



Stag's Leap Wine Cellars: Fifty Years and Counting 1970-2020

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars stunned the world in 1976 when its 1973 S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon bested some of Bordeaux's first-growth wines in a tasting in Paris. It was the winery's first commercial vintage, a wine produced from young, three-year-old vines. While the "victory" over the French in "The Judgment of Paris" continues to be hailed throughout the world – and the winery is still humbled by the achievement – Stag's Leap Wine Cellars enters its golden anniversary year with a commitment to producing more complex and age-worthy wines. No resting on laurels, no autopilot, no complacency, but rather a drive to ensure the next 50 years are even more glorious than the first 50.

A step back in time puts Stag's Leap Wine Cellars' current and future plans in perspective. The estate was founded in 1970 with the purchase of orchard land in what is now the Stags Leap District AVA in southeastern Napa Valley. Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot grapes replaced the prunes and walnuts, and the winery was built in 1972. A wine was made there in that year, but it was the 1973 S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon that impressed – and shocked – a panel of experts on French wine. In the 1976 Paris Tasting, a blind tasting, they chose S.L.V as the finest red wine in the group, without knowing its provenance. The outcome brought international recognition to the infant Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, the nascent Napa Valley wine region, and the entire American wine industry and put all on a path to worldwide renown.

The 1973 S.L.V. proved that a can-do spirit, keen attention to the viticulture and enology practices and a remarkable site could produce California wine on a quality par with those made in France, Italy and Germany, their winemaking histories dating to Roman times.

In 1974 – prior to the Paris tasting – the Stag's Leap Wine Cellars team decided that one lot of wine from the Stag's Leap Vineyard was so beautiful and distinctive that it should be bottled separately. It had been aged in a large wooden cask, No. 23 in the cellar, so the bottling was labeled CASK 23. Upon release, CASK 23 instantly became a benchmark for California Cabernet Sauvignon.

Twenty years after the Judgment of Paris, in 1996, the Smithsonian Institution created a display documenting the groundbreaking tasting and wine's coming of age in California. The 1973 S.L.V is now part of the permanent collection in the National Museum of American History.

Looking back also helps put into perspective the impetus to plant grapevines at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. In 1961, Nathan Fay was the first to cultivate Cabernet Sauvignon in the Stags Leap region, discounting opinions from others that the area was too cool for red Bordeaux varieties. It proved to be perfect for ripening luscious dark-berry fruit aromas and flavors in the grapes, firm yet supple tannins in the wines, a refreshing acid character from start to finish, and the structure that promises longevity in the cellar.

A tasting of Nathan Fay's exceptional homemade Cabernet in 1969 from his own ranch, led the winery to purchase and plant the adjoining ranch, now known as S.L.V. In 1986, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars bought Fay's 66-acre vineyard and named it FAY in his honor. Today, it remains one of the great Napa Valley vineyards, producing fruit with an abundance of supple red and blackberry character, perfumed aromas and seductive, fine-grained texture.

FAY, S.L.V. and CASK 23 comprise Stag's Leap Wine Cellars' portfolio of Estate-Grown Cabernet Sauvignons, which are among the most highly regarded and sought-after wines in the world. In 2001, the winery purchased an additional estate vineyard (Danika Ranch) on Big Ranch Road in the Oak Knoll region as a source of beautiful Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Twin Creeks Vineyard in the hills of Wooden Valley, northeast of the city of Napa, was acquired in 2016, to add cool-climate Cabernet Sauvignon grapes to the ARTEMIS program. Greenwood Vineyards, a 56-acre vineyard located north of the town of Calistoga, was also acquired with grapes intended for ARTEMIS.

Since acquiring the winery in the summer of 2007, the historic partnership of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates and the Antinori family of Italy has worked tirelessly to preserve the Stag's Leap Wine Cellars legacy and to set the bar even higher for the decades to come. Kirk Grace had already been hired as vineyard manager in 2006, and Marcus Notaro was named winemaker for Stag's Leap Wine Cellars in May 2013, coming from Col Solare – the Ste. Michelle Wine Estates/Marchesi Antinori joint-venture on Red Mountain in Washington state.

