



 *The*  

GREAT WINES
of
AMERICA

*The Top Forty Vintners,
Vineyards, and Vintages*

 **PAUL LUKACS** 

author of AMERICAN VINTAGE



STAG'S LEAP WINE CELLARS CABERNET SAUVIGNON, S.L.V.

Napa Valley, California

...

Cabernet Sauvignon from the Napa Valley is the one American wine that enjoys truly international renown. Its fame has penetrated even the most hide-bound Old World cellars, so much so that for many people it serves as a symbol of American wine at large—the country's vinous achievements but also its excesses. Over the years, many individual labels—from groundbreakers like Beaulieu Vineyard Georges de Latour and Inglenook Cask, through heavyweights like Heitz Wine Cellars Martha's Vineyard and Dunn Vineyards Howell Mountain—have contributed to its fame. But one particular wine, and one seminal moment, stands out. In 1976, a three-year-old Cabernet from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, made with grapes from equally young vines, triumphed at Steven Spurrier's now legendary Paris tasting, besting a set of first- and second-growth Bordeaux. From that point on, Napa, and by extension all American wine, began to emerge from a cocoon of provincial isolation. As important, the Paris tasting initiated a process in which critics, consumers, and vintners all began to rethink what



Warren Winiarski in the mid-1970s

constitutes merit or greatness in wine. For generations, people had associated wine quality with history, a history of storied vintages. Since only a handful of European wines enjoyed such a legacy, only those wines could be considered great. But the Paris tasting suggested that quality involves something else. The fact that a new wine from a new winery and a new vineyard could be judged superior to top Bordeaux meant that merit could no longer simply be equated with pedigree. Add to this the fact that the wine came from a country that only a generation earlier had deemed all wine contraband, and it became clear that excellence in wine, no matter the wine's origin, had to be defined in terms of present composition rather than lineage.

This shift in understanding had wide-ranging ramifications. For vintners, it inspired rededication and reinvention, while for critics and consumers, it led to a new sort of wine appreciation, exemplified by blind tastings and numerical scores. Most important, it enabled not only the United States but also Australia, South America, and the rest of the New World to emerge as legitimate sources of increasingly superior wines. And within the New World, no category of wine became more acclaimed than Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. As Warren Winiarski, the man responsible for the Cabernet that prevailed in Paris, acknowledges: "We were struck by lightning."

That particular wine, from Winiarski's very first commercial vintage at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, tasted rich and ripe, but at the same time restrained—its components all in balance. A tasting of it and a series of subsequent vintages in early January 2004 demonstrated that S.L.V. (this vineyard designation was first employed in 1985) consistently displays those qualities—what Winiarski likes to call "the three Rs." The 1973 showed its age that day, but it still exhibited refinement and finesse, while later releases, including an outstanding 1985 and a breathtaking 1997, tasted remarkably harmonious, their flavors deep but never heavy. According to Winiarski, that was his goal from the start. "I made this wine," he says, "in a deliberate effort to counterbalance some California wines of the time. Yes, we were struck by lightning. However,

we did climb to the top of the tree, or the top of the hill, to be exposed to the possibility of being struck by lightning.”

Of course, Stag's Leap Cabernet was not the only winner at the 1976 Paris tasting. Chateau Montelena Chardonnay bested a set of Côte d'Or white Burgundies that same day, the two Napa wines enjoying a bicentennial triumph that gave American vintners what Winiarski describes as the “confidence that we only sort of wished we had before.” Today, nearly thirty years later, that confidence is more apparent with Napa Cabernet than with Napa Chardonnay, if only because of the greater affinity the red grape has for most of the valley. Yet despite the category's renown, few Napa Cabernets display the sort of subtle, complex flavors that characterize Stag's Leap S.L.V., just as few have such a fine-grained texture, the tannins in this wine, even a young rendition, being firm but seductively pliant.

