

# Doug Shafer

*President, Shafer Vineyards  
6320 Silverado Trail, Yountville  
34,000 case production*

In 1973, Stags Leap was only an area, not an appellation. Warren Winiarski was just getting going, along with Clos du Val when Doug Shafer's father, John, bought land including thirty acres of vineyard, outbuildings and a ramshackle house--Batista Scansi's old place--in Stags Leap. John was then vice-president for long-range planning for a Chicago textbook publishing company (Doug says it was always a shock to see your father in the principal's office---even if it was for the latest math book). In John's researches, he had become aware of an impending wine boom and read up on California.

Of the few viticulture books then available, John thought the best were from Italy, and Italian advice was that vineyards were best planted on hillsides. It cost twice as much in California to develop hillside as it did flat land, for half the yield, and with grapes selling for \$400 to \$500 a ton, it made no sense to local growers. However, John had sought acreage with hillside potential. He had looked at Spottswode, then for sale, but it was on level ground. When John bought the Yountville property its 50 year-old

vineyard was planted to Zinfandel, Carignane and Sauvignon Vert.

The Shafers weren't wine drinkers, Doug's father wasn't a "wine guy": Lancers, maybe, or Mateus. Their peer group drank cocktails--highballs, beer. John came to Napa Valley as a grower. He said the land he bought was part of a "ten year plan" but shortly after he bought it, he said, "Now!" and moved the family to Yountville. There was no heat in the ramshackle house—and the Shafers were from suburban Chicago.

John was 47, his two older children were in college; Doug transferred to St. Helena High School as a junior and drove a 1955 Jeep pick-up to school. John started to replant and taught at Napa and St. Helena high schools. John sold fruit to the Growers' Coöperative in St. Helena and Doug helped haul the crop. John replanted part of the vineyard to Cabernet Sauvignon with budwood from Milton Eisele in Calistoga. Big John Pina, who was taking care of Milt's place, had supplied and helped plant it. When Milt found out he said, "Dammit, John, you got my budwood and nobody asked my permission." They had a good laugh, and it was a great match. That Cab is what is in Shafer Hillside Select. In 1975 Doug went to UC Davis. Seeing his first grapevines when the family first arrived, on a crystal-clear day in January, with

everything a vibrant green and guys going to work in jeans, driving pick-ups—not on trains in three piece-suits commuting to Chicago, UC Davis just seemed like a great idea.

In 1981, Shafer Vineyards released its first Cabernet Sauvignon, made from the new hillside planting in 1978 and custom-crushed at Round Hill Winery. The 15 or 20 barrels of it were stored under a shed. When Doug came home for Christmas vacation he saw a strange-looking pile. His dad said fermentation had stuck and he was warming the wine to finish the malolactic. "Dad had covered the barrels in electric blankets. It worked and the malolactic finally went through. Talk about non-intervention winemaking," Doug recalls fondly. He raked the wine before the end of his vacation.

After UC Davis, Doug went to Tucson, Arizona to teach junior high school, but being called "Mr. Shafer" by students wasn't going to change the world. Doug moved to Napa and went to work at Lake Spring Winery (now Havens) as assistant to Randy Mason, helping to make Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Cabernet as a cellar rat. Doug had fun and watched Shafer develop. In 1979, Shafer built its own winery. Nikko Schoch was winemaker, Alex Viborny helped in the vineyard and neighbors were great at lending a hand. Doug's sister, Libby, even



*Doug Shafer*

helped with sales and marketing for a few years. When Nikko left in 1983, Doug said, “No,” at first to being winemaker; he told his father, “I don’t know enough,” but with Chuck Ortman consulting, it didn’t take long to persuade him.

In 1979, Shafer made Cabernet and Zinfandel; in 1980, Chardonnay was added; in 1982, Doug kept out a tank of Cabernet from the upper “Sun Spot” vineyard he thought was really good. They called this the Reserve. In 1983, Hillside Select, made from ten blocks of fruit, became the reserve program. 1983 “Last Chance Zinfandel” was the end of their Zinfandel, a tough sell back then. Zin vines were grafted over to Merlot and Cabernet. Through the 1980’s Shafer also bought fruit from other growers to make their wines.

In 1984, Shafer called UC Davis and advertised for a cellar rat. Elias Fernandez, a senior in the oenology program, answered the ad. Elias was a transfer student from University of Nevada at Reno on a trumpet scholarship. He graduated early and came to Shafer in March, “the start of a really cool relationship,” Doug says admiringly. There was a big learning curve at Shafer in the 1980’s. Growing and winemaking are so site specific that John, Doug and Elias constantly asked each other, “Is it good?” “Why is it not so good?” as they learned to see, taste and

smell. “In winemaking you get one shot a year, in a four to five week period,” is how Doug puts it. Growing and winemaking really came together for them in 1990, 1991.

