



## *Stags' Leap*

### SIDEWAYS LIGHT & THE CULTURE OF CABERNET PART I: THE WINEMAKER'S CELLAR

The most beautiful light on this property is late afternoon light. Morning light is the embodiment of excitement; it's vibrant, working light. But when the sun gets around to the other end of the day and comes sideways through the trees and vines, and the edge of the atmosphere with its pollution and particles, for reasons of optical physics it takes on hues and a vibrancy that are magical. This sideways light induces calm and introspection as opposed to expectation, a light revered by photographers.

Having a photographer for a father, winemaker Robert Brittan learned to look at light as an exquisite expression of energy. He has had a chance to study the light in all seasons, at all times of day, and over the course of fifteen years at Stags' Leap. His favorite moment of the day is when the valley is rapidly shifting to twilight. It's a fragile moment, time for poetry, contemplation, a glass of wine on the manor house porch; time for owls to fly and bats to wake up.

If you want to thoroughly study the light on this estate, in addition to spending a bit of time hiking and sitting on the porch, you'll have to be fortunate enough to receive an invitation to the Winemaker's Cellar, because that's where it's ultimately stored. Freshly gleaming from a recent vintage or gently dusted with age, the glossy ranks of bottles cellared underneath the main floor of the manor house are made up of wines crushed from fruit that has spent a season gathering in the rays of this sideways light.

The historic entrance to the cellar is a trap door in an alcove that serves as a staging room between the kitchen and formal dining room. The trap door used to be in the middle of that alcove floor, with steep wooden stairs. The wait staff ran down and back many times over the course of an evening to access barrels of wine that sat at the foot of



## *Stags' Leap*

the stairs. This was during the era when the estate was a resort and restaurant, which started before the beginning of the Roaring Twenties, and ended with the beginning of the Second World War.

The trap door has been moved to allow space for stairs of standard proportion, with a railing added so that those who might not have the balance of a nimble-footed waiter can take advantage of an invitation from the winemaker to join him in sampling a library wine or two.

Descending into the cellar, there's a palpable sensation upon encountering the cooler, wetter air in the dim light. It's the spirit of the wine itself, that glorious anticipation upon opening a venerable bottle. Will it be good? Will it be extraordinary? How will aging have transformed its flavors? Will it be one of those bottles that has inexplicably gone off? For the lucky guest, it's an adventure written in the semi-darkness on liquid that can quench a special thirst for the soul of this place.

The cellar has been recently renovated, with new walnut cases installed, creating a permanent repository where estate wines can be properly cared for and lovingly looked upon, if not consumed. Here is stored a small selection of everything the property has ever bottled, to be used by the winemaker, at his discretion, for the occasional old bottle tasting, or for comparing a new with an old bottle, perhaps to have a discussion with the manor house ghost.

Drainage was a challenge. Moisture seeps out of the east wall anchored against native stone. Temperature control was added only recently, which explains the lack of older vintages. The summer heat of this area reached down below ground level to taint wines that had been collected from all over the world, along with any estate vintages older than the 1970s.



## *Stags' Leap*

In addition to the trap door entrance, the Winemaker's Cellar can be accessed from the Billiards Room via a wrought iron gate, and also via a secret passage, the ghost's entrance, created to ensure the cooperation, and hospitality, of the ghost.

Newly renovated as it is, with discreet lighting, the Winemaker's Cellar still awaits the miracle of dust and patina that only time can give. To Brittan, it feels almost too clean. He remembers the state it was in when he first arrived: littered with broken glass, some of the old shelves holding bizarrely twisted, heat-melted bottles that spoke of some undocumented apocalypse, rare and fabulous wines mixed with mediocre vintages. Among the dusty bottles, he found a Syrah that had been mislabeled. Now *that* was a good bottle.

In a natural open corner where the cellar makes a turn, a platform has been built above the hard damp ground, to hold a handcrafted table for small, intimate gatherings. From here, the winemaker and his guests can take their wine back up the stairs, through the trap door, and outside to sit on the porch, to watch for the moment of sideways light, bringing the wine back full circle to the sun and stone that gave it birth.

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