

(on the vine)

STAG'S LEAP WINE CELLARS

STAG'S LEAP

KEEPING THE FAITH?



Five years on from its acquisition by current owners Antinori and Chateau Ste Michelle from founder Warren Winiarski, Adam Lechmere visits pioneering Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and asks whether its reputation as a beacon of California elegance has survived the transition to more corporate ownership



Warren Winiarski sold Stag's Leap Wine Cellars to a joint venture of Ste Michelle Wine Estates and Marchesi Antinori in 2007, for a reported US\$185 million. On the surface, everything looks the same. The parking lot is still full, and there's still a good half-hour wait for a place in the rustic tasting room, but Napa's most famous winery is a sleepy-looking place, ivy trailing over the bare concrete of the new buildings, the original wooden sheds half-hidden in the oak and pine woods that sit just off the Silverado Trail. When he visited just after the purchase, Ted Baseler, CEO of Ste Michelle, thought he was in a time warp. "I first came here in 1984, and when we came back in 2007, to my amazement there were the same tasting rooms a quarter-century later," he told me.

The new owners are a formidable combination of corporate heft along with Old World wiliness. Ste Michelle, owned in its turn by US tobacco conglomerate Altria Group, is Washington's biggest player. It owns 14 big producers in the Pacific Northwest—including Columbia Crest, Stimson, and the eponymous Domaine Ste Michelle and Chateau Ste Michelle—half a dozen in California, and has partnerships with other big names such as Villa Maria and Champagne Nicholas Feuillatte, as well as Marchesi Antinori and its Napa estate, Antica on Atlas Peak. The relationship with Antinori goes back a long way; their first joint venture was Col Solare, a vibrant Bordeaux blend from Washington state made by Antinori's enologist Renzo Cotarella, and more recently by Marcus Notaro, who has just completed his first vintage as winemaker at Stag's Leap.

Antinori's connection with Stag's Leap goes back a long way, too. The urbane Marchese Piero is an old friend of Winiarski's. He has been making wine at Antica, 5–6 miles (8–10km) to the north, since 2004, and he has a decades-long association with the region. When Winiarski and his family finally decided to sell, they approached Antinori, and he suggested bringing in Ste Michelle. There was and still is some speculation as to how much of the enormous purchase price Antinori stumped up; after all, his gift of a 900-year-old name and winemaking history adds some luster to the new regime.

It's quite a legacy the two companies have taken on. It was in 1970 that the bookish Warren Winiarski, former political scientist at the University of Chicago and for the previous few years making wine at Souverain and Robert Mondavi Winery, finally—via an abandoned project on Howell Mountain—came to rest at Stag's Leap.

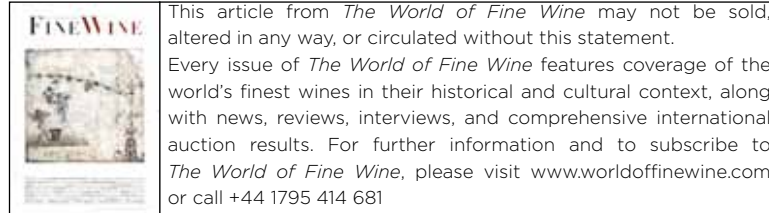
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That Winiarski's first vintage, the 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon, came top in the 1976 Judgment of Paris, is the stuff of legend. It catapulted the winemaker, and Stags Leap District, to world renown. (It wasn't to become an appellation until 1989, but for the sake of simplicity I'm sticking to the post-AVA "Stags," without an apostrophe, whenever I refer to the district rather than to the winery.) It confirmed Winiarski's belief that the unique topography of Stags Leap could produce the style of wine he was

All photography courtesy of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars



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seeking—what he and his successors call “the iron fist in the velvet glove”: supple tannins, ripe berry fruit, brisk acidity, medium alcohol, and the structure to age gracefully.

The valley within a valley

There is some debate about the distinctiveness of Napa Valley AVAs, with critics such as Stephen Brook and Elin McCoy questioning their validity. “Most of California’s AVAs are more to do with marketing and money than terroir and taste,” McCoy wrote recently, while Brook found he was able to identify mountain and valley AVAs less than half of the time in a blind tasting carried out for this magazine three years ago (*WFW* 28, pp.184–91). But Stags Leap District has always seemed different.

