

The Judgment *of Paris* Revisited

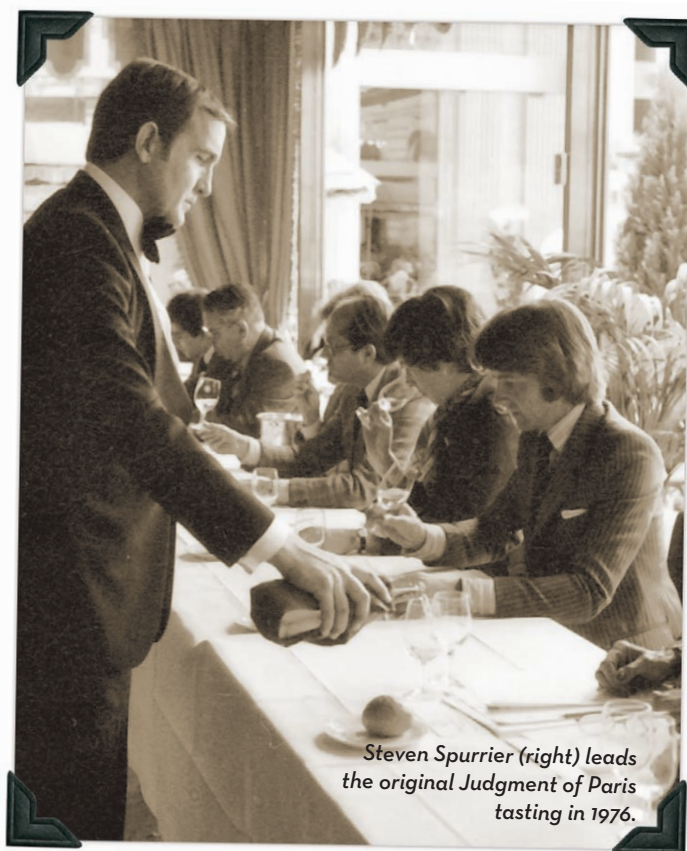
MY INVITATION TO ATTEND THE NAPLES (FLORIDA)

Winter Wine Festival came 18 months ago, with the request that I create a lot for their annual auction that over eleven years has raised \$146 million for the Naples Children and Education Foundation, which is dedicated to improving the lives of underprivileged and at-risk children. Wine is a fine vehicle for raising money, for it brings people together in a shared sense of conviviality and commitment where the enthusiasm at tastings, dinners and in the auction room is only matched by the generosity of the donors. A morning visit to the main campus that the NCEF supports showed that this is money very well spent.

The reason for my presence was that this year is the 40th anniversary of the Judgment of Paris, the tasting that my wine school L'Academie du Vin held on May 24, 1976, under the banner of the 200th anniversary of the American War of Independence. The background to this event began with L'Academie's tasting room in the centre of the city becoming a magnet for visiting winemakers and American wine writers keen to show us what was going on in California. The wines were a revelation to our French-based palates, and Patricia Gallagher, American-born director of the school, took her summer vacation to visit California and thanks to introductions from wine writer Robert Finigan went from winery to winery and came back totally enthused.

Throughout the autumn we made a plan to show carefully-selected California Chardonnays and Cabernets to an elite group of tasters with the aim of seeing their quality recognised and perhaps talked about. L'Academie du Vin, the first independent and self-financing wine school in France, was well-respected, so Patricia and I had little difficulty in getting acceptances from our list of potential judges, who were: Pierre Brejoux, Inspector General of the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée Board; Michel Dovaz, head teacher at L'Academie du Vin; Claude Dubois-Millot of Gault-Millau magazine; Odette Khan, Editor of La Revue du Vin de France; Chef Raymond Oliver, owner of Michelin three-star restaurant Le Grand Vefour; Pierre Tari, owner of Ch. Giscours in Margaux; Christian Vanneque, Head Sommelier at three-star restaurant La Tour d'Argent; Aubert de Villaine, co-owner of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti; Jean-Claude Vrinat, owner of three-star restaurant Taillevent.

The next step was to find a venue suitable for the occasion and thanks to Ernst Van Damm, one of the regular clients at my Caves de la Madeleine wine shop and publicity director of the nearby



Steven Spurrier (right) leads the original Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976.

PHOTO: BELLA SPURRIER, COURTESY OF GEORGE TABER

Intercontinental Hotel, we were offered the terrace rooms from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. on May 24. All that was needed now was for me to go to California and make the final selection, so my wife and I flew out in late April to San Francisco and, again with the help of Robert Finigan, set to work. After the tasting we were asked why there were no "big" names such as Mondavi, Beaulieu Vineyards or Buena Vista, but we were looking for smaller, "hands-on" estates that were known in France as "boutique" wineries. The selection of six Chardonnays and six Cabernets was made, two bottles of each were purchased and, to avoid problems with French customs had they been shipped, were hand-carried to Paris by a group of 20 or so wine producers and their wives, under the guidance of the great André Tchelistcheff, organised by Joanne Dickinson for a wine tour of France.

It was only a week or so before the tasting that it occurred to us that only one of the judges—Aubert de Villaine whose wife Pamela was from San Francisco—would have ever tasted California wine before and that the other eight, knowing that the state was a little north of Mexico on America's West Coast, might have taken geography into account and not given our selection the attention we thought they deserved. This persuaded us to turn it into a blind tasting of top benchmark clarets and white Burgundies. Choosing the best of these from my shop, on the day I asked the judges if they had a problem with my including benchmarks and they agreed that this would indeed be more interesting. The order of pouring had been drawn out of a hat the day before.