S.L.V.'s distinctive character comes in part from the vineyard; but even more important is the human vision behind it, *terroir* always expressing itself through choice and action. Warren Winiarski's philosophy of wine and winemaking has evolved over the years, becoming less instinctive and more reasoned with the passage of time—something that is not surprising considering his background as a student of the Great Books at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, and then a lecturer in the liberal arts at the University of Chicago. As a vintner, he strives not simply to make a wine that tastes good, but to comprehend why it tastes good and, even more to the point, what in this context constitutes “goodness”—the unchanging, ideal form to be emulated in the transitory reality of the grape's passage from vine to glass. Winiarski believes that a great wine is one that transcends both regionality and varietal assertion, so as to express a Platonic essence, what he calls “the lure of the classic,” considerations such as “harmony, balance, proportion, [and] scale.” His S.L.V. Cabernet does just that.

Winiarski purchased this property “on the basis of taste”—not the taste of a wine made from grapes grown there, but the taste of a wine made from grapes grown next door, a homemade wine fashioned by

Nathan Fay, that vineyard's owner. Fay had bought his property, then a fruit orchard, in 1953, and eight years later had become the first person to plant post-Prohibition Cabernet in the southern portion of the Napa Valley, defying the experts of the day who declared the region too cold. By 1969, when Winiarski first tasted Fay's wine, it had become clear that the area was in fact well suited to Cabernet, as some of Napa's most prominent wineries, including Heitz Wine Cellars and Charles Krug, regularly purchased his crop. But since they used the grapes in their Napa blends, only Fay's homemade wine presented this *terroir* in undiluted form.

When Winiarski tasted Nathan Fay's wine, he experienced an epiphany. "I said to myself, 'Eureka! That's it. This wine satisfied what I hoped was possible in the Napa Valley. It had not only regional character but also elements of classic or universal character.'" What exactly did it taste like? "It had a perfume of violets," he recalls thoughtfully, "and a complex structure that combined softness and strength. There was also a note of freshness, a red fruit character embedded in black that persisted from beginning to middle to end. No other Napa Valley Cabernet tasted like it." So the next year, using his own savings, along with a gift from his mother as well as money gathered from a group of investors, Winiarski purchased the property immediately to the south, assuming that it would produce grapes and wine with a similar taste. "My hope," he explains, "was that this would be a place that would express most fully the character of the wine I wanted to make."

As he cleared the land, then planted mostly to prunes, cherries, and walnuts, but containing a small, Prohibition-era vineyard (a field blend of primarily Alicante Bouchet and Petite Sirah), Winiarski thought frequently about what those characteristics might be. Only later did he find the right words. Speaking in London, at the 1987 International Wine and Spirits Competition, he argued that the difference between Old World and New World wines is not as important as the distinction between regional and classic ones—the former representing the character of a grape in a place, the latter moderating or even negating such character in order to express more universal qualities such as harmony,

balance, complexity, and completeness. “In every place where vines are grown,” he contended, “they will express the regional character of soil, the climate and other natural circumstances. They will also betray the work of the winemaker: his intent and his methods. [But] in some places, favored because of the special character of the soil, climate, and those other natural circumstances, the wines seem to possess another possibility. . . . [They] seem to lend themselves to the possibility of transcending the merely regional and reach what might be called the classic dimension.”

The idea of that dimension, its *ideal*, is what Winiarski wanted to express through his wine when he bought what would become S.L.V. He did not want to make a wine that shouted, “Cabernet!” or screamed, “Napa!” or even whispered, “I taste like Bordeaux.” Instead, he wanted to make a wine that could approximate what he called “wine perfection itself.” He had tasted one that hinted at that when he sipped Nathan Fay’s homemade wine, and as he planted his vineyard, he was gambling that this neighboring site could bring to fulfillment what seemed to him incomplete because of the merely regional and varietal character of so many other Napa Valley Cabernets.

Winiarski admits freely that he did not know then what about this location might prove special. But he thinks he knows now. In part, it’s the climate—cooler than more northern sites in Napa, with warm afternoons that give way to chilly, often breezy evenings. And in part it’s the soil, or soils—volcanic rock in the blocks that stretch up onto the steep hillsides, combined with alluvial deposits in the lower ones. “It’s fire and water,” he maintains; “soil made by fire and soil transported by water, a combination of unity and opposition.”

