

Winiarski to sell Stag's Leap

31 Jul 2007 by Linda Murphy

Warren Winiarski confirmed Monday what previously had been unthinkable: that he is selling his ground-breaking Stag's Leap Wine Cellars in Napa Valley. And the buyer is not the typical outsider who made his/ her fortune in high-tech or real estate development, but rather a joint venture partnership of Tuscan wine king Piero Antinori and Chateau Ste Michelle Wine Estates, Washington state's largest wine producer.

Call it a moment when all the superstars align in the sky.

Winiarski started Stag's Leap Wine Cellars in 1970 and quickly became famous when his 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon scored higher than Bordeaux's entrants in the 1976 Steven Spurrier-staged blind tasting that came to be called the [Judgment of Paris](#). Coupled with Napa neighbour Chateau Montelena's "victory" over France in the Chardonnay category in Paris, Winiarski and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars instantly legitimized California wine in the world's eyes.

While the sale is not final, Winiarski said all parties have agreed to the fundamental terms, which he would not disclose. Antinori and Ste Michelle Wine Estates president Ted Baseler are expected to be available for comment today (Tuesday).

When completed, the deal gives the Antinori- Ste Michelle Wine Estates partnership the Stag's Leap Wine Cellars brand, Winiarski's winemaking facility in the Stags Leap District appellation of Napa Valley and his SLV and Fay estate vineyards – both sources of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars' flagship wine, Cask 23 Cabernet Sauvignon, as well as vineyard-designated wines from those two plantings.

Winiarski, his wife Barbara, and their family keep the Arcadia Vineyard, also in Napa Valley, and will sell fruit to the Antinori- Ste Michelle team. Winiarski said he will remain as a consultant to the new owners for three years.

"I'll need to teach them about the terroir that I learned over 40 years," he said. "I'll be here (at the winery) part-time. It's not like I'm turning out lights."

Winiarski, 79, said he and Barbara are ready to retire from a business that wasn't quite right for their children - although they have been involved with it.

"We've been talking about (selling) as a family for four years, trying to come to the right decision," Winiarski said. "It became clear after a while that we needed to make a transition, because of (issues with) operating roles and ownership roles with the second generation. We all decided this; it was a deliberation by the family rather than a single decision.

"I've cherished this winery for 40 years. We could have ended it before this ... but now I'm passing it on to people who care, and it's so satisfying."

Antinori and Ste Michelle Wine Estates aren't strangers, having partnered in Col Solare, a Cabernet Sauvignon-based proprietary wine made in a new winery in the Red Mountain appellation of eastern Washington. Antinori has another foot in Napa Valley: he was co-founder of Atlas Peak Winery and owns vineyards in the Atlas Peak appellation.

The sale to an Antinori-affiliated group made sense to Winiarski, he said. He studied in Florence and became enamored of Italian wines. He has known and respected Piero Antinori for years, and put Antinori on a short list of those he contacted to inquire about interest in buying SLWC. As a young winemaker, Winiarski trained with Andre Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyard; Antinori was introduced to Ste Michelle Wine Estates and Washington wine through Tchelistcheff.

Almost everything in the world is for sale for the right price, even winemaking standard-bearers such as Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. While history will look most favourably on Warren Winiarski's accomplishments at SLWC, it will be up to Antinori and Ste Michelle Wine Estates to continue the legacy.

Stay tuned.