



Stags' Leap

CRUSH, A FORCE OF NATURE

Standing in line at the counter of Gordon's Deli in Yountville, a couple is greeted by Sally herself. "You leaving?" she asks as she rings up and packages a fig coffee cake upon which everyone's eyes are riveted. "Yes," sighs the woman reluctantly. "Perhaps next trip we'll actually have time to sit down and speak a few words with you. "Oh," says Sally, wrinkling up her nose in merry dismissal, "it'll all work out." Her smile becomes luminous, lighting up her face, as if time were the greatest joke.

At harvest, grape professionals either tense with awe at the formidable task or assume Gordon's philosophy. It's a time of hilarity and long hours. Crush—an inundation and an ecstasy, bone-wearingly, endless in labor, and ever so limited in the winemaking opportunities that open and close throughout the busy weeks, with weather as thoughtless collaborator. In the end, it always works out.

In the parking lot at Stags' Leap Winery, the results of three vintages have rolled out of the cool fragrance of the stone cellar and stand ready for the road behind their classic labels. The 1999 Merlot, as an automobile, would follow on the sleek and voluptuous cars whose fenders are round and tail fins long, with a personalized license plate that reads "Smoked Turkey." Sliding into the seats, elegant and velvety, a thick black cherry middle, hints of forest floor and wild mushrooms, and a long cigar box finish. Assistant winemaker Kevin Morrissey has been test driving attentively.

Under the hood, the Merlot shows signatures of its vintage: a long cool growing season capped by a heat wave that spiked the harvest. Built from a foundation of estate grapes grown in the bowl of the valley away from the base of the Palisades, it is sympathetic to the heavier soils found there, a bit of river silt clay mixed with its surface loam and decomposed volcanic shale. The 1999 model is supple enough to be



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driven with pleasure right off the showroom floor, and has the underlying structure that will beg to be taken on the road in twenty years.

Next to this fine animal, the pale, creamy gleam of the 2000 Chardonnay, unequivocally a convertible, open to the sky and windows down. The 2000 crop was ideal, weather allowing a more relaxed harvest, following a long, drawn out, and gentle growing season. It's a classic in the style towards which Stags' Leap Winery has been steering: lean, firm, crisp yet full against the taste buds without excessive oak, a silken, aerodynamic model.

The Chardonnay winemaking practice as it is performed at Stags' Leap, 100% Old World, with each barrel becoming its own lot, is one of the most satisfying wines for Morrisey to be involved in making. He gets out his finest brushes for this, his finest pin-striper, often bringing his two and a half year old daughter as he makes the daily rounds, evaluating each barrel.

It's also a tightrope to walk, letting the wine age on the lees as long as possible to pull in all character from the grape, ushering it along so as to preserve the fresh fruit flavors, allowing the buttery stage that happens after fermentation, yet letting some of it go in exchange for the excitement that begins once the yeast die. Laying on the bottom of the barrel the yeast break up, spilling their guts, adding the aromas and flavors that mark such a satisfying change in the mouth feel of the wine.

Poking its shiny fender out with characteristic bravado is the 1998 Cabernet, the result of a year of small, intensely concentrated berries. With six extra months in the barrel, this represents an improvement over previous vintages, a fine-tuning that will continue. The benefits are evident: a softening and concentrating of the wine, gathering all of the flavor from a rainy and somewhat cooler growing season, late bud break, capped by ideal weather during harvest. The 1998 is full in the mouth, with



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long, firm tannins. There's time and space here, fresh fruit forward behind earthy tones. Bucket seats and no bumper stickers, this is a styling Stags' Leap vehicle.

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