



Stags' Leap

THE ADORATION OF NATURE: PICNICKING AS ARTFORM

Several thousand years ago part of the mountain that is the Stags' Leap Palisades fell down and lay itself out like a skirt, a lap, holding rocky soil. Craggy boulders dimple the grass on a rise overlooking the land below.

This knoll is the setting for Block 23, a Cabernet and Syrah based vineyard two years away from its first harvest. On the rise in front of the vineyard, deciduous White Oaks grow as best they can in the shallow soil, remaining small of stature. They keep their proportions slight, which gives a diminutive impression that only makes the view that much grander.

From here, the eye can simultaneously touch the Carneros region with the San Pablo Bay to the south, and the Mayacamas range west and north toward St. Helena. It's a ringside seat, a choice balcony looking down the throat of the opera star, which in this case is the mature estate vineyards below, the arena of wine.

The quality of being lap held with a timeless view is what makes this the best picnic spot on the estate of Stags' Leap. The distance which one travels to get here from the manor house below is not so much in kilometers as through the envelope of time. Picnickers share a metabolism of rebellion, the joy of being liberated from the work-a-day world.

By trodding grasses underfoot with an intent to dine outdoors, one undermines entropy, changing the molecular structure of fate itself. Thus the hiker with a propensity to picnicking becomes a saboteur of logic, sequence, and all things which time would have us believe are inevitable.



Stags Leap

Once through the gate and up on the knoll, the varieties of oak most common on the estate are clearly seen in their native habitat: California Live Oak, *Quercus agrifolia*, Black Oak, *Quercus kelloggii*, and the spidery White Oak of the bluff, *Quercus garryana*, sometimes accompanied by Blue Oak, *Quercus douglassii*.

Block 23 is the ideal setting for the oldest species of picnic which developed spontaneously on this estate in the late 1890s: the Crowd Scene (*Stagsleapus crowdensus*). It's the mountain's way of gathering together as many members of the same gene pool as possible. This has been an estate owned by a succession of large and diverse families, the two most prominent being the founding Chase family, who picnicked from 1888 clear up to 1909, and the Grange family, who further developed the artform of dining al fresco from 1913 until 1956.

Everyone who shows up at such a picnic is always a long lost cousin of the firmament, no matter what their family affiliation. They arrive, carrying baskets of essentials and perversities, and all manner of old wines, olives, and aged cheeses, and each breathes with relief the sense of duties temporarily left behind. Each experiences in her own way the giddiness of passing beyond the ordinary, passing through the veil, ascending the hill through lupine and old grasses worn out by winter, and a sense of adventure comes into the blood, even if it's just this simple jaunt up the hill. Picnics do that.

Each picnic grouping always contains a few less than enterprising souls, loafers, raconteurs. It would be a boring picnic without them, and they're usually willing to sing for their luncheon. Thus the blankets and accoutrements are gathered and carried, the sealed dishes of potato salad safely deposited, along with crusty breads and lemonades for the ageless. Traditionally, there's always something pickled and something tenderly sweet and fresh, some limpid fruit newly ripened which is the epitome of the season.



Stags Leap

Ultimately, the picnic is made up of a period of great energy followed by a period of noble repose, digesting the view and seeing one's life projected across the details of distance. The cards in each hand are shuffled and reorganized and finally left scattered about on the grass, warming in the spring sunlight. Once the crumbs and the half-finished dishes and the horizontal bottles predominate, there is a sense of ease and tranquility, perhaps a desire to sleep in the warm grass, read, scout a bird with a looking glass.

Behind the picnickers, the land slopes up at an increasing angle until it meets with the vertical slabs of volcanic rock that give the Palisades their signature sawtooth profile. A scattering of feral olive trees straggle up the slope, renegades of the first planting of a grove by the founding Chase family. They form an almost regular directional pattern in their unsteady progression, a sight line down through time to the first picnic.

The trees point below, where automobiles speed along a paved road called the Silverado Trail. As the picnic spirit takes hold, the cars begin slowing and stalling and then, just as relentlessly coasting backwards, then flying in reverse gear, the asphalt peeling back in deliciously simple spirals like the skin of a tangerine until there is a dirt track and a horse and a carriage bringing visitors from the train station across the Valley in Yountville, up the long drive between the walnut trees to the carriage house at Stags' Leap.

It is the year 1895 and the Chase family is well established. The manor house has been freshly built, the original wine cave was completed two years ago. Ysabel Chase is three years old. Horace Junior won't be conceived for another two years. 40,000 gallons of wine are to be produced this year from 100 planted acres of vines.

It was the natural beauty of this area that first attracted the Chase and Mizner family, as daytrippers and immigrants. Minnie Mizner was a debutante from local Benicia, the



Stags Leap

daughter of a California state senator. Her husband Horace traveled to the coast from Chicago. They met and partied at the local Soda Springs Resort, courted, married, and thus began a legacy of picnics.

Over a hundred years later, there has been considerable mutation with many subspecies of the outdoor feast. There is the rigorously planned version, accompanied by engraved invitations which originally took place beside the clay tennis court, the area which is now the croquet lawn. Then there's the spontaneous variety, the glance out the window in the morning "oh, it's spring" type of picnic. More robust physical specimens show a preference for some kind of exertion involving the Palisades with a chance to wear brand new hiking boots, firmly strapped to the foot with gut or nylon depending on the century, and for the hammock crowd, there's opening one's side door to light the grill and spread linen over the table under the walnut tree.

Around the manor house are some of the choice spots for a Quickie, where one can step down to the Power Spot, a bench curled around a venerable oak overlooking the estate vineyards, sharing some munchables and a glass of wine without tremendous effort, and only enough room on the bench for one other person, one other particular.

A Grazing Picnic can be accommodated by the sensory garden, or the Winemaker's Apothecary Garden as it is called. Arugula, tender spinach, raspberries, and cherry tomatoes fall sweet, peppery, or sharp across the tongue, oracles of good health and good fortune.

Strolling the grounds in further search of a place to perch with one's basket and blanket, one finds the mysterious and exotic passion pit, a former greenhouse now overgrown with passion flower vines. Emerging from the shelter of its exotic privacy there is an inexplicable and powerful fragrance of citrus blossom. Looking up, one begins to hunt for its source, up and up to locate the tree, because of course something that smells as



Stags' Leap

divinely as this can only come from some lofty source, until there is that hilarity of realizing the trick is being played by a low lying bush, and on to the other latest great spot, the Bocce court where the harvest table with chairs becomes a firm platform for the pulling of wine corks and a bleachers for watching gamesters of the bowling persuasion.

If the hunt for the perfect spot has been successful, the sky itself becomes a picnic blanket inverted. Each picnicker goes home and dreams of the delicate shades of lichen which covered the rocks on the sloping meadows up the hill, pale pink on one boulder, pastel fuchsia on the next, which segues into blatant rust before softening into melons and corals.

After such an interlude, we are rejuvenated, inspired, flawlessly recalibrated. Nature intersperses reminders of her essential mystery amidst opportunities for innovation, encouraging collaboration amongst the robust specimens she calls to her various laps and glades, and these show up in our dreams and lives the more regularly we show up on her slopes looking for that ideal of ideals: the place that feels just right to spread a blanket and open a basket of provisions, and sit a spell.

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