only approximately. Wine matures at a different rate in an artificial environment. Temperature year-round in both caves: 58 to 60 degrees. Humidity is 90 percent plus.

Great skateboard park he says, emerging from the main entrance, and his voice stops echoing, and becomes unearthly flat in the sudden light. Behind him the sound of a spaceship gearing up echoes towards him out of the gloom. This evolves into a motorized cart which shoots out of the darkness. The dog is wearing sunglasses, the woman cradles her arm around the dog, and the driver waves.

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..."

Copyright ©2001 Theresa Whitehill, All Rights Reserved

Written for Stags' Leap Winery

Spring 2001 Newsletter, Volume One, Number One, May 2001

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

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

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

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