



Stags Leap

WHEN GRAPES COME TUMBLING

In the pause before harvest, the cellar crew works at a steady yet controlled pace, taking a few extra hours off in anticipation of a looming orgy of labor. Passing jokes with the hoses, they thread their pulses with the couplings, through the forklift arm and into the palettes, easing barrels down onto flatbed trucks, sorting, arranging, establishing the ground from which they will spring into action.

Very soon the waiting, the leisurely thought, is over. The impending ripeness of the grape and the increasing polish of its acidity reaches an ideal conjunction. The bunch of grapes hangs one moment aching on the stem, and the next, falls into the capable hands of the vineyard crew.

An avalanche of activity is started which continues through a dizzying series of weeks during which no one stops to measure up or divide or own or reason, except with the pulse. The relief of unambivalent action takes over. Communication occurs by electric current. All anticipation is surrendered; all ambiguities lose their luster. For the blood, it is primordial, the chance to participate in the turning of the season, a genetic satisfaction in dancing across the earth, poised as an angel, energized by the transfusion of fall.

When picking grapes by hand intended for premium wine, an experienced picker can fill two to three half ton bins a day, depending on his or her skill and handling of the delicate fruit. From beginning to end, at each phase of harvest, there is always the vivid tension between the swiftness required to get the grapes into the fermenting tanks at their peak of ripeness, and careful handling to assure that the grapes hold their fragile globes of sugars and acids and mystical flavor components until they are ready to be released. This tension adds snap to every decision, and every move.



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The grapes must be kept moving along, but with complete attention and mindfulness, a grace that allows for the myriad decisions required as the grapes arrive from the fields, as they are placed into the crusher and transferred to fermenting tanks and barrels. These decisions that can only be made while the grapes are flying are the ones that make all the difference in wine destined to stand in elegantly labeled bottles.

If harvest could be choreographed and repeated every year without variation, how much easier it would be, with chalk marks on the cellar floor to indicate where to stand, what arc to describe when weaving together the dance, but it is new every year—different weather, different circumstances, different grapes. The miracle is in how the vineyard crew, the cellar crew, and the winemakers willingly and energetically give themselves to this great improvisation. Each season teaches them how to rely more and more on their instincts, how to accommodate their companion workers, how to give consideration to the grape, the available daylight hours, how far they can push themselves.

From the perspective of the enologist, grape sugars are being converted into alcohol, carbon dioxide gas, and heat. The cellar crew, who feels the heat in the exchange most intensely, are also fermenting. As the weeks go on, the work is intense, unrelenting, and tiring. Like all distance athletes, once their bodies have used up available oxygen in the blood, aerobic respiration is no longer possible. Their metabolism shifts to the less efficient anaerobic mode, a fermentation in the blood which yields up lactic acid, a chemical reaction signaled by a bodily sense of weariness. Just when it seems the muscles can't escort any more grapes, the lactic acid becomes available as a secondary fuel for the muscles, hence the sensation of getting an unexpected infusion of energy, a second wind.



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As the cycle winds to a close, anywhere from mid-October to early November, any residual burst of thermal calories from the fermenting grapes is balanced by the gradual winding down of the hip hop artists of the barrels, pumps, and hoses, until finally, a harvest party inevitably materializes, and the dancers can take five with complete satisfaction, celebrating the tucking away of the year's wine into quiet barrels and clean-swept caves.

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

<http://www.stagsleap.com/> stagsleap@BeringerBlass.com

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