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Forbes Magazine

Mar 29, 2021, 02:11pm EDT | 2,261 views

Exploring The Cabernet Sauvignon Of Napa Valley, Part One: Stags Leap District And Yountville



[Brian Freedman](#)

Contributor

[Spirits](#)

I cover wine, spirits, travel, and food, and consult on wine. Follow me on social media @FDTreport

The 2018 vintage of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons is justifiably generating some serious buzz. Up and down the region, 2018 provided all of the ingredients for a classic year. Doug Shafer, President of Shafer Vineyards, commented: “I think 2018 is Napa doing what Napa does best,” he noted. “The temperatures were on the cool side, a lot of days in the mid-‘80s to low ‘90s. The see-saw of daytime highs and nighttime lows could see a swing of 40 degrees, which helps the fruit hold onto acidity. We had great fruit set resulting in a big crop, which we trimmed back to focus in on the best-of-the-best clusters, great canopies, and ideal temperatures, which allowed for long hangtime and the luxury of making picking decisions entirely based on flavors and mouthfeel rather than any concerns for heat or rain.”

He continued, “If you get your picking decisions right, the vineyard just gives the winemaker a wonderful gift.” He continued, “We’re seeing great acidity in the wines, which means they’re rich and lush while balanced nicely with a lot of vivid energy and lift. The tannins are elegant and ripe with enough softness to enjoy now and enough structure to ensure a lot of beautiful things will happen in your cellar down the road.”

Joe Harden, Winemaker at Nickel & Nickel, agrees. “I think 2018 is the vintage of the decade,” he told me. The conditions throughout the season resulted in everything “looking good on the vine, on the line, and then once we bottled it...it’s a fantastic year.”



Napa Valley may be spoken of as a monolith, but as this map of its AVAs shows, it is actually ...
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Napa Valley Vintners

PROMOTED

Of course, no great vintage exists in a vacuum, and even somewhat challenging years almost always boast enough excellent wines to make them worthy additions to a wine collection, no matter how modest or elaborate.

With that in mind, I set out to taste Cabernet Sauvignons from throughout Napa Valley, focusing on 2016, 2017, and 2018. This is the first of several pieces that will explore the best Cabs that I tasted from those vintages. The focus today is on the Stags Leap District and Yountville AVAs. Subsequent installments will shine a light on Oakville, Rutherford, St. Helena, mountain appellations like Howell Mountain and Mount Veeder among others, wines labeled simply as Napa Valley, and more.

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It's been a fascinating, delicious, and eye-opening exercise, not least because it reinforced once again that Napa Valley may be spoken of as a monolith, but that's never been an accurate story: Within Napa's borders—about five miles at its broadest point, and a mere 30 miles north to south—is a stunning tapestry comprising 16 appellations, a mind-boggling geological history, and world-class terroirs, seemingly all of which have the potential to produce wines of stunning, and often idiosyncratic, beauty.

Stags Leap District is one of the most well-known of Napa's constituent AVAs. Its wines are often described as being structured like the proverbial iron fist in a velvet glove, and the best of them do often possess a deep sense of power and potential longevity that's made appealing even in youth by a plushness of tannic structure and generosity of fruit. In alphabetical order, I recommend:

Addendum Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 Stag's Leap District

From the Fess Parker Family Portfolio, this is a quieter evocation of Stags Leap District, but no less appealing, with a real sense of self-possession to the scorched earth, black licorice, and cracked peppercorns that set the stage for a balanced and energetic palate of mixed cherries, brambly berries, more of that cracked peppercorn from the nose, and a finish with a subtle allspice and lavender lift. Enjoy over the next decade.

Amici Hirondelle Vineyard 2017 Stags Leap District

The first vintage from this vineyard for Amici, and it's gorgeous, bursting with sanguine aromas joined by cherry coulis, plums, blackberries, iron filings, blood, and blood orange peel, teeing up flavors that are far more generous and sweetly fruited than the nose implies: Blackberry preserves, plum pudding, sweet vanilla spice, black cherries, crushed blueberries, candied violets, and a long, mineral-seamed finish that sings with sachertorte and dark-chocolate-enrobed espresso beans. Drink now - 2041, at least.

Baldacci Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 Stags Leap District

Very plush, verging on velvety, with excellent extract to the warm plums, blackberries, chocolate ganache, cinnamon stick, well-aged Montecristo cigars, and excellent length. The finish is flashed through with candied violets and Amarena cherries. Drink now, or enjoy through the early 2030s.

