



*The Winemaker's Dance: Exploring Terroir in the Napa Valley*

Excerpt from Chapter 5: Civilizing the Vine (slightly modified)

After the Paris tasting of 1976, in which his Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon was deemed the best, Warren Winiarski and others in Napa realized that they did in fact have land that could produce "wines of global interest." Winiarski believes that the Paris event provided the motivating force that led Napa winegrowers to search for ways of improving the fruit.

By the late 1970's, winemakers had largely overcome the problems posed by the absence of experienced mentors by approaching winemaking with courage and audacity—they knew they could produce great wine, and they plunged into the task with little concern for their ignorance or limitations. In doing so, they slowly achieved an understanding of winemaking that allowed them to work with clarity and purpose, avoiding some of the uncertainties that had plagued the early years of the Napa renaissance. They did, of course, make misjudgments along the way, the kind of missteps that led, for example, to the highly tannic, over-oaked Cabernets of the 1970s and early 1980s. But as winemakers became more confident, the focus began to shift, however slowly, from winery to vineyard.

This change, initiated in the late 1970s and clearly in progress by the mid-1980s, would take an additional decade to realize, an agonizing time during which the scourge of phylloxera forced winegrowers to tear out and replant nearly every vine in the valley. Opportunity, however, is often the companion of disaster—the necessity of replanting allowed winegrowers to reconsider every aspect of winegrowing, from choice of rootstock and clone to spacing, trellising, and pruning.

For Winiarski, the focus on better fruit arose in the 1970s, but the motivation for action came from his recognition, in the early 1980s, that something was wrong in the vineyard. He also realized that the problems affecting his fifteen-year-old vineyard, whatever they might be, called into question the well-accepted idea that older vines make better wine. And then two events came along almost simultaneously: an opportunity to buy Nathan Fay's vineyard next door, and a chance meeting in Australia with Danny Schuster.

Winiarski had earlier bought a piece of land next to Fay's, after tasting the wine Fay had made from selected pickings of his own grapes. Winiarski by then had tasted as much unblended Cabernet as possible, exploring the expression of that grape throughout Napa. At that time, there were only some four or five hundred acres of Cabernet in the valley; Nathan Fay's vineyards contained the only Cabernet plantings south of Rutherford. Winiarski had "developed a kind of sense of the Cabernet 'geography' of the valley and thought the he knew roughly what to expect from Fay's efforts in Stags Leap.

Nevertheless, he recalled, “I was unprepared for the experience when I first tasted Nathan’s wine—and even before that, when the perfume of it spread through the small room where we stood together. That wine was, to my senses and mind, the best expression of the varietal of all the alternatives I had experienced before. That moment became, for me, an epiphany of perfection. I recognized immediately that this was the kind of wine I wanted to make.” Winiarski proceeded to buy the parcel of land next to Fay’s, which became his SLV vineyard, the one that produced the wine judged best in the Paris tasting.

Fay sold most of his fruit—to Krug, to Robert Mondavi, to Francis Mahoney at Carneros Creek, to Joe Heitz, and to a few others. Winiarski remembers that “Nathan’s fruit was regularly outstanding during the later sixties. His 1968 Cabernet influenced a lot of people—Francis Mahoney; John Kongsgaard, who decided to become a winemaker when he tasted that wine; lots of others as well. In the mid-seventies, Nathan’s fruit made fabulous wines at Krug.” But in the 1980s, something began to happen to Fay’s fruit; some sensed that its quality had begun to suffer. As the vines got older, the quality unexpectedly diminished. And then, in 1986, Winiarski had the opportunity to buy Fay’s vineyard.

On the surface, this was a simple choice. The original Fay property had, after all, changed Winiarski’s life. Wine from this vineyard had convinced him to buy his own Stags Leap land, which had produced the wine that made him famous. Yet he also knew that something was going on in Fay’s vineyard that he didn’t understand, something that might compromise its future. Nevertheless, being perhaps as much a gambler as Nate Fay, Winiarski plunked his money down and then worried about the mistake he might have made. Had the soil been changed through cultivation? Had the Bay Area climate changed in a way that affected Stags Leap? Did the problem lie in the way the vines were pruned, in a complicated and unsystematic manner? He knew that the quality was declining, he didn’t know why, and he wondered whether he would lose his shirt, or more, on the deal.

Then, while serving as a judge at the Sydney Wine Show in 1986, he met Danny Schuster. After ten minutes with Schuster, Winiarski identified the problem in the Fay vineyard and assured himself that buying the property was a safe bet. He became convinced that the reason for the decline of the fruit was neither the ground nor the climate (though that might have had an effect), but was, rather, the way the grapes were grown.