The Chardonnays were tasted first, all judges marking out of 20 and their marks totalled and divided by 9. The result was:

- 1 - **Chateau Montelena 1973.**
- 2 - **Meursault-Charmes 1973 Roulot.**
- 3 - **Chalone 1974.**
- 4 - **Spring Mountain 1973.**
- 5 - **Beaune Clos des Mouches 1973 Drouhin.**
- 6 - **Freemark Abbey 1972.**
- 7 - **Bâtard-Montrachet 1973 Ramonet-Prudhon.**
- 8 - **Puligny-Montrachet Les Pucelles 1972 Leflaive.**
- 9 - **Veedercrest 1972.**
- 10 - **David Bruce 1973.**

With three of the top five wines from California this was a surprise result, but the scores of the individual judges were conclusive, for Ch. Montelena was rated top by six judges and Chalone top by the other three. Patricia had a tie between Meursault-Charmes and Spring Mountain, and I placed Freemark Abbey and Bâtard-Montrachet equal first, but our marks were not counted.

I had announced these results while the red wines were being poured and got the impression that the judges would be more protective of their country this time and so it turned out. The results were:

- 1 - **Stag's Leap Wine Cellars 1973.**
- 2 - **Ch. Mouton-Rothschild 1970.**
- 3 - **Ch. Montrose 1970.**
- 4 - **Ch. Haut-Brion 1970.**
- 5 - **Ridge Monte Bello 1971.**
- 6 - **Ch. Léoville-Las Cases 1971.**
- 7 - **Heitz Martha's Vineyard 1970.**
- 8 - **Clos du Val 1972.**
- 9 - **Mayacamas 1971.**
- 10 - **Freemark Abbey 1969.**

While there were 5.5 points between the first and second in the whites, Stag's Leap was just 1.5 points ahead of Mouton-Rothschild and there were only 5.5 points between the top four wines. Many judges had rated the California Cabernets in single digits, which is rare in a tasting of fine wines. Patricia had placed Heitz Martha's Vineyard first and I had a four-way tie between Montrose, Mouton-Rothschild, Ridge and Stag's Leap.

We had invited the top French press to attend this event, but knew in advance the idea did not interest them. Patricia then remembered that George Taber, of *Time* magazine's French office, had done one of our wine courses recently and called him, the

reply being he would come if there was nothing else on. Due to a slow day in the office he was there from the start, with my wife Bella as house photographer. One week later, *Time* published his description of the tasting under the title "The Judgment of Paris," which was later to become the title of Taber's seminal book, published by Scribner in 2005 and now in many languages, even French, with the subtitle "The Tasting That Revolutionized Wine."

May 1976 certainly did a lot for California wines and I became persona non grata in Bordeaux for a while and was physically thrown out of Ramonet-Prudhon's cellars in Chassagne-Montrachet, but the results of the tasting remained. Some intelligent producers went to California to see what all the fuss was about, and I think it is no coincidence that the first vintage of Opus One, the collaboration between Robert Mondavi and Philippe de Rothschild, was 1979. For me, the importance of the Paris Tasting was to create a template whereby unknown wines of quality could go up against the recognised benchmarks and, if judged successful by an authoritative panel, would see their region and their brands getting the recognition that they deserved.

Amongst the criticisms I received was that the clarets had been tasted too young, so I set up a re-run of the same red wines in New York in May 1986. Once again, nine tasters, headed by Alexis Lichine, wine writers Alexis Bepaloff and Robert Finigan, George Lepré from the Paris Ritz and the young Bartholomew Broadbent. Here Clos du Val 2002 came top, Ridge second and Stag's Leap sixth. The Union des Grands Crus de Bordeaux were in the U.S. at the time, promoting their 1985s and they held me personally responsible for the failure of this campaign.

This, and having proved that both reds aged well, meant I had no intention of holding a re-run in 1996. It was only after pressure from Jacob Lord Rothschild, who supported the Copia Centre in Napa, that I was persuaded to hold, on May 24, 2006, a 30th anniversary tasting of the same red wines, simultaneously at 10 a.m. at Copia and 6 p.m. at Berry Bros & Rudd in London. Again, nine tasters on each panel, with Patricia Gallagher and Christian Vanneque joining such palates as Anthony Dias Blue in Napa, and Michel Dovaz and Michel Bettane joining me, Hugh Johnson, Michael Broadbent and Jancis Robinson in London. Both panels place Ridge Monte Bello 1971 top and when our scores were joined, California was seen to have taken the top five places, followed by Mouton Rothschild 1970, with Freemark Abbey 1969 last.

So, a final triumph for California? For the original wines, certainly, but in London we held an open tasting of the same wines and a few others from the 2000 vintage, the votes going overwhelmingly in favour of Bordeaux. My conclusion was that in the early 1970s France was resting on its laurels—no visible competition so no reason to try harder—and by the early 2000s so, to a certain extent, was California.

My auction lot was for two couples to accompany me to Napa for a weekend in mid-May, staying at Meadowood Resort, dinner at Napa Valley Reserve with Napa wines from the years before 1976, lunch the next day at Chateau Montelena, a visit to Mike Grgich who made the 1973 at Grgich Hills, dinner at Stag's Leap, then on Sunday a brunch at Jean-Charles Boisset's Raymond Vineyards, when I shall challenge him to the Judgment of Napa: my Bride Valley 2013 Blanc de Blancs against his JCB 2013. The lot fetched \$120,000 and I shall make sure it's worth it. 