

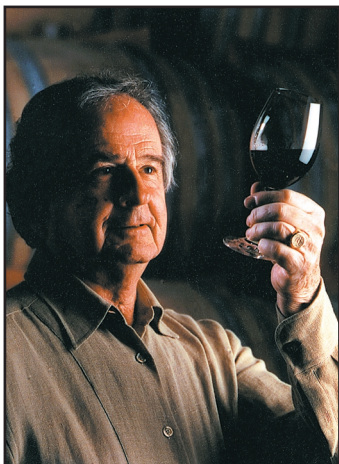
# Wine & Spirits

SIX-TIME HONOREE

WINTER 2002

## AMERICAN wineries of the year

>Over the last twelve months, Wine & Spirits conducted blind tastings of 3,214 newly released American wines. The top-performing wineries from those tastings feature in the following pages as our American Wineries of the Year. Our selection process begins with performance and consistency.



Earlier this year I had the good fortune to sit in on a recreation of the now legendary 1976 Paris tasting, where a couple of upstart American wines won out over some of the most famous names in

Bordeaux and Burgundy, much to the chagrin of the members of the French wine-trade judging the event. The wine on the top of the cabernet heap, 26 years ago, was the '73 Stag's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon. Tasted again this year, at New York's *11 Madison Park*, it showed beautifully, layering remarkably youthful plummy fruit against the complex secondary flavors of aged cabernet. Warren Winiarski made that wine; and that wine, to some degree, made Stag's Leap Wine Cellars's name.

Winiarski left an academic career in 1964 to move to the Napa Valley, putting in stints

with California winemaking pioneers like André Tchelistcheff of Beaulieu Vineyards, Lee Stewart at Souverain and Robert Mondavi. But what set Winiarski's course was a chance encounter with a bottle of Nathan Fay's homemade '68 cabernet, from Fay's vineyard just below the Stag's Leap Palisades. Fay was the first grape grower since Prohibition to plant cabernet sauvignon south of Rutherford; at the time, the Stag's Leap area was largely orchard land, not the acclaimed A.V.A. it is today. But Winiarski

### Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Napa, CA



13 Wines Tasted | 8 Recommended

93	'98 Napa Valley Cask 23 Cabernet Sauvignon \$150 (6/02)
93	'99 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon \$45 (10/02)
92	'99 Napa Valley Reserve Chardonnay \$45 (4/02)
92	'00 Rancho Chimiles Sauvignon Blanc \$24 (2/02)
91	'99 Napa Valley Merlot \$40 (10/02)
90	'98 Napa Valley S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon \$100 (4/02)
88	'00 Napa Valley Chardonnay \$29 (4/02)
87	'00 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc \$20 (2/02)

#### STAG'S LEAP WINE CELLARS

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recognized the potential of the area's terroir (for an in-depth look at the Stag's Leap district, see Rod Smith's article in our 2002 Guide to Tasting Wine), and a year later in 1970, he purchased the prune orchard adjoining Fay's vineyard and planted it to cabernet. That was the vineyard that grew the '73 Stag's Leap, and today is known as S.L.V.

The winery was built in 1972, and that S.L.V. site is now planted to 32 acres of cabernet and 4.5 of merlot. In 1986 Winiarski also bought the Fay vineyard, from which he'd been purchasing fruit since the winery's inception, and which is now planted to cabernet, merlot and petit verdot.

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If you want to recreate the experience of that great '73 in a current time-frame, pick up a bottle of the '98 Stag's Leap S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon. Keep in mind that those vines were only three years old when the '73 harvest came around. Now, substantially more mature, they were able to take a difficult vintage and from it grow a superb cabernet, loaded with cherry fruit flavors that last, balanced against firm, ferrous tannins. (For an interesting exploration into Napa cabernet terroir, taste the S.L.V. side by side with Stag's Leap's Fay Vineyard bottling. Though the vineyards adjoin one another, the Fay is a lusher, darker style, more boysenberry and blueberry than cherry in flavor.) Next to these, the '99 Napa Valley is testimony to the fact you don't have to pay \$100 a bottle or more to get a terrific Napa

## VITAL STATISTICS

- > Founded: 1972
- > Winemaker: Warren Winiarski
- > Acres owned: 195
- > Annual production: 61,050 cases
- > Estate grown: 40%
- > Owner: The Winiarski family
- > Known for: The epitome of Stags Leap cabernet

cabernet. A blend of fruit from Rutherford and Howell Mountain, along with a percentage from both Fay and S.L.V., its ripe flavors are electrified by vibrant tannins and acidity, sending hints of spice and herb out from its dark core. It's terrific now, and it should improve for years to come.

Stag's Leap produces top-quality wines from other varieties, too. Last year we were favorably impressed by their Arcadia Chardonnay; this year it was the '00 Sauvignon Blanc from Terry Wilson's Rancho Chimiles vineyard in the Wooden Valley, northeast of Carneros but benefiting from similar coastal influences. It's a fragrant sauvignon with flavors of quince and lime, given backbone by a small percentage of minerally sauvignon musqué in the blend; and though Winiarski has been making this wine for over twenty years now, we just discovered it. Our advise is don't wait as long as we did. —R.I.