

Decanter

2006 CALIFORNIA SUPPLEMENT

BORDEAUX ON THE HORIZON

Having taken inspiration from their Bordelais cousins, California's Bordeaux blends have gone on to enjoy widely trumpeted success in comparative tastings. But have the wines lost their trademark elegance? JEFF COX silky at the various different approaches

One of the first Napa wineries to actively use Bordeaux as a model was Cos Du Val in the Stag's Leap District. A lot of Cos Du Val's charm comes from the winery's founder, Bernard Portet, a master blender. On a tour of the tanks, he used a series of graduated cylinders to prove a point. 'Here's Cabernet Sauvignon with 12% Merlot,' he said, pouring me a glass from the cylinder. I tasted. 'Nice,' I said. We walked on, he filling another cylinder and pouring me a glass. 'This is 98% Cabernet and 2% Merlot,' he said. 'Powerful,' I said. Then he mixed a cylinder of 92% Cabernet and 8% Merlot. 'Astounding,' I said, in surprise. That blend was magic - the mix being far better than either of the components.

Although Portet was blending early in the 1970s when most winemakers were making 100% bottlings of the Bordeaux varieties, today many makers of premium to luxury wines fine-tune their Bordeaux-a-likes by blending. These blends have been given the sobriquet Meritage, to rhyme with heritage, since the late 1980s.

Since by law a bottle labelled as Cabernet Sauvignon (or any other variety) must contain at least 75% of that variety, that still leaves up to 25% of the wine open for blending with other varieties. Blends where none of the Bordeaux varieties reaches 75% are labelled Meritage, Bordeaux blend, or simply red wine.

There's no longer any doubt that California's best Bordeaux blends can be as impressive as fine Bordeaux. John Clews, the current winemaker at Cos Du Val, says that the goal in Bordeaux, at least on the Left Bank of the Gironde, is to produce flavourful, well-balanced, elegant wines that go well with food, 'and that's what we're shooting for here, too'. His 2001 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon is a blend of 76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Cabernet Franc and 6% Merlot. While it shows power in flavour and structure, its perfect balance of acids and ripe tannins renders it silky smooth and elegant.



Some of Stag's 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, Stag's Leap District is Napa's smallest appellation. Its wines were known for silky textures and gentle tannins even before Stag's Leap Winery 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 Stag's Leap wines, why blend?

'Cabernet can be a loudmouth,' says Kevin Morrissey of Stag's 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 Stag's Leap and its original model. Recent vintages of Left Bank claret 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. →