
California wines beat the French -- again Taste-off proves California wines age best, too Even after 30 years of aging, state's Cabernets still tops

- [Linda Murphy, Chronicle Wine Editor](#)

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Who says California wines don't age?

The French do. Repeatedly.

Yet Gaul is biting its tongue today after California smoked France Wednesday in a cross-continental tasting of wines that have matured in cellars for three decades. The California Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines placed first through fifth, followed by four wines from France's hallowed Bordeaux region and then another California Cab.

Sacre bleu!

Make that red, white and blue.

The occasion marked the 30th anniversary of "The Judgment of Paris," a tasting by French and British judges that pitted California against Bordeaux Cabernet Sauvignons on May 24, 1976.

In that slosh heard round the world, the 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars S.L.V. Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon scored higher than its French counterparts. At the same time, a taste-off of California Chardonnays and Chardonnay-based white Burgundies from France resulted in another stunner when the 1973 Chateau Montelena Napa Valley Chardonnay won.

When writer George M. Taber reported the outcome in Time magazine, California gained instant recognition as a world-class wine region. The French saved face by saying, "Our wines will improve with time. But these California wines will not age well. They will tire quickly, lose their character, lose their balance."

"Phooey" was the answer from Wednesday's tastings. Two panels of wine professionals -- one in Napa at Copia: The American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts, the other at wine merchant Berry Bros. & Rudd in London -- simultaneously evaluated the same 10 wines tasted in the 1976 Paris event.

When the results were combined, the 1971 Ridge Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon from the Santa Cruz Mountains finished first, followed by the 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon; a tie between the 1970 Heitz Martha's Vineyard Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon and 1971 Mayacamas Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon; and the 1972 Clos du Val Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon.

Bordeaux took the next four slots -- 1970 Chateau Mouton-Rothschild, 1970 Chateau Montrose, 1970 Chateau Haut-Brion and 1971 Chateau Leoville-Las-Cases. The 1969 Freemark Abbey

Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon was 10th.

Organizers of the event were quick to say the re-enactment was a "celebration" of the historic Paris tasting and not meant to be a competition -- a bit like the Special Olympics, where everyone is a winner.

But it became a competition nonetheless, and California vintners reveled in the outcome.

Paul Draper, winemaker and CEO of Cupertino's Ridge Vineyards & Winery, said he did not have high hopes of his wine showing well against Cabernet Sauvignons that were riper and fleshier.

"The 1971 Monte Bello was the wine (Paris organizer) Stephen Spurrier thought would win," Draper said, although in 1976 it finished fifth. Yesterday, it won.

"It's a very balanced, elegant wine, though I didn't know how it would compare to some of the bigger wines. I'm delighted that this elegant, lower-alcohol style from a cooler climate was recognized."

Most of the panelists who tasted the wines, including this reporter, marveled at how well all of them survived the elements that destroy wines as they get older -- time, evaporation, temperature fluctuations and crumbling corks.

Eight of the 10 wines in the re-enactment showed remarkably well, their once-garnet color fading to ruby with only some slight browning at the edges. Most still had plenty of bright red and black fruit character along with varying levels of the leather, spice box and earth character of older red wines.

"It's absolutely wonderful that California wines have shown that they can age as well as Bordeaux wines," said Spurrier, a British wine merchant who, with Patricia Gastaud-Gallagher, staged the 1976 tasting in Paris to commemorate America's Bicentennial.

"Today's event was most amazing -- the link between California and the U.K. has been extraordinary and uplifting," Spurrier said.

It's doubtful the French will feel the same.

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