In the wine, the volcanic “fire” contributes concentration and structure, while the alluvial “water” yields softness and perfume. The balance so critical to Winiarski’s ideal, restraint alongside richness and ripeness, thus originates in the site. Yet following this logic, all the Cabernet-based wines from vineyards on the eastern edge of the Stags Leap District Viticultural Area should exhibit this sort of harmony, and they clearly do not. Shafer Hillside Select, for example, tastes significantly

deeper and more powerful than S.L.V.—not because the *terroir* is all that different, but because Elias Fernandez and John and Doug Shafer pursue a different ideal, one in which concentration and intensity are valued more highly than restraint. Both are exceptional wines, as is neighboring Stags' Leap Winery's Petite Syrah, and less consistently, the top wines from Chimney Rock, Clos du Val, and Steltzner Vineyards, all of which display berry fruit checked by persistent, fine-grained tannins. (When all is said and done, those tannins may well be the district's mark of distinction.) The region yields related but markedly different wines because, as Winiarski acknowledges, *terroir* by itself is a powerful but mute force. "*Terroir* can find its true voice," he argues, "only through the deliberate, painstaking, fastidious, and correct process of human choices—through trial and error. Or, more accurately, through trial and trial again."

The trials at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars involve managing the vineyard so as to regulate its annual cycle, trying to compell each vine to devote maximum resources to the production of berries rather than leaves or wood. The vineyard workers, overseen by Winiarski's daughter, Julia, and led by Charlie Hossom, prune and thin the vines so as to restrain natural vigor. They regulate yields, often working cluster by cluster, and at harvest they make multiple passes through each block, with up to two weeks passing from when the first until the last grapes in this thirty-six-acre vineyard are picked. The trials continue in the winery, where each lot is fermented slowly and separately, and the wine is aged in French oak barrels that are stored in caves and chambers tunneled in a low-lying hill. Winiarski made the initial 1972 vintage of S.L.V. in rented space in Oakville, and then aged it in the basement of his home. He started building a production facility on the estate in 1973 (completing the first part in time to make that vintage's Cabernet), and has added onto it over the years as production of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and Hawk's Crest (his other label) wines grew. Today, the vast majority of the wine made there comes from other vineyards in Napa. But for Winiarski, the pride and joy remains the Cabernet Sauvignon that brought him here in the first place.

Along with his wife, Barbara, he lives in a home overlooking the estate vineyards. It's a place, he says, in which "every day is Christmas."

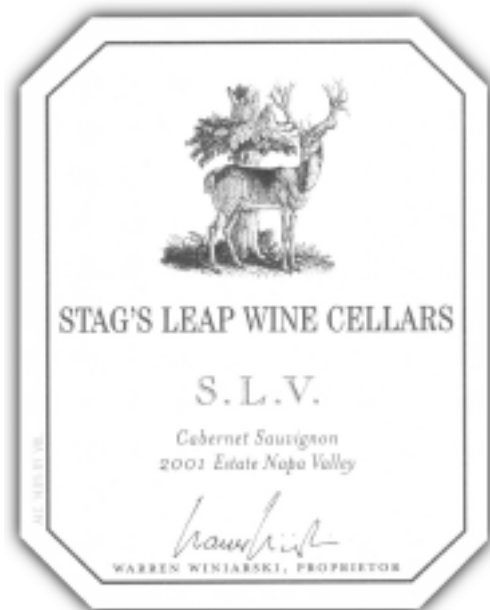
There are now two estate Cabernet vineyards at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Winiarski having purchased Nathan Fay's historic property in 1986. (The winery owns two other vineyards, both closer to the city of Napa, one devoted to Chardonnay, the other to Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.) Fay and S.L.V. were replanted gradually in the later 1980s and 1990s, not due to phylloxera since the vines were not on vulnerable AXR1 rootstock, but simply because of age. In both, the effect of trial and experimentation is evident. The spacing is tighter now, with vertical trellising and cordon rather than cane pruning, and Winiarski thinks the fruit is even more expressive than before. In strong vintages, a selection of the top lots goes into a separate bottling: Cask 23, the winery's most exclusive offering. Originally sourced only from S.L.V., but now using fruit from Fay as well, it too tastes graceful and elegant, as it is crafted with much the same stylistic ideal in mind.

