

A Winery Pastoral



Stags' Leap Winery: A Guide to the Estate
Volume 1: *The Book of Rules*; Volume 2: *History, Culture & the Muse*; Volume 3: *Ne Cede Malis, Sed Contra Audentior Ito*; Volume 4: *Cartography*; Volume 5: *Voices from the Leap*
Concept: Robert Brittan, Theresa Whitehill, Kevin Morrissey;
Texts: Theresa Whitehill; Artists: Dana DeKalb, Olaf Beckmann, Patrick McFarlin, Robert Rovira, Dick Cole
Napa, CA: Stags' Leap Winery, 2002–2006
Five volumes, 32 pp. each. Illustrations. \$125.00 each (paper).
\$500.00 (set of five). \$750.00 (bound case set)

STAGS' LEAP WINERY: A Guide to the Estate is an ambitious, limited-edition set of five illustrated books created to share the history of the Stags' Leap estate and celebrate its tradition of winemaking. One hundred exceptionally handsome cloth-bound cases have been produced to house

a complete set of books; one thousand copies of individual volumes have also been printed. Originally envisioned by winemaker Robert Brittan in 2001, the project was completed by poet Theresa Whitehill in 2006 in collaboration with Brittan's successor, Kevin Morrissey. Such an expensive, self-published venture might recall Michael Pollan's "supermarket pastoral," his term for food manufacturers and marketers who use evocative descriptions of their products to suggest authentic experiences, connections to the earth, and romanticized pasts. *A Guide to the Estate* does all of these things, blatantly at times, but the rich history of Napa Valley's Stags Leap Wine District forces us not to dismiss this project—originally developed as a keepsake for overnight winery guests—as merely a marketing gimmick.

A spirit of playfulness informs many of the volumes, as in volume one, *The Book of Rules*, whose mischievous tone



intentionally contradicts the seriousness of its title, a reference to the *Libro de Juegos* commissioned by King Alfonso X of Castile in 1283. Theresa Whitehill skillfully combines what she calls “The Art of Visiting” with actual sets of rules for several games available at the estate, including bocce, dominoes, and card games. She weaves together practical advice about how to avoid local wildlife and “maddeningly ambidextrous” forklifts and offers cleverly worded warnings about unattended fires and voices that travel in the evenings: “Please make sure you say something publishable, or at least memorable” (vol.1, p.6). Even if Whitehill’s prose seems overwrought at times, her love of language and enthusiasm for the estate convey a welcoming atmosphere and a convivial place “sympathetic to companionship and leisure” (vol.1, p.2).

The desire for playfulness sometimes works against the goal to create finely crafted books. Each volume has been designed to open in a different direction, a gesture that leads to some very awkward text flow and pagination. The binding for volume two was placed at the bottom edge, causing the reader to go down the length of two pages and then up again to the top after each page-turn. Such a layout presumes too much willingness on the reader’s part to play along. An equally playful accordion-fold book would have

better supported this volume’s chronological history and required fewer anchors and repetitious subheadings to keep the reader on track. Volume three, bound on the right edge, requires similarly creative reading skills, made apparent by the clumsily numbered pages 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, etc. that guide the reader through the text.

Each book is bound in a different, richly colored cover stock of deep blue, deep green, burgundy, mustard yellow, or brick red. When the volumes are spread out with the deep-navy cloth box fully open, the set possesses a board-game quality, and its subtle whimsy works well. When I pick up an individual book for closer inspection, however, I am disappointed. The elegance achieved with the rich colors, the letter-pressed, gold-stamped titles, and the beautifully arranged letters is diminished by the cover paper besieged by tiny bits of confetti. The confetti effect disrupts the otherwise clean layout, smooth papers, and solid colors. Instead of appearing lighthearted, this choice points to a confused sense of style and comes across as a misguided attempt to keep the books from seeming too stuffy.

The conceptual team behind the *Guide to the Estate* chose well to model their project after artists’ books and other well-crafted, collectible volumes, but they neglected

to follow through on a few fundamental concepts. In some instances, the content—the driving force behind most artists’ books—was not given full consideration or enough space on the pages. The consistent length of each volume fails to accommodate dramatic textual differences among them. Despite the numerous archival photographs used in volume two (sixty-three in all), Whitehill admirably manages to include substantial amounts of historical research, interviews with former residents, details about business transactions, and even descriptions of the early indigenous people who lived in the valley. In order to accommodate all of this information, the typeface for this volume is notably shrunken, and image captions are miniscule. In sharp contrast, volume four, *Cartography*, will puzzle the reader with its minimal text; this volume lists the flora and fauna found on the estate, including their scientific names, but contains little else. When compared to the detailed history of volume two, this volume feels cold and distant; it missed the opportunity to show an intimate connection to the estate’s natural features. Even the cartographic watercolors of the landscape, which fills four entire spreads, appear to have been made from the vantage point of an airplane and thus detach the reader even further from the place.

An artist book, or letterpress book, requires intense dedication to the balance between text and image, both of which must be strong enough to stand alone. Regrettably, the carefully written texts often outweigh the artists’ contributions. The paintings by Dana DeKalb in *The Book of Rules* are cramped by text in their margins and are far too literal to sustain interest. The photographs by Olaf Beckmann that accompany the historical timeline and its many archival images do not read as works of art at all. His images are not given any special treatment but serve merely to illustrate the timeline. A better solution might have been to use his lovely black-and-white photographs of the estate to personalize or perhaps counterbalance the odd specimen lists of volume four.

Volumes three and five come closest to achieving the balance of well-planned, beautifully designed books. Patrick McFarlin’s paintings of tools, vines, and stag horns in the third volume are not identified anywhere in the book, but each is given a page of its own, and they hold up very well next to the dense, informative text on winemaking. The final book, *Voices from the Leap*, is not bound at all. It consists of loose pages that open up to the only four-color images in the set (the others use two colors). Twelve noteworthy watercolors by Dick Cole have been paired with personal accounts by employees and individuals connected to the estate. Cole’s depictions of the estate’s landscapes, structures, and animals have been given generous space to breathe. By foregoing a binding, this final volume remains confidently open-ended and optimistic about the winery’s evolution.

The strict thirty-two-page, eight-by-nine-inch format creates uniform books that fit satisfyingly in their case, but it also draws attention to the mass-production techniques used to manufacture them. Collectors of small-press editions will be disappointed by the offset lithography used on the interior pages (as opposed to an all-letterpress book). This in itself is not problematic—the typeface is beautiful and crisply printed on well-chosen papers—except that each of the thin, paperbound books costs \$125. The juggling act necessary to create something special and rare *and* available to a wider audience is distractingly easy to see.

On close examination these volumes make it seem as though Stags’ Leap is clinging to its past or searching for a solid foundation, perhaps in response to the winery’s recent transition to a corporate model after years of private ownership. At the end of volume two Whitehill defensively concludes: “Each individual who ever lived or worked at Stags’ Leap has felt the tremendous pull of its beauty and power, and a corporation is no different” (vol.2, p.30). If a corporation is no different, then why mention it? Stags’ Leap is justified in celebrating its long history. Yet this graceful five-volume set, an elaborate pastoral, is much like the winery’s carefully crafted and expensive wines—not intended for everyday consumption. ☹