

Written by Jancis Robinson 9 Jul 2016

That Paris judgment 40 years on

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When his grandson asks him why he is famous, wine writer [Steven Spurrier](#) (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/tt-steven-spurrier-champion-of-french-wines>) shows him George M Taber's book *Judgment of Paris*, a tangible reminder of the fateful blind tasting of California and top French wines he organised on 24 May 1976.

In this 40th anniversary year, Spurrier has been travelling the globe – to Florida, California, Washington DC, Paris and at least five commemorative events in and around London (including [this one at Sager & Wilde](#) (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/judgment-of-paris-a-40th-anniversary-rerun>), reported on recently by Julia, and [this one at Christie's](#) (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/napa-valley-veterans>), reported on this week by me) – so long lasting, if slow burning, have been the effects of what he called at one celebration at Christie's, London, last month 'a template whereby unknown wines of quality could go against famous ones'. A bottle of each of the winning California wines are even part of the Smithsonian museums' collection of '101 Objects that Made America'.

In 1976 it was only 10 years into the modern era of Napa Valley. The Robert Mondavi Winery, the first new wine operation of any size to have broken ground there since Prohibition, has just celebrated its half century (as reported [here](#) (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/mondavi-retrospective-a-napa-history-lesson>) by Elaine Chukan Brown). The first Mondavi wines were made by Warren Winiarski, who went on to produce the winning red wine in the Paris blind tasting, the first crop from his own vineyard at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars.

In the late 1970s Spurrier was a young wine merchant in Paris. He and his colleague Patricia Gallagher had heard that some interesting wines were starting to be made in California and decided to draw attention to them in France. Perhaps a California tasting, scheduled to coincide with the bicentennial of American independence, would garner some useful publicity for their business?

They also ran an increasingly respected wine school, the Académie du Vin, that nurtured many of today's wine luminaries. Because of this, they managed to line up a particularly high-powered panel of French tasters to take a look at a dozen promising California wines that Spurrier had picked out on a trip there in March 1976.

A week or two before the tasting he realised that of his panel probably only Aubert de Villaine of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, married to an American, had tasted California wines before. Only because he was worried about anti-California prejudice, he assures us today, he decided to make his event a blind comparison with eight of France's finest wines, including two first-growth bordeaux from the 1970 vintage, highly regarded at the time but one that looks a bit dry and fruitless compared with modern vintages.

The result was conclusive. The six California Chardonnays and four top white burgundies were compared first. Six out of the nine tasters put Chateau Montelena 1973 Chardonnay (a blend of Sonoma and Napa grapes) top. Then Warren Winiarski's Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet 1973, made from vines that were a mere three years old, topped the red wine preferences. These two California wines were then retailing at around \$6 a bottle (as opposed to about £12, probably about \$25 in the US, for the first growths).

The initial effects of the tasting were limited to embarrassment among the tasters, the editor of the two leading French wine magazines asking for the return of her tasting notes. Spurrier resisted and was rewarded with a vitriolic article and the allegation that the tasting had been rigged.

Even the California wine producers involved were not exactly sitting on the edge of their seats. Several of them had been unco-operative when Spurrier tried to visit them. And rather than helping with shipping the bottles to Paris, they left Spurrier to depend on the goodwill of the organiser of a tour of French wine country for California wine folk who volunteered to ship the bottles with her participants' luggage.

But in early June a brief account of the tasting by Taber, a reporter for *Time* magazine in Paris and the only journalist to witness it, was published, and triumphant news stories began to appear in the American press. After a few months the French press finally reported, with extreme scepticism, on the results, and eventually all hell broke loose. The head of the appellation contrôlée authority who had been one of the tasters was asked to resign, as was the oenophile Jean-Claude Vrinat of Taillevent as head of Paris's restaurant association. Spurrier was cold shouldered by the French wine establishment and physically ejected from one Burgundian cellar.

The French argued that their wines failed to shine because they were too young, so a rerun of the original tasting was organised in New York 10 years later in May 1986. California triumphed again. At the time the Bordelais blamed Spurrier for the failure of their concurrent 1985 primeurs campaign in the US.

In 1996 Spurrier had little appetite for a 20th anniversary reprise, but I took part in an ambitious [30th anniversary transatlantic re-enactment](http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/judgment-of-paris-re-run-a-guide-to-this-sites-coverage) (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/judgment-of-paris-re-run-a-guide-to-this-sites-coverage>) of the original tasting held simultaneously at Berry Bros in London and Copia in the Napa Valley, including one of the original French tasters in each of the two panels. Ridge Vineyards 1971 Monte Bello Cabernet (magnificent but not as magnificent as the 1970), grown high above what is now Silicon Valley, was the favourite wine for both panels. (Ridge's guiding light [Paul Draper](http://www.jancisrobinson.com/forum/showthread.php?t=6114) (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/forum/showthread.php?t=6114>) has just announced that he is to retire from active service, at the age of 80.) The famous Stag's Leap 1973 was second and the top five places, in a total of 10 wines, were occupied by California Cabernets.

I have been lucky enough to taste a wide range of California Cabernets made in the 1970s and 1980s, some of them quite recently, and have been hugely impressed by their quality, subtlety and longevity. I am also told that there has recently been a resurgence of interest in these wines on New York restaurant wine lists - perhaps partly thanks to the massive recent tome *Napa Valley Then & Now* by sommelier Kelli White. But there was a bit of a sea change in style during the last decade of the last century when most grapes were picked much riper and the wines generally much more potent, leading me to wonder whether these vintages will age as well. It was notable that when, as part of the 2006 re-enactment, we compared 2000 red bordeaux with similar vintages from California, Bordeaux 'wiped the pants off California', as Spurrier put it at Christie's.

Partly thanks to the Judgment of Paris, partly because of advances in scientific understanding, the Bordelais transformed their wines from the 1980s on – arguably making them more in the riper mould of California

Cabernets.

But today the trend in both Bordeaux and California is to exercise increasing restraint so that, while the wines are made from grapes ripe enough to produce wines drinkable in youth, they also definitively express the places they are grown. This, along with unparalleled technical proficiency, means that they could be on a course to meet mid Atlantic.

SOME GREAT CALIFORNIA WINES

These are some rather more recent recommended vintages of the wines that performed well in the 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting that are still produced in much the same fashion as they were 40 years ago.

Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 2009 Napa Valley

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, SLV Cabernet Sauvignon 2008 Stags Leap District, Napa Valley

Mayacamas Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 Mount Veeder, Napa Valley

Ridge, Monte Bello 2014, 2013 and 2012 Santa Cruz Mountains

AND SOME MORE RECENT FAVOURITE PRODUCERS

Araujo (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/araujo-a-calistoga-exception>) (recently renamed Eisele Vineyard by new owner François Pinault)

Corison

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/corison-california-cabernet-with-subtlety>) **Kapcsandy**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/kapcsandy-inglenook-stags-leap-wine-cellars>) **Kongsgaard**

Mount Eden

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/santa-cruz-mountains-stylistic-tangle>) **Spottswoode**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/spottswoode-wip-ep>)