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Napa pioneer Clos du Val on track for change from cellar to vineyards

By [Sandra Silfven](#)



Napa's Clos du Val, founded in 1972 in the heralded Stags Leap District, is on the east side of Napa Valley on the Silverado Trail. (Image courtesy of closduval.com)

LONG FAMOUS for its Stags Leap Cabernet Sauvignon, Clos du Val is ramping up for the future. The winery that committed to Bordeaux and Burgundy varietals in the early 1970s is still owned by the John Goelet family and holds to the same founding values, but a new management team is deep into staging a renaissance.

The wines at this venerable property are moving away from their restrained French style to focus on riper, more generous, vineyard-driven flavors. Production has been drastically cut to focus solely on wines from vineyards owned by the winery — in winespeak, “estate vineyards.”

Clos du Val’s new president and CEO Steve Tamburelli, who formerly managed Chappellet Winery in St. Helena, is examining every aspect of the winemaking and winegrowing program. He calls these moves at the pioneering winery “the most exciting thing I have ever been part of.”

In January he beefed up the team, putting Sean Gallagher in charge of sales. Gallagher held key sales positions at Robert Mondavi Winery, Renwood Estate, Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy/Clicquot, Inc. and St. Supery Vineyards. He also worked worked with Tamburelli at Flora Springs and Chappellet.

Former winemaker Kristy Melton, who left recently to pursue her dream of becoming a consulting winemaker, started addressing wine styles with the 2012 vintage. She was only the third winemaker since the winery’s inception and she gently moved it away from its Old World roots. By letting the grapes hang longer, she prepared the cellar for richer, more textural wines with good acid balance and alcohol in the 14 percent range. She worked with vineyard manager Al Wagner to increase dappled sunlight in the vine canopy, tweaked steps in the winemaking process and switched up the barrel program with more new oak from the best coopers.

Clos du Val, French for small vineyard estate of a small valley, is hallowed ground in Napa Valley. John Goelet and founding winemaker Bernard Portet opened the Bordeaux-centric winery in 1972, both having roots in the French wine trade that go back generations.

Back then, the winery acquired 150 acres in the Stags Leap District for Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc and another 180 acres in Napa-Carneros for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. It’s staggering today to think how important those purchases were. Their 1972 Cabernet Sauvignon was one of the six Napa Cabernet Sauvignons selected for the famous 1976 Judgment of Paris Tasting and won the rematch 10 years later.

Clos du Val also has a vineyard in Yountville. The three vineyards are represented by the image on the label showing the mythical daughters of Zeus, the Three Graces — Splendor, Mirth and Joy. That label has never changed.

But it’s on to the future: Here’s a taste of the new Clos du Val.

Clos du Val Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2012, \$38: Dark like ink, intense fruit, great integration of oak, structured tannins and firm acidity: It’s the complete package. Aromas of dark berries, dark chocolate, plum and spice lead to a palate packed with dark berries, baking spices, black pepper and cedar. It has Napa muscle.

Clos du Val Merlot Napa Valley 2012, \$35: This is what great Napa Valley Merlot is all about — big structure, tremendous fruit and the ability to age. Swirl and catch the aromas of carob, dark berries, plum. Flavors are laced with oak and braced with acidity. The midpalate is creamy with chocolate, spice and dark fruit. It’s a powerful wine.

Clos du Val Estate Pinot Noir Carneros-Napa Valley 2013, \$32: This wine off Clos du Val’s vineyard in the Napa side of Carneros has a gorgeous dark garnet color,



classic aromas, supple tannins and a spine of acidity. Aromas are raspberry, red cherry and currant. Flavors of red fruits and brown baking spices are swirled with oak and firm acidity.

Clos du Val Chardonnay Carneros-Napa Valley 2013, \$28: What a wonderful creamy mouthfeel and elegant, feminine styling. The fruit flavors are deftly woven with oak and acidity. Aromas of apple, pineapple, lemon and cedar are followed by flavors of tropical fruit, citrus and lemon curd.

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