That ideal, precisely because it is an ideal, has not changed over time. Winiarski may not have been able to convey it all that clearly when he first moved to Napa back in 1964, but even then the form of his desire was fixed in his mind. "I've always wanted a wine that can *dwell*," he says; "a wine with a euphonic relationship between the parts—the smooth, sensuous parts and the harder tannic parts—a wine with no predominance, no excessively forceful elements, with a certain complexity, a depth, a length, a persistence of flavors, no shortness and no interruptions, a wine with continuity and completeness." Those "classic" or "universal" or "transcendent" qualities are what he has aimed to express from the start. In order to do so with the early vintages of S.L.V., he deliberately tried not to focus on varietal character, for he wanted his wine to do more than announce itself as an expression of the grape. In an era of sometimes excessively hard and tannic Napa Valley Cabernets, richness was an appropriate goal. With more recent vintages, of Cask 23 and Fay as well as S.L.V., Winiarski and his winemaking team (currently led by Nicolette Pruss) consciously counterbalance the contemporary California craze for

highly extracted, superripe wines. “People have gone too far,” Winiarski argues. “In recent years, there has been a paradigm shift away from classically styled wines. I think that’s unfortunate.” And he adds emphatically, “It’s not a direction we’re ever going to go here.”

Winiarski’s insistence on all three Rs—*Restraint* as well as *Ripeness* and *Richness*—has led many of the influential critics, who today can be blinded by their infatuation with extract and power, to undervalue his wines. James Laube of *The Wine Spectator*, who once dubbed Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet a Napa “First Growth,” now tends to score it in the high 80-point or occasionally low 90-point range; and Robert Parker, who called the 1985 Cask 23 “perhaps perfect,” now wonders publicly, “What’s going on?” To be fair, Parker in the same review admits that “wine tasting is very subjective.” His personal preferences, more than the wines in question, may well be what have changed. My own tasting of S.L.V., with a set of vintages from 1973 through 2000, suggests that the wine is remarkably consistent. Production dropped in the late 1990s because of the vineyard replanting program, but the wine retains its distinct character—with a stylish bouquet, full fruit, evocative secondary flavors, and great length. (Indeed, the 1997 S.L.V., which was made under the direction of Julia Winiarski, sticks in my memory as one of the very finest of the hundreds of excellent wines I tasted while doing research for this book.) Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars’ Cabernets are definitely not as powerful as many of today’s blockbuster Napa wines, but they undoubtedly are more nuanced and tasteful than most.

“We’ve never had trouble getting ripe fruit,” notes Winiarski. “Our challenge is getting ripeness at a lower degree of sugar so as not to sacrifice restraint.” He met that challenge successfully in 1973, crafting a wine that brought unprecedented notice to Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. In the years since, he has continued to do so, vintage after vintage and wine after wine, aspiring after the always elusive Platonic ideal. If critical attention now sometimes goes elsewhere, well—“so be it,” he says softly, adding, “our wines are what they are.” They continue to have legions of admirers, and to my mind remain exemplars of why Napa Cabernet clearly deserves to be America’s most renowned wine.



A NOTE ON
VINTAGES :

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars S.L.V. is delicious in its youth but perhaps even more delectable with seven to fifteen years of age, when its affinity to classic red Bordeaux comes to the fore. Of the many excellent vintages over the years, 1973, 1985, 1991, 1997, and 1999 stand out.

THE SUGGESTED PRICE FOR THE CURRENT 2001 RELEASE IS \$100.