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ANOTHER TOAST TO CALIFORNIA

FRANCE IS AGAIN BESTED IN EPIC WINE REMATCH

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NAPA - Call it the Judgment of Napa and London.

In a 30th-anniversary re-enactment of part of the famous Paris Tasting of 1976, in which upstart California wines bested some of the top wines of France, California came out on top again Wednesday, grabbing the top five spots. Judging panels on both sides of the Atlantic declared the 1971 Ridge Monte Bello, a wine from the hills above Cupertino, the best wine in the tasting.

In a separate tasting of more current wines, another Ridge wine, the 2000 Monte Bello, was ranked the No. 1 California cabernet sauvignon when the two panels' scores were combined. In that tasting, California wines didn't compete against their French counterparts.

Longtime Ridge winemaker Paul Draper, clearly delighted at the results, said he thought the 1971 would do well. "I know how good it is, and if it held . . . it would have a shot." But he said the success of the 2000 was a "total surprise" because the wine is from a poorly regarded vintage and is made in a style that is much less ripe and alcoholic than what's currently fashionable.

The 1976 Paris tasting -- which came to be known as the "Judgment of Paris," after a headline that appeared in Time magazine -- catapulted California wines into the world spotlight. The informal event -- organized by Steven Spurrier, a Paris-based British wine merchant, to mark the U.S. bicentennial -- pitted six California cabernet sauvignons against four top bordeaux, which are cabernet-based, and six California chardonnays against four chardonnay-based white burgundies. The judges were French, and the tasting was blind, meaning that the judges didn't know what wine was in which glass.

When the results were tabulated, two California wines -- the 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon and the 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay -- were judged to be the best wines.

For the re-enactment, which took place exactly 30 years after the original tasting, panels of nine wine professionals were assembled in London and at Copia: The American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts in Napa, and the wines were again tasted blind. Only the red portion of the 1976 tasting was repeated, because most of the whites were unlikely to have held up this long. Spurrier was in London, with a telephone hook-up both before the tasting and when the results were announced.

In the overall rankings, combining the scores from both Napa and London, the Stag's Leap wine that won the first tasting came in second. It was followed by the 1970 Heitz Martha's Vineyard and the 1971 Mayacamas in a tie for third. No. 5 was the 1972 Clos Du Val. The top bordeaux, at No. 6, was the 1970 Chateau Mouton-Rothschild.

"What I was expecting today was the downfall of the California wines," said Christian Vannequé, one of the 1976 judges, who participated in Napa. He noted that the French judges at the first gathering had pooh-poohed the results, saying the California wines won because "they were too open." No one thought these exuberant wines would age. "It's not true," he said. The re-enactment revealed that "California wines do age very, very well."