“Consistency—they finally got that going. Acquiring more vineyard; Hillside Select was really coming into its mind; what this place does. Wine of a place.” Doug says he used to pooh-pooh terroir, and there was no time for heroes in the 1980’s. He and Elias would compare wines with neighboring Clos du Val, Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, Silverado and Pine Ridge. His dad always pushed Doug and Elias to go to France, but there wasn’t time. “If you go over there,” observes Doug, “what ‘they’ do becomes what ‘we do.’” Doug and Elias got comfortable at home. They didn’t go to France and adopt French methods. When they did go in the late in the 1990’s, they met other winemakers, went tasting, and it was great to compare, and contrast—but from a strong comfort level of what works *here*.

In 1989, John turned the vineyards over to Doug, who enlisted Bob Cantisano and John Williams as mentors for farming. Doug cautions, “Adding fertilizer in a bag is like adding a jolt.” The learning curve for vineyard care took years. Amigo Bob’s approach was baby steps--“What’re you comfortable with? What is a non-chemical way to take care of whatever issue comes

up?” Shafer now has sustainable cover crops, compost heaps, bat houses, song-bird houses and barn owl houses. Water from the cellar is recycled to the vineyards, and in 2005 it went solar for all the winery’s electrical needs. In 1994, Elias became winemaker and Doug became president of Shafer Vineyards.

John had gone to Italy in 1988, and fallen in love with Tuscany and Sangiovese. The suitcase budwood all died but budwood from Bob Pepi and Atlas Peak took. In 1991, Shafer introduced “Firebreak,” a Sangiovese-Cabernet blend similar to Antinori’s Tignello, and named for the vineyard that saved the house from a fire in 1981. That site was later judged better for Cab and “Last Chance Firebreak” was released in 2006. Doug points out that in Napa County, Sangiovese bearing acreage was 425 acres, with no non-bearing (or newly-planted) acres. In 2001 there was one new acre. With Syrah however, in 2005 there were 867 bearing and 84 new acres, with acres added every year in the same period, unlike Sangiovese.

More than ten years ago, Elias and Doug began drinking Australian Shiraz and Rhône Syrah. They had their eye on 18 acres near Oak Knoll Crossroad. “18 acres without a new-product test?” worried John. “Oh, come on, Dad, we’re going for it,” countered Doug. “Well, you guys have been doing ‘OK’; go ahead.” They planted

Petite Sirah and Syrah for “Relentless.” Petite Sirah budwood came from vineyard on Ink Grade; the Syrah is one-third an Australian clone and two-thirds a Syrah Noir clone from Duarte Nursery. Vines are trellised double cordon. Soil at Shafer is volcanic, shallow, with light bedrock below. Oak Knoll Syrah rootstocks are 3309, 101-14 and 110-R. Petite Sirah is on St. George. Shafer lets cover crops of all sorts control vigor; no site at Shafer is that fertile, and every year is different in terms of vine growth.

To know when to harvest, Doug says that as well as Brix and acid, you have to watch the plants, the grapes, and sample all the time. From the crush pad, looking up, he and Elias can tell when they are getting close. Shafer picks its fruit into half-ton boxes at first light or at night when it is cool. Fruit is sorted, goes from a shaking table into the crusher, destemmer, and stainless steel, closed top fermenter; Shafer uses an irrigator and pumps over two to three times a day for three or four days, at 80° maximum, and presses early, before dryness at 2 to 5 °Brix. There is no long maceration; yeasts are added. After settling a few days, the wine goes into all new French oak. Doug says their Syrah can handle it and Petite Sirah gives the Syrah a little tweak. Relentless, 80 percent Syrah and 20 percent Petite Sirah, is a massive wine, as big as Hillside Select. Its concentration of flavors is rich, extracted.

Fermentation and aging is slow, with wine spending 30 to 32 months in barrel. Long oxidation time softens the wine, lessens oak pick-up. The new wood kick early on becomes beautiful barrel in twenty months. Shafer racks three times the first year, two times the next; the wine is then bottled in six or eight months. Doug assesses their Syrah/Petite Sirah blend: smokey/blueberry; smoked meat/fruit; bacon fat/tannin; sometimes black pepper/color. If winemaking were like painting, Doug would compare the painter's palettes: for Sangiovese, maybe just three colors, but a whole rainbow with Syrah.

Before releasing Relentless, Shafer gave a supply party for all their purveyors of essentials like stainless steel, barrels and glass. The purveyors all agreed Elias was ever vigilant when they worked together, always checking everything. Doug said Elias was like a junkyard dog. He wanted to call the vineyard-designated Syrah, "Junkyard Dog Ranch." Doug was voted down. Relentless does, indeed, honor Elias, but for his "relentless pursuit of quality." It is made full-throttle.

Doug says you just never know what is going to work out. Their Merlot in Carneros just wasn't the dynamite he thought it would be, and it's been pulled. As to the next generation at Shafer, Doug says, "It's much too soon to tell."