

Telegraph.co.uk - New World wins again in a vintage rematch

By Sally Pook

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At the time it was unthinkable. French wine, surely the finest in the world, was put to a blind taste test against the best California could offer.

It was 1976, the tasting was in Paris, and wine from the New World was considered no better than cheap Retsina. Imagine the heart-stopping moment, then, when nine experts, all French, ruled that Californian wine was superior.



Steven Spurrier at the London tasting yesterday

"You cannot underestimate how much the 1976 tasting shocked, and then revolutionised, the wine industry," said Steven Spurrier, who staged the event. "It was iconic, the first chink in France's armour, and a huge, huge shock."

The Judgment of Paris, as it has become known, was re-enacted yesterday, 30 years to the day after the original, with two teams of tasters in London and the Napa Valley, California, thanks to Mr Spurrier's wit and ingenuity.

The London tasting, held in the cellars of Berry Bros & Rudd in Piccadilly, included all of the original red wines tasted in 1976, along with new French and Californian wines, representing the best that has emerged from the two regions over the past 30 years.

Part of the point of the exercise was to see whether the 1970s Californian reds had aged as well as the great Bordeaux first growths. The views of nine of the best European tasters will be made known today.

Jasper Morris, one of only 250 Masters of Wine in the world, and the buying director of Berry Bros, said: "The Judgment of Paris was a wake-up call to the French.

"Wine-growers prone to complacency were forced to smarten up their act but it was also a rallying cry to other potential wine-growing countries."

At the time of the judgment, Mr Spurrier was running a small wine shop in Paris, the only Englishman to do so. He considered a Californian wine-tasting a suitable way to celebrate the American Bicentennial - and thought it would be fun to test it against the French.

At the tasting of 10 red and 10 white wines, evenly split between French and American in both classes, the panel awarded the top place in both categories to Californian wine. A Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 1973 topped the white wines, beating famous French names such as Puligny-Montrachet.

In the red category, a Stag's Leap Cabernet-Sauvignon 1973, now unobtainable, beat names such as Chateau Mouton-Rothschild 1973 (now roughly £100 a bottle).

There was only one journalist there. The French media stayed away, assuming the result would be a bore.

George Taber, of Time, did attend, mostly, it was said, because he was on a wine tasting course. He had a scoop.

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