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BORDEAUX BLENDS



Some of Stags Leap District's big names

STAGS LEAP DISTRICT: THE BORDEAUX PIONEER PLAYING TO ITS STRENGTHS

by Kia McInnery

Barely 1.5km wide by 5km long, Stags Leap District is Napa's smallest appellation. Its wines were known for silky textures and gentle tannins even before Stag's Leap Wine Cellars claimed first honours for its 1973 Cabernet blend in the original Paris Tasting.

'The AVA (American Viticultural Area) is well defined in terms of soil and climate,' says Russ Weiss of Silverado Vineyards. Volcanic hillsides and an alluvial valley floor provide soils that grip the vines and provide excellent drainage. Brisk winds from San Francisco Bay prevent over-ripening that can otherwise spike sugar levels in Napa. Slower ripening means harvesting as much as three

weeks later than a few kms north, resulting in more mature flavours and softer tannins.

In Bordeaux, blending counters Cabernet's strong tannins in its youth. Sauvignon after all, resembles the French word for savage, and it is Cab Sauv's harsher nature that blending is intended to tame. In addition, early-ripening Merlot serves as Left Bank climate insurance in case autumn arrives too soon for the later-ripening Cabernet. But given the leisurely ripening time, fine tannin structure and smooth texture of Stags Leap wines, why blend?

'Cabernet can be a loudmouth,' says Kevin Morrissey of Stags' Leap Winery. 'We

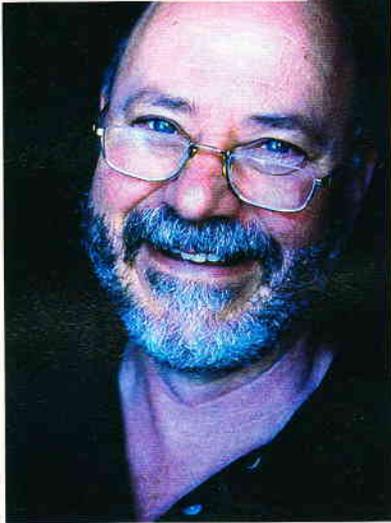
blend for harmony and balance.' At Pine Ridge, Stacy Clark says: 'Our philosophy is to blend. I look for layering and complexity - a target structure and mouthfeel.'

Despite the shared belief in blending, there are notable differences in approach between Stags Leap and its original model. Recent vintages of Left Bank ciaret are mostly Cabernet - over 80%, with Merlot, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc making up the difference. One would expect Cab to be even more dominant in California blends - but the reverse is largely true.

Pine Ridge's 2003 Estate Cabernet contains 12% Merlot as well as Petit Verdot. ...

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Doug Fletcher at Chimney Rock loves Petit Verdot in his blends



The estate's Andrus Reserve is typically 60-70% Cab with Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc and Malbec. Malbec has all but disappeared from the French recipe, yet it is the alluring new kid in California. At Cliff Lede, the varietal is part of the estate's 2003 Claret as well as its signature Poetry Cabernet blend.

In terms of percentages and experimentation, Stags Leap winemakers are spread right across the board. For Morrisey, a favourite varietal is Cabernet Franc. 'It lightens up the wine, layers in high notes - the vocals, if you will.'

At Chimney Rock, winemaker Doug Fletcher likes Petit Verdot in both the

estate Cabernet and Reserve. 'It gives a blueberry aromatic that is great with the blackberry of the Cab.' Hartwell's 2003 Misté Hill Cabernet includes 21% Merlot and a splash of Petit Verdot.

In describing his intentions with the Elevage reserve blend, Doug Fletcher makes reference to the Right Bank. 'With more Merlot and Cab Franc, it is more like Cheval Blanc,' he says.

Despite the AVA's differences in soil, climate and blending preferences, there is a strong Bordeaux reference throughout. 'Everyone started with Bordeaux,' recalls Weiss. 'That was the inspiration and the benchmark.' But with such disparity in terms of the approach to blending, is there uniformity among Stags Leap wines?

'The character of the AVA transcends all varietals,' says Morrisey. 'Both the Merlot and Cab have a common character due to the terroir.'

'There's a distinct texture to the wines grown here, fine-grained tannins, silky in the mouth,' says Weiss.

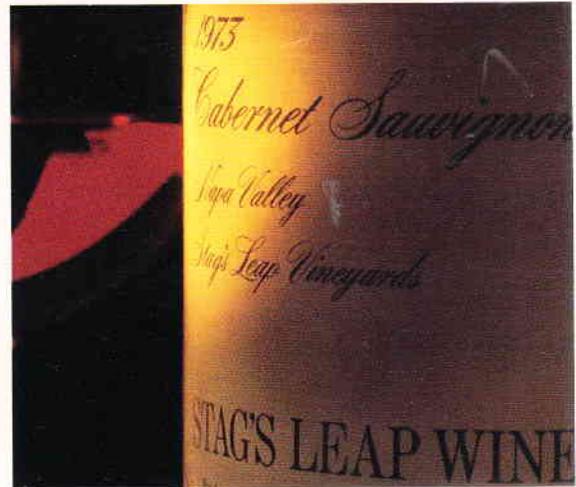
With the possible exception of Shafer's voluptuous high-octane 100% Hillside Cabernets, the wines show a uniform restraint that is closer to France than to California powerhouses.

Like his colleagues, Morrisey does not expect his wines to taste like Bordeaux's, however. 'If I can achieve an expression of Stags Leap District, it is a good thing to be doing with my life,' he says.

This is echoed by Weiss. 'Our deep passion and love for Bordeaux got us to the party,' he says. 'Now, 30 years later we end up with blends that are unique - completely different from Bordeaux.'

In October, the District association will release its 10th Appellation Collection - 15 or so Cabernets from members intended to showcase the distinctive AVA style. Although all will contain at least 75% of the varietal as required by law, the collection reveals different blending styles.

When Warren Winiarski added Merlot to his 1973 Stag's Leap SLV Cabernet Sauvignon, he was unsure what effect it would have. 'I was looking for softness, perfume, fleshy qualities.' Who could have guessed his experiment would launch a tradition that links two great wine regions?



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