Cliff Lede "Poetry" Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 Stags Leap District

What a fascinating juxtaposition of a more reserved nose and a more effusive character to the palate. Aromas of French toast, fenugreek, distinct balsamic tones, cherry cobbler, and a hint of raspberry-coulis-filled chocolate truffle set the stage for a dense, generous palate of melted black licorice, fig Newtons, blackberries and blackberry coulis, a touch of sage, blueberries, warm sweet spice, and a bit of candied violets. Stony minerality provides a thread that runs

throughout, and the texture manages to be both fine-grained and persistent, grippy and sappy yet so elegant, and large-scaled yet still full of energy. This is one for the cellar if you have patience, and will evolve easily for the next two decades. But there's plenty of pleasure here already.

Shafer Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Stags Leap District

I love the savoriness here as soon as the wine is poured, a deep umami character that brings to mind soy sauce, beef bouillon, and graphite, though the counterpoint of ripe black and brambly berries, as well as a lift of fresh-picked mint, makes for a thoroughly complete and complex nose: I could sniff this for an hour and be perfectly happy. These transition to a palate of almost impossible generosity, with mouthwatering and impeccably ripe fruit—black cherries, cassis, blueberry cobbler, and plum pudding—complicated by candied violets, Chinese five-spice powder, cedar, and a subtle hint of salinity that is a fantastic bookend to the savoriness of the nose. This is majestic. Drink it now or in 30 years—either way, it's a blockbuster.

Stags' Leap Audentia Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 Stags Leap District

This is beguiling on the nose, bursting with chamomile, cassis, melted black licorice and chocolate, toasted fennel seeds, star anise, and Chinese five-spice powder. On the palate, a silky texture is framed by beautiful, assertive tannins, amplified acidity, and flavors of goji berries, wild strawberries, a touch of rhubarb, huckleberries, cherry pipe tobacco, something slightly balsamic and smoky, hints of scorched earth, singed spearmint, cocoa powder that lingers on the very long finish, and floral peppercorn spice. Lay it down for a few years and then enjoy until the middle of the century.

Taylor Family Vineyards Estate Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Stags Leap District

Dense, toasty, and generous aromas of black currants, cassis, singed spearmint, and allspice are tugged along by suggestions of kirsch, dark chocolate, and pencil shavings, before a palate of power and freshness that pulses with mouthwatering yet rich flavors of plums, black cherries, blood oranges, cigar tobacco, warm vanilla, and on the finish the suggestion of cardamom, with its floral and woody character. This is stunning. It's great already, but give it five to 10 years without a worry.

Yountville, which is located to the west of Stags Leap District, is marked by a "cool marine influence and fog [that contribute] to cool summer mornings," according to the trade organization Napa Valley Vintners. Their website continues: "The strong breezes of San Pablo Bay [keep] afternoons more comfortable than further up valley." The result is "Cabernet and Merlot with ripe, violet aromas and rich, but supple flavors and firm tannins." I recommend looking for the following two.

Ad Vivum Sleeping Lady Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Yountville

Waves of cassis, kirsch, and sachertorte aromas are very generous, and precede a palate of velvety texture and sweetly spiced flavors of vanilla crème brûlée, plum pudding, a hint of toffee, and violet-tinged blueberries. Powerful and balanced, with a chocolate-laced blackberry liqueur finish lifted by lavender and kissed with pencil shavings and crunchy minerality. Enjoy for the next 25 years.

Brion Sleeping Lady Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Yountville

Utterly gorgeous as soon as you smell it, with perfumed aromas of star anise, Chinese five-spice powder, toasted fennel seeds, cassis, crushed blueberries, tar, and melted chocolate seamed with warm vanilla pot de crème: Sipping this reveals a palate of stunning elegance, with wonderful sweet tannins framing flavors of warm figs, dark berries, a hint of black plums, savory Middle Eastern spices, cedar, graphite that rings through the finish, and high-cacao chocolate. Now or in 25 years, this is a winner. Note: This is the first vintage of Sleeping Lady Vineyard to be fully made by Julien Fayard, though BRION has been producing wine since the label's 2002 debut.

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[Brian Freedman](#)

I am a wine, spirits, travel, and food writer, restaurant and beverage consultant, wine educator, and event host and speaker. I host beverage-focused dinners, workshops, and seminars around the country for private and corporate clients, have consulted on wine lists for dinners at New York's James Beard House, created beverage programs for a number of the Philadelphia region's top restaurants, and work with private clients on their wine collections.

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