It is the first and the smallest of the Napa Valley sub-appellations. It’s tiny—around a mile (1.6km) wide and 3 miles (5km) long—a “valley within a valley,” as its winemakers are fond of saying. The Stag’s Leap Palisades, the bold, 1,200ft (365m) rocky outcrop that gives the district its name, looms over the vineyards, holding the heat and creating high daytime temperatures. Soils are volcanic on the upper, eastern reaches, becoming loamier as they drop down toward the lower western elevations. To the south, ocean breezes from San Pablo Bay bring the temperatures down, allowing the grapes to cool and preserving their acidity.

Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars’ vineyards cover some 100 acres (40ha), running from the Silverado Trail and up into the foothills of the Palisades. The original purchase was followed in 1986 by the 66-acre (27ha) Fay vineyard, named by Winiarski in honor of its founder. The vineyards are Cabernet Sauvignon, with a half-acre (0.2ha) of Petit Verdot in Fay and an acre and a half (0.6ha) of Merlot in SLV. These two vineyards provide the three first wines: the eponymous Fay and SLV, and Cask 23, a blend of what Cotarella calls the “most elegant” lots from both. A fourth estate wine, Arcadia Chardonnay, comes from the new Coombsville appellation to the south: Arcadia vineyard is still owned and managed by Winiarski.

Then there are the second wines, the handful of cuvées blended from valley-wide fruit led by the Artemis Cabernet Sauvignon. It’s worth remembering that Ste Michelle is answerable to its owners, and a profit must be turned. This is where we are going to see tangible development: It seems likely that the Ste Michelle marketing machine will get behind these wines and promote them as upper-level steakhouse staples.

“With Artemis, we are going to have to find additional vineyards at some point, some land to do some planting so we

can grow that,” Baseler says. “The goal is to refine and build, not to grow dramatically, but Artemis will lead that growth.”

There will be no expansion at Fay and SLV. “How can we?” Baseler asks. “There is nowhere to go.” Next door to each other, but famously distinct, the former’s predominantly volcanic soils produce grapes with intensity, power, and structure, the latter’s alluvial makeup contributing softer, more delicate flavors. Of course, things are a good deal more complex than that. On an hour-long walk around the estate, vineyard manager Kirk Grace repeatedly draws my attention to anomalies and quirks in the topography—“sweet spots,” as he calls them—that yield grapes with noticeably different intensity of flavor.

Standing in Fay, with the Palisades in front of you and the winery buildings on the wooded knoll behind, you get a sense of the enclosedness of the place. Nicki Pruss, who joined the winery in 1998 and served as head winemaker until her rather under-recognized departure in May this year, described to me the “Venturi effect” of the “valley-within-a-valley” funneling the cool winds from the bay.

Winiarski was never in doubt as to the uniqueness of his site. Over three decades he forged himself a reputation as the éminence grise of Napa, a cerebral counterpoint to the mercurial Robert Mondavi just up the road in Oakville. Both men were wedded to the idea of controlled, poised, food-friendly wines, but it was Winiarski who came to be seen as the Ancient Mariner of elegance, buttonholing

journalists to deliver quiet but intense homilies on the virtues of restraint. Now, as the pendulum begins to swing back in Napa, and more and more winemakers (helped by the cool and difficult 2010 and 2011 vintages) are discovering how tannic structure, acidity, and restrained fruit are perfectly achievable, Winiarski looks more like a seer. He has always been right, according to a sizable proportion of the world’s critics. The famous 1973 still attracts high praise. At a 30th anniversary rerun of the Paris Tasting in 2006, critics such as Michael Broadbent MW and Jancis Robinson MW—tasting blind—lavished praise on the venerable Cabernet. “Very subtle but not especially intense. Hint of oyster shells. Lovely lift. Really racy. No tannin management here but great integrity and life. Could be Bordeaux,” Robinson said.

A precious machine

That was seven years ago. By 2006, Warren and Barbara Winiarski—and their children Stephen, Julia, and Kasia, all of whom had been involved in Stag’s Leap but moved on to other professions—had been thinking hard about the future of the winery.

