



## *Stags' Leap*

### ASSEMBLING CABERNET

Lift your glass of Stags' Leap Cabernet Sauvignon and turn it in the light. What is it made of? Dreams? Volcanic rubble? If you could break it down into its constituent parts, what would you have in your hand? In this recipe for making memorable Cabernet, the primary ingredient you would have to assemble is the place itself.

Set your wine bottle on the rock wall overlooking the estate vineyards, and bring your glass out into the geometrically mesmerizing rows of vines. Sit cross-legged on the ground, or better yet, lay out full length, and let some of the little creatures that scuttle along the surface of the earth use your shirt cuff for a roller coaster. Unfocus your eyes a bit, inhale the pungent earthy cradle of grapes.

There are two different types of soil at Stags' Leap—the soil located on the lower lying flats, and that of the hillside. They are dramatically different in structure, origin, and composition.

What you're lying in now, in vineyards fanning out in front of the Manor House, are soils classified as Bale Loams, one out of two of the finest deposits in the Napa Valley; the other being the Rutherford Bench. But while the Rutherford Bench and Stags' Leap share similar soil profiles, they have utterly distinct microclimates, influenced by their respective topographies, orientations to the sun and wind, and the different mountains at their backs.

The Bale Loams here are alluvial soils, with volcanic ash minerality, eroded sediment that forms where stream channels emerge into flatter land. If you were to reach your hand into the soil like a vine root, eventually, as your arm stretched to a length of anywhere from 36 to 48 inches, you would encounter a deeper layer of sandy loam laced with gravel and cobbles, allowing for exceptional drainage. Water is conducted into the Napa



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River subterraneously from here, leaving the soil above relatively dry, encouraging vine roots to also stretch as they yearn for sustenance.

Shaking out your wings and soaring up over the Manor House and onto the knoll of Block 23, the Vigilance Vineyard, you alight on soils that rise up on steep slopes toward the Stags Leap Palisades. The soils are classified as Kidd and Boomers series; Kidd shows a grayish brown color, and Boomers tend toward the reddish brown end of the spectrum. From eight to eighteen inches of topsoil sits on top of volcanic rhyolite and tuff. These topsoils are residual, having formed directly in place from the existing bedrock, by gradual degradation over time from wind and rain, heat and cold. Water drains quickly through this loose, rocky soil, sinking down and sheeting off the rock beneath, so that baby vines struggle for many years before being strong enough to offer grapes for winemaking.

From here the shape of the land, its topography, is an irresistible subject matter for the eyes. The aspect, or direction the slopes face in relation to the sun, orients south, west, and north. Depending on where you stand, you can look out across the parts of the Napa Valley visible on either side of a low hill that effectively blocks the estate off into its own separate valley.

Napa Valley pinches down to a narrow waist just north of here at “the Yountville Constriction,” and the cool marine air from San Pablo Bay is channeled through the Stags Leap District by a funnel, a venturi, created by this narrowing. Winds forced to whistle a little faster through the smaller valley of the estate and across the vines are encouraged further by the suction of warm air rising up the mountain slope.

The palisades that define the east side of the property and the hill opposite not only frame the estate vineyards between them, they shorten the sunlight hours of the day. More significantly, they lengthen the Stags' Leap dawn and twilight so that the grapes



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stay out of direct sunlight for a longer period of time. The rock face also gives off stored warmth after sunset, reflecting and radiating down over the entire ranch. It's wonderful to be a visitor to the ranch after sunset in August and September and feel that lingering, radiating heat. You can believe it's a great time to be a Cabernet cluster as well.

Unlike a recipe for chocolate gateaux, whose ingredients have known and verifiable contributions to that delectable forkful of cake in the mouth, it is not yet known for sure how certain ingredients for our Cabernet—soil, microclimate, topography—ultimately contribute to the characteristic flavors, aromas and structure of wines. We do know that certain geographical areas are legendary for the excellence of their wine grapes and certain characteristics have a good chance of being the contributing factors. It remains for winemakers to go back to the kitchen and continue testing and tasting that will narrow down the specific origin of wine qualities.<sup>1</sup>

The wines from the hills are different than the wines from the flats. Yet these differences are subtle compared with characteristics significant of this place, indicating that their shared microclimate might contribute a larger share in the mix. Where Rutherford, with soil similar to the flats of Stags' Leap, is known for its lavender notes, and has characteristic big round mid-palette tannins, the structure of wines from Stags' Leap are fine and delicate, long in the mouth. Karen MacNeil describes Stags Leap District wines as having, "the irresistible softness of flannel pajamas."<sup>2</sup> There is a dry herb sense that comes through, a flinty, earthy flavor, with black cherry and raspberry fruit aromas.

As you make your way back down off the mountain, this time following the trail that winds along the contour of the hill above the historic winery, all of these separate pieces that you have considered independently begin to assemble themselves back together again. By the time you reach the rock wall where you have left your bottle of wine, it is waiting for you, a leaping stag of a vibrant Cabernet Sauvignon, a wine that whispers of



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its origin long after you've finished your glass, set it down and wandered away into your evening, perhaps for a game of Billiards, or a rendezvous in the moon garden.

<sup>1</sup> See *The Winemaker's Dance: Exploring Terroir in the Napa Valley*, Jonathan Swinchatt and David G. Howell, University of California Press, for an articulate and engaging discussion of how much is known and not known about the impact of terroir on wine, and the companion website project: <http://terroir.earthvisioninc.com/> for The Terroir Project, resources related to gathering definitive information to help winemakers understand and incorporate knowledge about terroir into their winemaking

<sup>2</sup> "Softly the Stags Leap: A Primo Cabernet District and its Ooze Factor," Karen MacNeil, *Los Angeles Times*, Wednesday, July 8, 1998, page H6, Wine Section

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