Marcus and Kirk are united in an ever-evolving effort to farm the best grapes possible, in the most conservation-friendly ways. The estate vineyards – FAY, S.L.V. and Danika Ranch – became Napa Green certified in 2010 and re-certified in 2016. This designation ensures that environmentally sound practices are followed, that water and energy use are minimized, and that procedures are in place to reduce, reuse and recycle materials.

"At Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, we take a qualitative vs. a quantitative approach," says Kirk. "Numbers are an indicator but growing premium grapes and making fine wine is really about being in tune and in touch with each plant. You've got to be on the ground. Managing vineyards involves both the technology of agriculture and the craftsmanship of farming. When the soils are balanced, and the vines properly maintained, the wines taste better."

The intuitive skill Marcus has for expressing both the terroir of a vineyard and the inherent varietal character of the grape have ably allowed him to carry on the winemaking legacy at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars with added refinement. During his tenure, he's put a greater emphasis on matching the type of oak to the wines from the individual estates to heighten the vineyard characteristics.

"Cabernet Sauvignon can make a rich, powerful wine without being heavy, while truly expressing where it was grown," Marcus explains. "My wine style favors balance and complexity, richness and elegance, and captures the unique characteristics of the vineyard. With each vintage I learn more about how Cabernet Sauvignon expresses itself in the microclimates on the FAY and S.L.V. estate vineyards. Everything begins in the vineyard and then it all comes together in the cellar. You need to do what the vineyard and the vintage tell you to do."

Marcus's close partnership with Kirk ensures they get the most out of the vines, while taking as little as possible from them.

"When S.L.V. was replanted in the 90s," Kirk explains, "the French template was followed, with tight vine spacing, rootstock selection and modified trellises. Over time, we've learned great

lessons, and with each replanting, we've experimented with various rootstocks, trellis systems, spacing, and tillage to improve soil health – to produce the best wines we can, while elevating our level of sustainability. Matching cover-crop types and soil-amendment mixtures to the needs and characteristics of each vineyard block, and using irrigation on a conservative level, are now vital to our farming.”

“We want the grapes to be ripe but not over-ripe,” Marcus adds. “To achieve this, we farm vineyard blocks individually, because no parcel is the same as another. Kirk and I walk the vineyards on a regular basis and make decisions throughout the year on farming practices. We must be flexible in our choices, as conditions can change quickly. We have to be responsive to what Mother Nature gives us.”

The inclusion of a small amount of estate-grown Cabernet Franc to FAY Cabernet Sauvignon beginning with the 2016 vintage has lifted the already heady perfume of FAY and adds a layer of complexity and intensity. The Cabernet Franc was planted in 2014 when the Petite Verdot that was originally planted in FAY was removed. “These young wines show great potential,” Marcus says.

When the Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars winery was built in 1972, it was a state-of-the-art facility. Improvements were made over time, but it became clear when Ste. Michelle Wine Estates purchased the winery that the space needed to expand beyond its original footprint. Under the direction of Marcus, the team is exploring the building of a new cellar to pay attention to fine details and to be flexible to the vintage. This includes having a gravity-flow-driven winemaking cellar, the most modern optical grape sorting equipment and precise control of tannin management and fermentation temperature.

“Happy cellars make good wines,” Marcus says with a hearty laugh.

The winery opened the FAY Outlook & Visitor Center in September 2014, giving guests a spectacular view of the estate vineyards and a tasting experience that matches the world-class wines being produced. It affords a breathtaking view that illustrates why Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars was established in this very place. The rocky palisades, from which a large stag reportedly escaped hunters with a magnificent leap long ago, loom over the Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars estate vineyards, a patchwork of viticultural blocks shaped by fiery ancient volcanic eruptions and the movement of soils by historic rivers.

“The new tasting room makes the connection between wine and place,” Marcus says. “Visitors can stand on the deck and see the Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars story. And the elevated customer experiences further drive home that connection. A visit to the estate is magical and beautiful and the 50th Anniversary is the perfect reason to come celebrate with us.”