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The deep hillside caves at Stag’s Leap, now air-conditioned rather than being left open at night; Marcus Notaro, who completed his first vintage at SLV this year



“We’ve been talking about selling as a family for four years,” Winiarski said at the time, “trying to come to the right decision. It became clear after a while that we needed to make a transition, because of [issues with] operating roles and ownership roles with the second generation. We all decided this; it was a deliberation by the family rather than a single decision.”

The new owners took possession as one might a precious machine—a vintage Bentley, say—that ran as well as ever, though perhaps with the odd cough from a leaky valve. The way Pruss remembers her early meetings with Baseler, it appears they lost little time in getting the bonnet open and examining the carburetor.

“The first thing Ted Baseler said to me was, ‘What do you need to make better wine?’” she recalls. She told him the caves—which hold some 4,500 barrels—were too warm, so air-conditioning was installed. Then Baseler told her, “Piero would like you to have a Mistral sorting system.” This machine, one of the optic sorters popular among top-end wineries, uses airflow filters to sort the grapes, removing shot berries and any unwanted material. “Only solid, intact berries are delivered to the tank,” Pruss said, “with the result that the wines are more fruit-forward.”

The installation of air-conditioning in the caves dealt with what Baseler considered the most pressing problem at Stag’s Leap: Brettanomyces. For several vintages, going back to the late 1990s, critics and consumers—mainly American, it has to be said—had grumbled about Brett in the wines.

At first they thought the Brett was coming from the vineyards, but then they turned their sights on the storage facilities. Basically, the deep hillside caves dug by Winiarski were too warm. They used to leave doors open at night to cool them down. “It just wasn’t satisfactory,” Baseler said.

So, the Brett was eradicated. The new pipes, Cotarella told me, had an almost immediate effect, with even the 2008 vintage showing a cleaner and brighter profile.

Air-conditioning and Mistral machines are investments, of course. The chilling system in the caves must have cost

many thousands of dollars. (The fat insulated pipes run past Winiarski’s dramatic Foucault’s Pendulum, which hangs from the cave roof—a metaphor, as he was always fond of telling tour groups, for the passing of time and the aging of wine.) And you don’t get any change from a hundred thousand for the basic-level Vaucher Beguet Mistral sorter. But it isn’t upheaval; indeed, Baseler considered it basic maintenance. The legacy of the great winery is secure, he insists.

The dangers of change

Everyone from Baseler to Grace maintains that their role in Napa is not change but enhancement. Baseler explains: “Our position has always been, where it was great, make it better. The style will always be the Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars style: a little lighter in alcohol, a more classically European style. We want to enhance the style, to add some nuance. We keep to the concept of long-lived wines—they are not prototypical Napa Valley wines—but at the same time we want to have really nice clean fruit.”

Of course, “enhancement” and “nuance” can be dangerous words to use when dealing with an icon as revered as Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, especially when you represent a multinational tobacco company. Talk of “more fruit-forward wines,” or dropping in the idea of “more approachability on release,” as Pruss did, gives some in the European wine community the jitters. Various august wine magazines were distinctly old-fashioned about the idea of a profile on Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars when I proposed it. “They’re corporate-owned now, aren’t they?” said one editor. “Haven’t the wines become rather commercial?” The tolerably widespread attitude is that when a corporation takes over a family-owned winery, it is guilty until proven innocent. Look at the furor surrounding Constellation’s purchase of Robert Mondavi Winery in 2004, or Burgundy’s (and Bordeaux’s) collective trauma at the influx of Chinese corporate ownership over the past few years.

The Brett issue is a case in point. Is it a fault or a facet of classical profile? A straw poll of Europeans and Americans,

TASTING NOTES

1993 Fay
Bright, strong aromas of mocha and dark chocolate, with old cedarwood and potpourri (what I want to call “grandmotherly”). Very ripe tannins, dark fruit, damson, plum, black cherry, and chocolate. Very charming, the whole set off by good brisk acidity.

