



## *Stags' Leap*

### NE CEDE MALIS AND THE DNA OF FIELD BLEND PETITE-SYRAH

You know, I almost had that block ripped out when I arrived—one of the first things I recommended. Robert Brittan is sitting on a bench overlooking the estate vineyards, a spot where he can stretch out his long legs and think back over fourteen years of winemaking at Stags' Leap.

Something got in the way of this most practical and exemplary urge. He made Petite Syrah his first season, using grapes from that motley block of mixed vines known as Block Five, and the wine was so good, he went back and stood in front of those vines and wanted to understand them. This curiosity led to the making of Ne Cede Malis (pronounced **Nay Kayday Mahlees**), a proprietary wine so central to Brittan's vision for this place that it is difficult to separate out from the rocky soil. Ne Cede Malis led to the genetic quest, and the genetic quest led to the making of Ne Cede Malis... a wine that has become a definition and expression of the 70-year-old Petite Syrah block.

*Never give in to misfortune; always push harder.* He had inherited not only a legacy of head-trained vines when he arrived in 1988, but a motto from Horace and Minnie Mizner Chase, the founding family of the estate. *Ne cede malis.* Anyone who walks through the historic manor house will feel it, the multi-colored light striking out from a stained glass window in the dining room, especially in winter when the light shifts to the south and becomes almost too intense to take in directly. *Seal contra audentior ito.* Rampant lion, ruby glass, a history of fortunes and misfortunes. Phylloxera, silver mines, Prohibition, assumptions, all potentially debilitating in their own way.

Brittan brought in Dr. Carole Meredith, geneticist from the Department of Viticulture and Enology at U.C. Davis. He was able to show her Petite Syrah vines that looked identical but made wines that tasted entirely different from each other. He will be donating samples of these vines to the repository at Davis; Meredith determined through DNA fingerprinting



## *Stags' Leap*

that they are different varieties at a genetic level. The parentage of the Durif, or Petite Syrah, in his wines is true Syrah (the pollinating parent), and Peloursin, while the other vine is straight Peloursin.

Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphism Analysis, almost as baffling a phrase as the Deoxyribonucleic Acid it serves to analyze, but RFLP Analysis can detect differences in DNA sequence. It is being used widely in the industry to identify the parentage of grape vine selections, usually called clones. Brittan prefers the term selections. *Selections* leaves room for all the shifting and free fall of genetic material that is a genuine picture of reality; *clone* implies that the descendants of vegetative propagation are identical, which they never are. All kinds of things can happen to vinestock taken from a mother plant, budded, and replanted... mutation, pathogens, environment. His efforts have been directed toward making enough wine to know which vines are consistently unique, confirming those differences through testing, and developing known samples of those vines, so that as they die, they can be replanted, maintaining the multi-ethnic population.

Bacteria containing restriction enzymes behave like cleavers at the molecular level to chop up DNA into fragments. A solution is made of these fragments which is then placed on the surface of a gel and an electric current is run through the solution. The current causes the fragments to travel over the gel at different rates, with smaller fragments moving more quickly than the larger ones so that they end up spread out according to size. The DNA is made visible by staining with a fluorescent dye. Similar genetic material creates similar patterns of black bars.

Brittan bought the testing equipment himself, brought in a young technician with a degree in genetics, arranged for her training in the DNA analysis procedure, and began to sort through the vineyards. He made wine from different blocks, evaluated, adjusted his fermentation and barrel techniques, improved trellising, building successive blends of Petite Syrah as he replanted the estate from select genetic material. Even a newer block, planted in the 70s on



## *Stags' Leap*

AXR1 rootstock, which had begun to show signs of Phylloxera, had a stay of execution until he could determine it's contribution to the genetic mix and extract clean cuttings.

As he worked, he realized the importance of these mixed blocks. Vineyards aren't planted this way anymore for a whole variety of sound reasons. And yet, the oldest selections existing in California are in mixed blocks similar to the estate Petite Syrah, an incredible and vanishing resource. The older vines give unique qualities to wine, flavors and aromas that are utterly distinct from any of the newer selections of the same name being brought in now from Europe. At this point in time, the Petite Syrah vines, mixed in the old block with Carignane, Grenache, Syrah, Peloursin and Mourvedre, are some of the oldest existing in northern California.

The 1993 reserve Petite Syrah was a first effort at pulling together the results of the genetic quest. First official bottlings were in '96, but it wasn't labeled distinctly as Ne Cede Malis until 1997; the 1998 is just being released this Spring. When the barrels for this wine are being racked, you can back out of the old cellar and all the way over to the Manor House and still smell it, the aromas are so intense. From there you'd have to back up quite a distance to take in the complete arc of this project, something with the unmistakable mark of the hand of time. From a distance of seventy years, this arc might even begin to resemble one strand of the double helix looped over and back to touch the place and the time that it started from little shoots thrusting upward in the April sun.

Copyright ©2002 Theresa Whitehill, All Rights Reserved

Written for Stags' Leap Winery

Spring 2002 Newsletter, Volume Two, Number One, March 2002

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