

## Judgement of Paris – is the jury still out? by Sid Cross



Our wine expert Sid Cross has provided his overview of the Judgement of Paris under 5 key points:

1. In 1976, European knowledge of California wines significantly lagged behind North American knowledge.
2. Knowledgeable Napa wine aficionados in 1976 were not surprised by the results of JOP.
3. Blind wine tasting is very subjective and the results depend solely on the tasters' scores.
4. In 1976 Chardonnay and Cabernet were dominated by France, with California closely pursuing.
5. Fifty years ago, the popular opinion was that California wines should be enjoyed shortly after bottling and do not age as well as French wines.

The historic wine tasting in Paris held on May 24, 1976, and organized by the late Steven Spurrier (with Patricia Gallagher) will soon celebrate its 50th anniversary. Your scribe is surprised that it still receives such enthusiastic continued interest. Of course it was a big deal at the time: nine French wine tasters judged ten Chardonnays and Cabernet blends in a blind tasting, placing California #1 over both Burgundy whites and Bordeaux reds. Having George M. Taber, Time Magazine's Paris correspondent, attended the tasting and wrote his article, which was followed by wide publicity and his subsequent 2005 book helped.

Here are a few of my random thoughts on five key points of JOP for you to ponder:

### **1. In 1976, European knowledge of California wines significantly lagged behind North American knowledge:**

In my IWFS Monograph "An Appreciation of the Age of Wine," there are several references to the important 1974 IWFS Convention held in California. One mentions "Mike Robbins presented his Spring Mountain Chardonnay, declaring that his 1973 (placed 4th in 1976 JOP) and 1972 were consistently beating French Burgundy in blind tastings"- this was two years before JOP.

Secondly, Maynard Amerine, Professor of Enology at the University of California at Davis felt strongly that "Cabernet Sauvignon produced the very highest quality red wine, but not like Bordeaux because it is spicier and more alcoholic." I noted, "The professor was particularly enthusiastic about the

California vintages of 1934, 1936, 1946, 1949, 1951, 1958 and 1968, but surprisingly didn't mention the famous 1941 Inglenook." It wasn't until the eighties that pioneering UK importers like John Avery and Geoffrey Roberts Associates introduced the British Wine Trade to top California wines.

### **2. Knowledgeable Napa wine aficionados in 1976 were not surprised by the results of JOP:**

By the late sixties and early seventies, some of us in North America including yours truly recognized that world class Chardonnay and Cabernet were being produced in California. We marvelled at the balance of Stony Hill Estate Chardonnay produced by Eleanor & Fred McCrae from higher-elevation, north-facing vines planted in the 1940s on a stony hill north of St. Helena. First commercially released in 1952, it became an early cult white wine in the 1960s with memorable vintages of 1970, 1968, 1964 & 1962 all aging well. Similarly the amazing Beaulieu Vineyard Georges de Latour Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley was making waves with its outstanding, ripe, generous 1968 & 1970 vintages (with memories of the

outstanding 1958) as the hot new item to place on top restaurant wine lists. Also, Robert Mondavi was just making his first omnipotent statement with his impressive refined 1974 Robert Mondavi Winery Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon.

**3. Blind wine tasting is very subjective and the results depend solely on the tasters' scores.**

Nine French judges tasted 10 Chardonnays and 10 Cabernets one by one, scoring them out of 20. The selection included only four white Burgundy wines and four red Bordeaux wines, but six of each from California. Better odds. Naturally the judges focused on the style and characteristics of French wines which they were more familiar with, while assessing the wines. That tended towards less ripeness, less spice, less alcohol more acidity, and more subtlety. However one taster misinterpreted the reaction to a young 1973 Bâtard-Montrachet (which came in 7th) as "That is definitely California:" "It has no nose." More subdued, closed-in aromas are expected from such a young Grand Cru white Burgundy. Young California Chardonnays have more assertive young fruit aromas and show well early, taking up three of the first four highest ranked total scores. Likewise for the reds where California's bigger, ripe fruit profile would be more open and deeply impressive. Ironically, however, the #1 picks Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 1973 and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon (SLV) 1973 both showed a lighter, more balanced character, appearing more French-like than the other richer California white and red wines. The French Cabernet wines actually performed impressively ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> out of all ten. The wines, ranging from 1969 to 1973, were all very young and not the vintages of the century. It's interesting to note that none of the scores were very high. We appreciate that the scoring fifty years ago was much lower than what is used presently, but the high was only 14.14 and the low was 9.45. Not encouraging numbers for buy recommendations for any of them. Different judges would have reached different results.

**4. In 1976 Chardonnay and Cabernet were dominated by France, with California closely pursuing.** Fifty years later, vineyard and winery technology has achieved significantly higher levels in producing excellent wines in both regions. Chardonnay and Cabernet from California and France have become somewhat more similar in style. Global climate change is influencing every winery. Those two grape varieties are now finding remarkable success worldwide in very diverse terroirs. Repeating those tastings with meaningful results is difficult without adding more current vintages of the same wine and adding other world contenders. What about Chablis Les Clos or Tolpuddle Chardonnay?

**5. Fifty years ago, the popular opinion was that California wines should be enjoyed shortly after bottling and do not age as well as French wines.** We know now that this generalization is not true. This JOP has been repeated several times including at 10 and 30 years with California still the front-runner. Certainly California wines do age and many of them develop well. Still some key collectors say that even though these wines age well and retain their concentrated fruit, they don't develop the distinct, refined, tertiary dimensions of complex notes found in French wines. Many 50th-anniversary events are being planned namely by a number of the IWFS branches across the Society. Check out [judgementofparis50.com](http://judgementofparis50.com) also. Fifty years is usually too long to wait for judgment or judgement on wines. However, I just had the typically backward 1970 Montrose now on a beautiful plateau of lovely softened intriguing enjoyment. Maybe the jury is still out. Stay tuned.



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