



Stags' Leap

SIDEWAYS LIGHT & THE CULTURE OF CABERNET

PART III: Cabernet

The essence of the Stags' Leap estate as a winemaking entity turns on Cabernet Sauvignon. When winemaker Robert Brittan first arrived, it was also his biggest challenge. The Cabernet blocks were the ones showing signs of Phylloxera and Eutypa. In addition to disease, the vine was not planted in the best locations on the estate for its needs. Planting it in better sites was fundamental to getting the property turned around.

Currently, six selections of the grape are planted on a variety of soil structures, from the toe of the slope out beyond the manor house, to the mountainside itself. Five different rootstocks are used, depending on location. What all of these estate selections with their various rootstocks have in common, beyond the Cabernet Sauvignon varietal, is that they are grafted, they bud, flower, fruit, go through veraison, and ultimately ripen, in a viticultural appellation renowned for its Cabernet.

The Stags Leap region is recognized as one of the best places in the world to grow this variety. Its soils are well-drained, and have a high rock content compared to valley soil. Debris comes right off the mountain behind the estate with every storm and gust of wind, and has done so ever since the Palisades formed a million years ago. Rock holds much more heat than dirt, with the temperature soaring in the afternoon. At night, rock also lets go of its heat faster, providing a wider variation of temperature that the Cabernet grape seems to like. The climate's long growing season allows the grapes to be left on the vine until they're absolutely ripe, a luxury many regions in the world don't possess. The grape has been grown on this estate since the 1960s.

As a noble variety, Brittan is almost tempted to say it's a boring grape. It will grow almost anywhere and make a decent glass of wine. It can even be abused and make a



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bland but drinkable wine. Yet in a place that's truly nurturing to the variety, it can make an amazing wine. Cabernet has a formidable history in Europe; it's a workhorse around the world. For this reason, he surmises, many sophisticated folks lose track of it; it's taken for granted. Not tended properly, Cabernet can deliver big chewy mouthfuls of overripe fruit. If picked underripe, the herbaceous notes can dominate in an unpleasant way. But there's an elegance to the grape when it's well handled that can make wines that are meaningful, interesting at the table. This is the source of Brittan's passion for this particular grape. These are wines that lend themselves to conversation and nuance.

The varietal is all about black fruit. It can give one of the most elegant and beautiful taste experiences, a seamless effect that never quite lets go, from the first taste to the mid-palette and beyond—a vibrantly long finish. It can have wonderful, aromatic notes, achieving a real finesse in the mouth, with a complexity and intensity that goes exceptionally with food. At Stags' Leap, Cabernet delivers flavors and aromas of crushed dry blackberry leaves and anise; in cooler years—raspberries and plums.

The grape is easier to grow than Petite Syrah, he admits ruefully, as if it were a fault. It withstands heat and rot well. It's always the last to bud out and the last to be picked in the fall. It uses less water than Petite Syrah, and does a better job of balancing its crop on its own without intervention, making long loose clusters. The ratio of its small berries and thick skins allow the wine its typical deep dark, often opaque, color.

The estate Cabernet vines are now laid out in specific areas chosen to give the roots proper development room, and allow for ideal light entrapment. Balance in these two factors is critical in the ability to make outstanding wine. Water is used to fine-tune that balance once the location, rootstock, selection, and pruning are adjusted.



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Upon establishing the essentials for the vine's growth and harvesting, Brittan was able to turn his attention to things beyond the traditions and known quantities of the grape as a European transplant. He began to look for ways to allow the grape to take full advantage of the elements of the estate that nurture the varietal. This place, with its historic planting of Petite Syrah that dates to the 1920s, taught Brittan to understand and respect the field blend concept, and based on this, he planted some of his newest Cabernet vineyards as field blends—intermingled with Petite Verdot, Merlot, Syrah, Tempranillo, Malbec and Cabernet Franc vines—intending them to be harvested and crushed together. These vineyards are now ripening toward their first crush, planned for 1995.

And while he's waiting to savor the results of this most recent adjustment in the Cabernet world view, he can always pour out a couple of glasses of the Estate wine and enjoy a quiet, sun-drenched conversation with a friend or two on the manor house porch.

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