1993 SLV
Lovely earthy aromas: summery forest floor, leafy dried petals, potpourri, raspberry. The tannins are much more pronounced and linear than in the Fay: dusty, ripe, and pretty. Secondary aromas of quince and sweet fruit developing, alongside a mineral edge. A feeling that this is closed for the duration; slightly sulky and angular.

1993 Cask 23
Lovely dense sweet fig and prune nose. Tannins present and grippy, with gentle, supple length. Flavors of sour cherry and sour plum. Good fresh acidity and salinity.

1999 Fay
Essence of plum and cranberry on the nose, with some bright tar notes. There’s age on this wine—all the fruit is dried fruit, its memory rather than its presence. The tannins are dusty but on the mid-palate they explode into juiciness, bringing sweetness to the fruit. Powerful and fine.

1999 SLV
Superb blast of violets on the nose, then blueberry and cassis. Very bright and dense, with dry, chalky tannins and a sense of great power. Very young, considerably less developed than its sister wines. Wait for the tannins to calm over the next five years.

1999 Cask 23
Very deep color, dried herbs and tobacco on the nose. Really powerful tannins on the attack, then gradually calm to a fresh and juicy finish. Flavors of cut grass, hay, and some hints of hedgerow—even cow parsley. A fine, textured whole.

2002 Fay
Medicinal nose, hints of iodine leading into cassis and sweet tarriness. Very youthful flavors of licorice coated with sweet candy, and underlying notes of resinous pine forest. Every note in a major key, but when it calms it will be harmonious and fine.

2002 SLV
Really lovely nose with graphite and earth, and deep, dense sweet notes on the palate—damson, some perfume and herbs. The softest tannins imaginable at first, then rising to grip on the end palate.



2002 Cask 23
Open, bright, medicinal spicy nose, delicate tannins around ripe dark fruit. Wonderful robustness to the palate, earthy notes and spice. Excellent juicy acidity.

2007 Fay
Very juicy sweet fruit, cassis and dark cherry, some sage. The tannins are juicy but give an impression of firing on only three cylinders.

2007 SLV
Bright and robust with late-developing tannins that remain constrained throughout. Lovely dark fruit but only the merest hint of herbaceousness in the form of tobacco notes. The tannins and acidity are beautifully balanced at the close.

2007 Cask 23
Sweet blackberry and cassis supported by soft tannins with some grip. Very fresh, lively acidity adds precision to this rich, powerful wine. Delicious.

2008 Fay
The first vintage in which the Mistral sorter was used, eliminating any green, unripe, or shot berries. The nose gives nothing away except hints of briar. The palate has dense, knotty black fruit, almost tart blackcurrant and briar fruits, and tart acidity. Not disagreeable but angular, young, just on the point of charm. The tannins develop late and unexpectedly softly on the palate. Leave for at least three years.

2008 SLV
Muted nose showing hints of dark fruit and a little herbaceousness. Tannins show earlier on the palate than Fay’s but are



equally soft. Much more forthcoming than its sister Fay, but still very young and angular, with toasty notes, dark berry fruits, robust acidity. Will be superb.

2008 Cask 23
Notes of tobacco on the nose. Granular, powerful tannins hit before the fruit, which is dense, dark, showing ripe, hung tobacco leaf with the merest hint of green. Very fine and powerful wine, classic “iron fist in velvet glove,” to quote every SLWC winemaker from Winiarski down.

2009 Fay
The nose has hints of red fruit and graphite and beguiling, very delicate aromas of sweet green pepper. Where the 2008 had the tartness of extreme youth, here the acidity and tannins dissolve into juiciness around lifted blackcurrant and spiced damson with notes of raspberry leaf and Parma violets. Very attractive, and drinking well now.

2009 SLV
Much more expressive on the nose than the Fay, with bright and sweet dark fruit. Superbly textured chewy tannins, present and precise. Lots of berry fruits, great acidity, very charming, with that trademark perfume. Lovely wine.

2009 Cask 23
Beguiling nose with sweet cherry and more red fruit than the SLV. Very attractive early palate, with forward blackcurrant and damson and hints of green pepper, then a rolling, very delicate wave of precise and linear tannins, with the overall impression of silkiness. Very fine, very approachable, but still with many years ahead of it.

as a very crude guide, will often find the former much more tolerant of Brett than the latter. To Baseler, the problem of Brett was “self-evident,” and another American wine professional with an intimate knowledge of Stag’s Leap told me, “I’m a lover of SLV and Fay. I stopped buying them around the mid- to late ’90s and have just started again. They were pretty filthy. There’s this trope that Brett is terroir. If that’s true, then I can give you terroir wherever you want.”

