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California reds win by a nose in tasting rematch

BY ALAN HAMILTON AND DAVID SANDERSON

THIRTY years had passed since the Judgment of Paris, when French oenophiles received a red nose at the hands of American upstarts in a blind wine-tasting competition.

But to the dismay of the French wine experts taking part in last night's eagerly awaited rematch, Californian vintages have again trumped their Gallic counterparts.

The nose-off began in 1976, when Steven Spurrier, an Englishman who owned a wine shop in the French capital, invited a panel of French experts to a blind tasting of some of their own classic vintages against some Californian reds. To the horror of the entire French wine industry, the Americans won hands down.

Last night Mr Spurrier and a group of British, French and American tasters took part in the 30th anniversary re-enactment to discover whether the shocking defeat for what was then the undisputed world leader in viticulture could be reversed.

A simultaneous sampling of the same wines was staged in the Napa Valley, California's main wine-producing area, and at Berry Bros & Rudd wine merchants in London.

Despite the French tasters, many of whom had taken part in the original tasting, "expecting the downfall" of the American vineyards, they had to admit that the harmony of the Californian cabernets had beaten them again. Judges on both continents gave top honours to a 1971 Ridge Monte Bello cabernet from Napa Valley. Four Californian reds occupied the next placings before the highest-ranked Bordeaux, a 1970 Château MoutonRothschild, came in at sixth.

A delighted Paul Draper, the Monte Bello winemaker, said: "Maybe it is final justification that it held through all these years and did well."

The original tasting gave Californian producers a huge boost of confidence, and America is now the fourth-largest wine producer in the world.

"Not only did that tasting change people's perception of New World wines for ever, it sparked an exchange of ideas that

heralded a new golden age of wine drinking," Mr Spurrier said.

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