

## The 1976 Paris Wine Tasting R. C. Brusca

If you haven't read George Taber's entertaining and thorough book on the famous 1976 Paris wine tasting event, you should (*Judgement of Paris. California Vs. France and the Historic 1976 Paris Tasting that Revolutionized Wine*. 2005. Scribner). George Taber, who was a correspondent for *Time* magazine in Paris, was the only journalist at the tasting and his book was long overdue. The book gives a concise history of wines and wineries in both France and California, as a prelude to the Paris tasting event. Taber's history of wine making in the United States is fascinating (e.g., during Thomas Jefferson's 8 years as president, he brought more than 20,000 bottles of wine from Europe for White House consumption; White Zinfandel, America's biggest selling wine [ugh!], was first made by accident when a batch of Zinfandel got stuck during fermentation and all of the sugar did not convert successfully into alcohol).

The organizer of the famous Paris tasting was an Englishman, Steven Spurrier, who had settled in Paris and opened a small wine shop. Spurrier was the well-to-do son of English landed gentry who grew up drinking and studying fine wines. He ran a small "wine school" out of his shop in Paris, and did tastings of French wines on a regular basis. But when he discovered California wines in the early '70s, he decided they might be good enough to put up against the finest French vintages. The Paris tasting event featured 9 judges, all leading wine experts in France. Spurrier insisted it be a blind tasting, so none of the judges knew what the wines were or whether they were from France or California. There were two tastings, one with Cabernet Sauvignons of the Bordeaux style, the other of Chardonnays of the Burgundy style. Spurrier brought in 12 California wines, 6 Cabs and 6 Chardonnays; these were put up against 8 of the finest French wines. All of the California wines were from small new wineries that had started up in the 60s and 70s (9 of the 12 were from Napa Valley). As things turned out, the most famous of these proved to be Stag's Leap and Chateau Montelena. At the time, of course, French wine ruled the world. No one outside of California really knew what was happening there, and it still had a reputation for the cheap fruity bulk wines that evolved out of prohibition era bootlegging. The California wines tasted at the Paris tasting sold for ~\$6/bottle.

The contest was as strictly controlled. The nine judges, drawn from an oenophile's Who's Who, included such high priests as Pierre Tari, secretary-general of the Association des Grands Crus Classes, and Raymond Oliver, owner of Le Grand Vefour restaurant and doyen of French culinary writers. The wines tasted were transatlantic first cousins—four white Burgundies against six California Chardonnays, and four Grand Cru Châteaux reds from Bordeaux against six California Cabernet Sauvignons.



The tasters were stunned when they heard the results of their own blind tasting. A California Cab and California Chardonnay each took first place. In fact, 3 of the top 4 Chardonnays were from California, the '73 Château Montelena taking first place. The top Cab, a '73 Stag's Leap, soared above all the others at the tasting. The Stag's Leap was followed by Château Mouton-Rothschild '70, Château Haut-Brion '70, and Château Montrose '70, and California's Ridge Vineyard. The four winning whites were, in order, Chateau Montelena '73 from Napa, French Meursault-Charmes '73, and two other Californians, Chalone '74 from Monterey County and Napa's Spring Mountain '73.

The Paris tasting destroyed the myth of French wine supremacy and was a watershed in the history of wine. And, needless-to-say, it put California wines on the map forevermore. So profound was this tasting event, that bottles of the '73 Stag's Leap and Chateau Montelena are now exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution. 20-year anniversary media coverage is archived at: <http://www.montelena.com/winery/parisMedia1996> Interestingly, although the 1,800 cases of '73 Montelena Chardonnay was made in Napa Valley (by Michael Grgich), almost all of the fruit came from Sonoma County. The famous Bacigalupis vineyard that contributed most of the grapes for that Chardonnay still exists (although it's often referred to as the "Paris Tasting Block" now).

An interesting side story (that I don't think is covered in Taber's book) is the rise of a second "Stags Leap" winery—Stags' Leap. Stag's Leap sued Stags' Leap for copyright infringement over the name. The judge ruled that both names were valid, and from that day on both have continued to produce fine wines (and the name of the region is now spelled without an apostrophe— "Stags Leap"). In my opinion, Stags' Leap Cabs are every bit as good as Stag's Leap Cabs (and less expensive). Both Stag's Leap (and Stags' Leap) and Chateau Montelena continue to produce fine Napa Valley wines, as does Ridge Winery. Spurrier organized a repeat tasting in 1996. To everyone's surprise, again, California wines came out on top.

The chapter from Taber's book that describes the making of the famous 1973 Stag's Leap Cab is attached as a pdf file. It's a great read. By the way, the film, based on Taber's book, is a bit of a disappointment (Randall Miller's "Bottle Shock"), covering only the Chardonnay side of the story and dwelling ridiculously long on the romantic life of Bo Barrett, current General Manager at Chateau Montelena and son of Jim Barrett (owner of Chateau

Montelena and the man who created the exquisite 1973 bottles that traveled to Paris). However, it is well acted and seems to have captured the nature of the real-life characters.

Rank order of wines in 1976 Paris tasting:

**Bordeaux-style Cabernet Sauvignons**

Stag's Leap, 1973  
Château Mouton Rothschild, 1970  
Château Haut-Brion, 1970  
Château Montrose, 1970  
Ridge Vineyards, Monte Bello, 1971  
Château Léoville-Las-Cases, 1971  
Mayacamas Vineyards, 1971  
Clos du Val Winery, 1972  
Heitz Cellars Martha's Vineyard, 1970  
Freemark Abby Winery, 1969

**Chardonnays**

Chateau Montelena, 1973  
Meursault Charmes Roulot, 1973  
Chalone Vineyard, 1974  
Spring Mountain, 1973  
Beaune Clos des Mouches Joseph Drophin, 1973  
Freemark Abby Winery, 1972  
Batard-Montrachet Ramonet-Prudhon, 1973  
Puligny-Montrachet Les Pucelles Domaine LeFlaive, 1972  
Veedercrest Vineyards, 1972  
David Bruce Winery, 1973