

California trounces France 30 years on

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A handful of venerable Californian wines have once again beaten their French counterparts - in a re-run of the Paris Tasting of 1976.

Against all expectations the Cabernets – Ridge Monte Bello 1971, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars 1973, Mayacamas 71, Heitz 70 and Clos du Val 72 – were voted superior to their rivals in Bordeaux.

In yesterday's extraordinary series of coordinated tastings in London and California, hosted by Steven Spurrier, some of the world's most eminent tasters found the Californian wines to have retained more of their verve over the years than the Bordeaux.

Hugh Johnson, Jancis Robinson, Matthew Jukes, Michel Bettane, Michael Broadbent, Spurrier himself and other eminent critics, pitted Leoville Las Cases 71, Mouton 70, Haut Brion and Montrose 70 against the Californians.

The Ridge was outright winner. Spurrier suggested it was a compliment to Bordeaux, as Ridge's owner Paul Draper trained at Chateau Latour. His 1971, Spurrier said, 'is a Latour-style wine. It's very Bordeaux.'

The tasting took place in utmost seriousness and totally blind conditions at the headquarters of Berry Brothers in St James's in the centre of London in the early evening. Simultaneously, at the Copia Center in Napa, the same wines were tasted by an equally eminent panel.

There were also tastings by panels of journalists of later vintages of Bordeaux and California cabernets, Burgundies and California chardonnays.

The wines were simply ranked 1-6 and the scores totalled. The tasters were impressed with the quality of the wines after 30 years. 'They were amazingly fit,' Jukes said. Bettane pointed out that then 'it was a different winemaking world, but some of the wines were very good'.

Panel members said they found it almost impossible to tell the French and American wines apart, either by tannins or fruit quality. There were universal nods of assent when Brian St Pierre, another of the panellists, said he found the whole thing 'thrilling'.

The tasting was an exact rerun – with the same wines – of the Paris Tasting of 24 May 1976, in which Stag's Leap and Ridge were voted superior to the French wines by a panel of eminent French critics.

That decision shook the wine world, but last night was carried out in a spirit of celebration and – as at the end of dinner at the opulent RAC Club Spurrier used a rickety phone and speaker system to patch through to Napa – hilarity.

'My God, they're on,' he said, as if he was coordinating the first landings on Mars. 'We're just on the cheese and we're moving onto desserts,' Napa said.

The scores from London and America were efficiently totted up and the totals announced. 'So California wins!' Spurrier said, to laughter and applause.

The veteran critic had been convinced France would be voted the best. Both Warren Winiarski of Stag's Leap and Paul Draper of Ridge had said their wines hadn't lasted that well.

Along with the celebration, Spurrier allowed himself a moment of schadenfreude as he contemplated the fact that the Bordeaux chateaux had sent wine for the tastings of later vintages but had refused to supply any of the old vintages. Instead he bought all the wines from 'the most irreproachable sources'.

Thinking about the result, and how it would be received across the Channel, he said happily, 'So, Spurrier's name will be mud again.'

In California, Peter Marks MW, Copia director of wines said, 'It really felt like a celebration today. It's well known that French wines have stood the test of time for centuries, and it's wonderful to confirm that California wines have the ability to age gracefully, as well.'

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