

*On Writing Stags' Leap Winery:
A Guide To The Estate
In Five Volumes*

By Theresa Whitehill

When the book project idea for Stags' Leap Winery first came up, the concept was simple: create several small volumes to be printed and bound in annual cycles that provided information about this venerable winemaking estate. The modest volumes were to be placed in the guest cottages for visitors to enjoy during their stay and then "steal" when they left.



This early vision says much about the place, and especially about the people who work on its behalf. They are practical, mischievous and playful, but also charged with a sense of responsibility to educate visitors to the charms of a property founded in the 1880s, with a passionate following for its wines.

At the time of the book commission, I was already familiar with the beauty of

Stags' Leap, having served as its Poet-in-Residence in 1998 and worked with artist Patrick McFarlin and wine writer Rod Smith to create a series of portraits, painted and literary, that became *Napa Valley: Portrait of a Community**. After that project ended, my husband, Paulo Ferreira, and I found ourselves returning again and again to the property. Winemaker Robert Brittan asked if I would design and write their newsletter. I thought he was taking pity on me since I was so obviously attached to the place—its gardens, the craggy mountain that rears up behind the winery with so much drama and energy. It was at the second or third newsletter meeting that Robert threw out the idea of the books. I thought it over for a few months, drawing on inspirations and resources from my student days in the Book Arts program at Mills College. Then Paulo and I took Robert to San Francisco for an exhibit of a collection of artists' books at the Legion of Honor**.

Driving home from that exhibit, the book project shifted gear. The series of books would be housed in a portfolio that opened out on all sides. Each of the books could then open in a different direction, like a vine unfurling its craggy arms, or a pinwheel of information, with a place for each topic—a fitting introduction to a unique property. I realized we had a structure that captured something essential about the place. It remained for

me to take advantage of that structure so that the books themselves would come to seem inevitable and graceful.

We began to look for artists for each of the volumes, and I put down on tissue the proportions and broad movements of image and type, pushing toward an arrangement of art and information that would be pleasing, surprising, yet classical. An utterly contemporary approach would not have been appropriate, but a stuffy, academic look wouldn't have worked either. I wanted the books to be companions to the wines, made in California with classic Old World technique, with an emphasis on balance, handwork, and attention to craft. The book project took five years to complete, one volume per harvest. Before it was finished, Robert Brittan moved on to found his own winery in Oregon. Kevin Morrissey, who had worked as assistant winemaker under Robert, returned from a winemaker position at Etude to be winemaker for Stags' Leap, and it was with Kevin that the project came to completion. I was kept busy researching, interviewing, writing, and working with bookbinders, the copy editor, artists, and printers.

The Stags' Leap estate book has been a rare opportunity to shape something of substance with skills and interests gathered over a lifetime devoted to poetry, book design, and playfulness. All these

things came together and made sense in a satisfying way, resulting in a unique and engaging publication. I have been fortunate to have both the vision and trust of those who gave me this task and helped carry it through. Now that it's published, I will gradually forget the intensity of the book's birth and production, its challenges, the continuous problem solving (how to make a book that opens backwards read appropriately to someone who will inevitably try to read it conventionally). The book will belong to its readers.

*Napa Valley: Portrait of a Community: a project initiated by artist Patrick McFarlin for Stags' Leap Winery, based on a similar project for Site Santa Fe. Participants sat for their portrait painted by McFarlin in a public setting while writers interviewed each subject and provided written accompaniments. The project was exhibited at Napa Valley Museum in January of 1999, traveled to Philadelphia and Atlanta, and became the subject of a CBS documentary. A catalog designed by Jim Cross is available through the winery.

**Artists' Books in the Modern Era, 1870–2000: The Reva and David Logan Collection of Illustrated Books, California Legion of Honor, 2002

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