



Stags' Leap

A WINEMAKER'S PLEASURE: THE PRIVILEGE OF CHARDONNAY

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As a winemaker, my routine in the months of August, September, and October involves several hours each morning spent walking vineyards, looking at the overall vine health and balance, and tasting grapes from as many different parts of the vines and areas of the blocks as I possibly can.

This year, my six-year-old daughter, Zoë, looked forward to Sundays when I would wake her before dawn, bundle her up and take her out to taste grapes. In the car, she would slowly pass from her dream world to my dream world, asking me, "Papa, are we going to taste red grapes or green grapes?" "You mean red grapes or white grapes." "Why do you call them white? They're really green." "Because we make white wine out of them," which isn't really white either. "Can we taste red grapes and green grapes and bring some red grapes home to Mama and Oona?"

And it goes on about like that until we pull through the gates and onto the first ranch. The sky is light now and the sun is just behind the hills. There are no fools out here this early Sunday morning except for us, and it is glorious. The vines are full, there is dew on the ground, dew on the grapes. The fruit is cold, crisp, sweet, and delicious.

Zoë loves to walk. She eats grapes, telling me which ones are the best, which ones are too sour. She asks if she can pick some leaves to take home. Then we're back in the car. We drive a few hundred yards to the next block, walk and talk and taste some more, pick some more leaves. The sun peeks up over the hills and cuts across the tips of the vines; the morning world lights up. A jogger runs by in a trance. Back in the car, I need my sunglasses, drive back onto the highway, head for the next ranch.



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We're looking at Chardonnay blocks, and Chardonnay is the earliest Stags' Leap varietal to ripen and the first to harvest. As for red grapes, only Pinot Noir would be close to tasting ripe, while Merlot and Cabernet are several weeks behind and still tasting like sour cherries. Before we've finished we'll nevertheless have to follow through on my promise to find a few small red clusters to bring home. Soon we're out of the car again; we walk and talk and "eat" more green grapes.

To my eye they're somewhere between the palest of pale lime green and the golden rays of sunrise, soon to be a beautiful white wine with a hue of the lightest autumn straw. To Zoë, they're green grapes, and they're yummy. Before quitting the last vineyard we step across the avenue into a block of Pinot Noir that belongs to a friend of mine. We taste red grapes until we find the perfect bunches to bring home to Zoë's still-sleeping Mama and little sister Oona, and we're on our way home for breakfast.

Growing and vinifying Chardonnay is a pleasure and a privilege. The work starts in the vineyards, standing on a hill kicking the dirt. Planting the right clones on the right soils in the right areas, and considering the slope and the path the sun will take crossing the sky in the month of August as the grapes are ripening. Our Chardonnay vineyards in the Napa Valley and in the Carneros are cool and breezy and exceptionally well-drained. The vines are small, low yielding, and balanced and as the summer wears on, the tiny berries develop into immensely flavorful translucent succulent candies.

We often talk about clones when we talk about Chardonnay, and our favorite clones are the Dijon clones, the Wente clones, and a couple of the new Champagne clones. They have numbers like 76, 96, 352, 121... Fruit intensity, flavor complexity, and gustatory excitement is what makes one Chardonnay clone more interesting than another.

We start harvesting the vines when the fruit starts tasting right. As harvest approaches, I walk the vineyard blocks every couple of days tasting berries, metering the rate at which each



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particular block is sweetening up. I watch the weather forecast and the chemical analysis of the maturing grapes. Ultimately, I make the picking call with a vision of how the wine made from that single parcel will contribute to the final blend of the Stags' Leap Chardonnay.

The field crews have been through the vineyard removing any fruit that isn't perfect, and the picking crews follow several days behind them, so that every cluster delivered to the winery has been twice selected. The whole clusters are picked in the early morning hours so the fruit is still nice and cool as it goes directly to the press. We settle the juice for twenty-four hours, chill it to fifty degrees Fahrenheit and transfer it to pre-cooled barrels.

The different lots are kept separate and barrel fermented in French oak from the Nievre, Allier, and Tronçais forests. One third of the barrels are new, one third once used, and one third twice used. As the golden juice turns to wine I taste every barrel with my winemaking team and determine which, if any, of the barrels will undergo malolactic fermentation. In 2004, only twenty percent of the wine went through the malolactic conversion. Like many of the winemaking decisions, this is decided based on the sensory attributes of the wine, barrel by barrel by barrel by barrel.

Every two weeks, the barrels are stirred and topped, and at the end of eight months, the clear wines are gently racked off their lees and prepared for final blending. As we roll into the blending process, I have a singular focus: balance. At Stags' Leap we have a style, but we don't have a recipe. The style is about the beautiful intersection of richness and minerality. Quality has been delivered by the vineyards and assured by the cellar and winemaking teams, so when I am blending the wine my muse is balance.

I may start with thirty to forty different blocks of Chardonnay, from which I intend to blend one Stags' Leap Chardonnay—a wine that will paint a portrait of the characteristics of our vineyards in this particular vintage year. I have to consider acidity, mid-palate body, up-front impressions, alcohol, oak influences, fruit influences, malolactic influences, tannins, the



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finish of the wine, bitterness, aromatics, oxidative influences, and hedonistic preferences. I'm a right-brained blender; I trust my senses and let the wine be my leader. When the process is complete and the blend is as supple and balanced and exciting as it wants to be, it goes to bottle.

In 2004, the weather was generally very good with moderate spring temperatures. We had an early bloom and apart from a few hot days in June, mild weather dominated the growing season. The grapes enjoyed a long hang-time, and all the fruit was in the winery before the late September hot spell. In all of our vineyards, the Chardonnay grapes developed optimal maturity and extraordinary flavor, and produced a harmonious experience in the glass. I invite you to try the wine; it is a classic and satisfying example of what we do.

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