

Steven Spurrier, who organized the original Judgment of Paris tasting, speaks at the 40th anniversary celebration and tasting during the 2016 Naples Winter Wine Festival in Naples, Florida.

# the Judgment of PARIS

## FORTY YEARS LATER

BY LANA BORTOLOTT



Winemaker **BO BARRETT** of Chateau Montelena. Barrett was an assistant at Chateau Montelena working under the tutelage of Mike Grgich during the 1973 vintage, which placed first among Chardonnays at the Judgment of Paris.



**GEORGE TABER** wrote the original story in Time magazine and later authored the book Judgment of Paris, which was made into a motion picture.



**STEVEN SPURRIER** organized the original Judgment of Paris in 1976 and has since become one of the world's foremost wine authorities.



**TED BASELER** is President and CEO, Ste. Michelle Wine Estates & Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. The Stag's Leap Wine Cellars 1973 S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon placed first among reds at the original tasting.



Thanks to its winning Chardonnay in the original Judgment of Paris, Chateau Montelena became, and remains, a Napa Valley icon.

## Revisiting the event that changed wine forever

When Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about “the shot heard around the world,” he was referring to the opening volley of the American Revolutionary War. Some 200 years later, that phrase would be renewed to describe another American revolution that again pitted Americans against the Old World order.

In wine circles, that scrimmage is, of course, the famed Judgment of Paris, in which a couple of West Coast upstarts flummoxed French wine experts and caused a revolution in the way California wines were perceived.

Steven Spurrier, a former wine merchant in Paris and one of the organizers of the historic tasting held in America’s bicentennial year (and currently The SOMM Journal’s London Correspondent), says he didn’t expect to start a war: “We intended to show the wines to get their quality recognized and have something to talk about,” he told guests at a retrospective tasting that commemorated the 40th anniversary of the Judgment of Paris. “We were so blown away by the quality of California wines that something had to be done.”

The story of how Chateau Montelena Winery and Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars beat out the French is now well-told in wine lore and in Hollywood, thanks to the 2008 movie *Bottleshock* and George Taber’s gripping account of the historic tasting in his 2005 book,

*Judgment of Paris*. Judging from the turnout at the anniversary retrospective at the 2016 Naples Winter Wine Festival, it is still a story worth telling.

“If there’s one thing to be drawn, it’s that France was sitting on its laurels with no incentive to advance,” Spurrier says. “It was the beginning of the crack in French wines.” Flying in from London, he was joined in Naples by George Taber, the *Time* magazine journalist who broke the story in 1976, and ambassadors of the Napa Valley upstarts: Bo Barrett, CEO and Master Winemaker of Chateau Montelena, and Ted Baseler, President and CEO of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, which now owns Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars in partnership with Marchesi Antinori. The Naples event kicked off a schedule of events that will include tastings, master classes and feasts in select cities, co-hosted by the two Napa icons. Additionally, The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History will commemorate the anniversary with two special events May 16 and 17 in Washington, D.C., where bottles of the winning wines are held in the museum’s permanent collection.

As the lone journalist attending the afternoon event on May 24, 1976 at the Paris InterContinental Hotel, Taber got the extraordinary scoop. In the years since, he realized its reverberation. “This wine tasting has been the turning point in California winemaking and someone had to tell the story,” Taber told guests. “If I wrote

a book only about a tasting, it would be done in an hour and half, so I decided to travel around the world and find out the impact." Barrett, who said he was "just a soldier crushing grapes" for \$3.15 per hour in 1976, called it a "remarkable ripple effect" that affected regions around the world. "I don't think there's any doubt that the biggest transformation was the idea that California wine could be even considered nearly as good as French wine," he said. "The fine-wine industry that exists today in California . . . was transformed by the idea that you could make high-quality wine in other viticultural regions. We went from an aristocratic world to a meritocracy."

This was a significant achievement, not just as a matter of reputation, but also for what it did to combat the devastating effects of Prohibition on the American wine industry. Consequently before the Paris Tasting, California wines were known only locally with limited sales elsewhere in the U.S. After Paris, East Coast retailers opened their shelves to California producers, where, for the first time, they shared space with the best wines from Europe.

But, Barrett noted, beating the French 40 years ago isn't enough. He pointed to the pressures of maintaining the quality. "I think that Napa Valley is a major-league player in the world; the demand is there, but I think we can make better wines in the future," he said. "It's so much more difficult to remain at that competitive level than it was in 1973."

### The Path to Sustainability and Authenticity

Another result of the Paris Tasting was to crown California with a leadership role, which Barrett says includes an insistence on best sustainable agricultural practices. "I think the rest of the world is following us because we make better wines of higher quality—sustainably, responsibly and with managed farming," Barrett said, speaking for both his estate and his home state. "We won that day, but in the next 40 years we continued to set the bar for quality and farm responsibly, and that's where our leadership is now," Barrett said. Chateau Montelena established a far-reaching sustainability program as part of the Napa Green Certified Land program, which pro-

PHOTO: BELLA SPURRIER



ducts and enhances the regional watershed and natural habitat; the program includes natural compost and healthy cover crops to ensure vine health and stability, installing LED lighting and planting micro gardens around the estate, using almost exclusively solar power and providing visitors with electric car chargers.