It’s much harder to find a critic in Britain with such an attitude. Greg Sherwood MW, senior wine buyer at Handford Wines, who sells about 50 cases a year of all three of Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars’ first wines, says, “I’m well aware that Brett’s talked about, but I haven’t clocked it myself.” Moreover, he points out, “For a wine that’s supposedly riddled with Brett, it sells out pretty quickly.” Other critics I asked said the same. Stephen Brook said it was never an issue for him. “I did pick up what might have been Brett on 1997 Cask 23 and 2002 Cask 23, and more markedly on 2005 SLV. But that’s a very small proportion of the Cabs.”

At the winery, in a vertical of all three first wines—Fay, SLV, and Cask 23—going back to 1993, the words “earthy” and “medicinal” began to disappear from my notes as we moved on to 2007 and 2008, and I noted attractive Parma violet aromas rather than clove, a descriptor often associated with Brett. But it never occurred to me to mark down a wine, nor did it cross my mind that any of them had “dirty” aromas or flavors.

The issue, eventually, comes down to personal preference. But what is certain is that the new team is dedicated to the primacy of the vineyard, to letting “the soul of Fay and SLV shine through in the wines,” as Notaro says.

“We try to understand deeply the potential of the grapes,” Cotarella adds. “The vineyards are perfect, a special place, and we don’t need to touch anything.” Notaro, too, talks of nothing but the importance of those complex acres of soil and vine: “My first goal was to get to know Kirk and to understand his philosophy of farming.”

Similarly with vinification, Cotarella and Notaro say nothing remotely radical is planned. “Every winemaker has his or her own way of doing things,” Notaro says. He will experiment—depending on the vintage and what the vineyard gives him—with different extraction routines. He will test different coopers, but little else. The regime has remained the same: picking at below 25° Brix, with an alcohol level of 13.5–14.5%—“to maintain the nervosity, the vibrancy of the wine”—then gentle extraction with “soft” pump-over and punch-down, not crushing all the berries, and cool fermentation. Tannin management, Cotarella says,

is key, and this is where Notaro’s work with Col Solare—and indeed the centuries of experience that Antinori has amassed—is vital.

“We’re accustomed to this. With Sangiovese and Nebbiolo you have to be very careful; and in Washington State you can have tannins that are a little bit too rough. Marcus is very sensitive to this, and he will apply this sensitivity at Stag’s Leap.”

The work of a goldsmith

There’s also great sensitivity toward Winiarski, who is still very much a presence: He and Barbara live above the winery in their handsome house on top of the hill. In August this year, the next major phase of development at Stag’s Leap was unveiled: a new US\$7-million visitor center, designed by the architect Javier Barba, who was responsible for Winiarski’s last addition—an extension of the wine caves completed in 2000. By using Barba, Piero Antinori said at the opening ceremony, “We are honoring the dream of the founder.”

Critics will forever discuss style, and the presence or otherwise of unwanted aromas in the older vintages. Perhaps the wines will be more fruit-forward, perhaps they will require less aging, but it seems to me that any winemaking team that unfailingly steers the conversation away from the winery and into the vineyard, must be on the right track.

“We are still coming to understand the place,” Cotarella told me. “I really don’t want to make the

wines any differently from the way they have historically been made. You only have to taste wines from SLV and Fay to know the strength of the vineyards’ character and how difficult it is to address, or define, every nuance. We say in Italy, *è come il lavoro del orefice*—it’s like the work of a goldsmith—you need to have a very refined approach.” ■

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CONTACT INFORMATION & PRICES FOR RECENT VINTAGES

//// Cask 23 Cabernet Sauvignon	//// SLV Cabernet Sauvignon
//// Fay Cabernet Sauvignon	//// Arcadia Chardonnay
//// Artemis Cabernet Sauvignon	//// Karia Chardonnay

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