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Napa v. Bordeaux, Round Two Vintners re-enact famous '76 tasting

**By Jessica Yadegaran
CONTRA COSTA TIMES**

NAPA - California has done it again.

Exactly 30 years after the historic Paris wine tasting that changed the wine industry forever, a Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon once again beat out its prestigious Bordeaux peers in what has come to be known as the wine rematch of the century.

In May 1976, nine French wine experts judged New World cabernet sauvignons and chardonnays against their beloved red Bordeaux and white Burgundies in a blind tasting.

Judges ranked the California wines as superior. The French were shocked.

At the time, with fewer than two dozen wineries to its name, Napa Valley was a mere speck of soil on the international wine map.

Only a tasting re-enactment of the original wines three decades -- to the day -- later could once and for all reverse the widely-held adage, at least by the French, that California wines may be just as good as French wines, but they do not age as well.

So there was much on the line Wednesday as winemakers, world-renowned judges and the international wine media descended on Copia for a day of swirling, sipping and spitting some of the most expensive wines made, including the \$600-a-bottle Chateau Margaux 2000.

And the tension was palpable.

Before the winners were announced, Warren Winiarski of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, who made the cabernet that won in 1976, said that "since our wines happened to prevail in that tasting, I was shaking with the fear that they wouldn't show as well as they did 30 years ago."

In fact, the top four winners were Californians. Ridge Monte Bello 1971, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars 1973, Heitz Martha's Vineyard 1970 and Mayacamas 1971 (in a tie), and Clos du Val 1972.

Younger vintages were also tasted, but they were compared against their local counterparts, rather than their transcontinental varieties.

The winning chardonnay was Talley Rosemary's Vineyard 2002, and the winning cabernet was Ridge Monte Bello 2000. Ridge Monte Bello cabernet also snagged first place in the re-enactment tasting.

Paul Draper of Ridge Monte Bello said he knew long ago what "this piece of ground" was capable of.

"I'm delighted," he said above the sound of the Napa Valley Wine Train whizzing by. "Now maybe we can lay this to rest."

It was a sentiment felt by all, especially considering how much the wine industry has changed in 30 years. Today, it is a much different business, with reputations and big money at stake.

"The difference between the tone of that day 30 years ago and today is like night and day," said George Taber, a former Time magazine journalist and the only member of the media who was present at the original Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976.

"Everyone is so serious here. Back then, it was just a fun day."

After the Judgment -- which established for the first time that terroir, the French notion of a "taste of place," exists outside of France -- Napa Valley real estate soared, and wine regions from Chile to Australia began to hone their styles.

The re-enactment, which also was held simultaneously in London, began in Napa promptly at 9:30 a.m., when the palate is said to be at its best. The room was still except for an occasional and clinking of glass.

But back in 1976, without the scrutiny of the wine media, the French judges made now-infamous aspersions about the wines. Comments such as "That is clearly from California!," when tasting a sub-par French wine, and "OK, back to France!," when their taste buds were actually craving a California wine, have haunted the French to this day.

"We've learned our lessons, so to speak," said Patricia Gastaud-Gallagher, the panel chairwoman and organizer, along with Steven Spurrier, of the original 1976 tasting.

So, in calculated silence and with little animation, judges and master sommeliers Paul Roberts and Andrea Immer Robinson worked through the original red wines, their younger vintages, and a new flight of whites. Robert Mondavi Winery Chairman Jean-Michel Valette stood up to look down on the wines, hoping to make a color or clarity distinction between the rubies and garnets. Stephen Brook of Decanter practically gargled his.

Judging was based on the Borda Count system, a consensus-based, non-majority system where judges give the wines points in order of preference. By lunch, judges on this side of the Atlantic had finished their testing, and a licensed statistician was busy tabulating the results.

When asked how she felt minutes before the results were announced, Kathleen Heitz of Heitz Vineyards, whose Martha's Vineyard 1970 cabernet was in the original judgment, simply held up her glass and said: "More wine, please."

By the time they moved on to the younger vintages, however, the mood was lighter: "I like my chardonnays better with breakfast," quipped judge and collector Wilder Jaguar, breaking the silence. Jaguar's wine collection, at 18,500 bottles, is one of the world's largest.

In London, however, Sparer and a pre-eminent contingency of judges including Hugh Johnson and Juncos Robins were behind in their tastiness but nonetheless seemed to be having more fun, despite technical difficulties.

"So far, all I can say is that we know that a French wine will never be as good as a California wine," Sparer said with a laugh via intercom to Gastaud-Gallagher and the rest of the Copia crowd. Despite the satisfaction California vintners clearly felt, all agreed that the re-enactment was more celebration than competition.

After all, many California winemakers pointed out, they just wanted to be in company with the French. Perhaps it was Clos du Val's winemaker John Clews who said it best: "It's like being in the Olympics. You can't complain."

Jessica Yadegaran is a lifestyle writer. Reach her at jyadegaran@cctimes.com or read her wine blog at <http://blogs.www.contracostatimes.com/corkheads/>.

THE WINNERS

Judgment of Paris winners in 1976:

- Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 1973
- Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon 1973

Judgment of Paris winners Wednesday:

- Ridge Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon 1971
- Chardonnay: Talley Rosemary's Vineyard 2002
- White Burgundy: Domaine Leflaive Puligny-Montrachet Premier Cru Les Pucelles 2002
- Cabernet Sauvignon: Ridge Monte Bello 2000

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