## CHATEAU MONTELENA TASTING NOTES

Notes courtesy of Chateau Montelena.

The 1973 vintage was just the second vintage year of wine produced by the Barrett family after their purchase of Chateau Montelena in 1972. The Barretts produced Chardonnay at first as a means to bring in revenue before the release of the winery's Estate Cabernet Sauvignon. With the incredible attention that resulted from the Judgment of Paris, Chardonnay became an integral part of the winery's offerings. Consistency of style is one of the hallmarks of Chateau Montelena Chardonnay. The winery also sells a six-year vertical of Chardonnay that demonstrates the incredible nuance and age-ability of these Chardonnays.

—David Gadd

### CHARDONNAY

**2007 Napa Valley Chardonnay** Aromas of orange blossom, citrus rind and stone fruits of white peach and apricot; on the palate, layers of tropical fruit, white melon, green apple and citrus. Eight to nine months in French oak.

**2008 Napa Valley Chardonnay** Pear tart, tropical passion fruit and lychee on the nose with wet gravel; fleshy, round, juicy peach and big citrus notes of pink grapefruit and honey tangerine. Ten months in French oak.

**2009 Napa Valley Chardonnay** A classic Chardonnay hue of pale golden straw with white peach, orange blossoms and

toasted almonds aromas; bright citrus tones of sweet mandarin and Meyer lemon with tropical notes of guava and pineapple on the palate. Ten months in French oak.

**2010 Napa Valley Chardonnay** Opens with intense aromas of lemon, lime leaf and honey; citrus continues on the palate with firm acidity and star fruit with a subtle marzipan finish. Ten months in French oak.

**2011 Napa Valley Chardonnay** A rich gold color in the glass with clean aromas of pear and crisp green apple; a full and creamy palate with a rich display of nectarine, white peach and lychee. Ten months in French oak.



*The original panel for the Judgment of Paris in 1976.*

### **Napa: The Next 40 Years**

Between high land prices and an influx of tourism (almost 4.5 million people visit Napa Valley each year), preserving Napa's rustic authenticity will be an issue in the future. Barrett said he thinks the challenge is complacency. "We schooled the French 40 years ago and I think Napa might set itself up to be schooled by somebody else by resting, so it's important to keep your head in the game and keep working forward," he said. "The bar for quality has never been higher."

Today, even as it celebrates its win 40 years ago in Paris, family-owned and -operated Chateau Montelena is more focused than ever on its renowned Napa Valley and Estate Cabernet Sauvignons, which account for almost two-thirds of the winery's current annual production, furthering founder Jim Barrett's original dream of producing a First Growth California Cabernet Sauvignon.

Chateau Montelena's Estate Cabernet Sauvignon comes from 111 acres of

Cabernet vineyards that surround the winery at the base of Mount Saint Helena in Calistoga. The vineyard site contains the three most desirable soil types used in making premium wines (volcanic, sedimentary and alluvial) and also faces east, giving it a 45–50 degree Fahrenheit diurnal temperature variation during the growing season. Because of these unique growing conditions, the vineyard typically produces less than a ton of fruit per acre, which gives the wine an incredible concentration of flavors.

Spurrier also agreed that Napa needs to continuously evolve. "Napa will always be the hub, but I think that Napa will really have to keep renewing itself to keep the public buying its wines, because the public is always after something new." Echoing his earlier thoughts, he concluded, "It's very good to know that the families are still there. That's what wine growing is all about: people remaining on the soil and making the best thing they can. It all comes down to quality and individuality. You can't have quality without individuality."

See page 30 for Steven Spurrier's personal reminiscences about the original Judgment of Paris.

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"When you visit the winery, it's a totally different experience," says Barrett. "Everything else falls in place if you can provide remarkable wine experiences." But, he noted, it's essential to do it with integrity and honesty—from the way you treat your land and employees to the price you charge for what's in the bottle.

**2012 Napa Valley Chardonnay** Ripe peach, green apple and honeydew on the nose; the palate shows bright acidity and layers of kiwi, grapefruit and soft notes of sweet oak and lemon curd. Ten months in French oak.

### **CABERNET SAUVIGNON**

**2005 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon** Dark and powerful in the glass with notes of violets, cassis and dark cherry; on the palate, red raspberry with hints of cherry, dried fruits and clove. 18 months in 28% new French oak.

### **2011 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon**

Aromas of strawberry, vanilla and lavender are followed by ripe raspberry, cranberry, mint and cocoa on the palate. A vein of bright acidity is present from start to finish. 22 months in 32% new French oak.



*A bottle of the famed Chateau Montelena 1973 Chardonnay.*