

Every once in a while I like to recall the story of the Judgment of Wines that took place in Paris in 1976. Using a phrase that is popular today, it was a very real "game changer." It is the story of two wines that were entered into a formal wine tasting by Steven Spurrier, a transplanted Englishman, who just happened to be a believer in the quality of California wines. TIME magazine reported on the event in their June 7, 1976.

Here is what TIME had to say:

"Americans abroad have been boasting for years about California wines, only to be greeted by polite disbelief - or worse. Among the few fervent and respected admirers of Le vin de California in France is a transplanted Englishman named Steven Spurrier, who owns the Cave de la Madeleine wine shop, one of the best in Paris, and the Academie du Vin, a wine school whose six week courses are attended by the French Restaurant Association's chefs and sommeliers. Last week in Paris, at a formal wine tasting arranged by Spurrier, the unthinkable happened: California defeated all Gaul.

"The contest was as strictly controlled as the production of a Chateau Lafite. The nine French judges, drawn from an oenophile's WHO'S WHO, included such high priests as Pierre Tari, Secretary General of the ASSOCIATION des GRAND CRUS CLASSES, and Raymond Oliver, owner of Le Grand Vefour Restaurant and doyen of French culinary writers. The wines tasted were transatlantic cousins - four white Burgundies against six California Pinot Chardonnays and four Grands crus Chateaux reds from Bordeaux against six California Cabernet Sauvignons.

"As the judges swirled, sniffed, sipped and spat, some judges were instantly able to separate an imported upstart from an aristocrat. More often, the panel was confused. 'Ah, back to France!' exclaimed Oliver after sipping a 1972 Chardonnay from the Napa Valley. 'That is definitely California. It has no nose,' said another judge - after downing a 1973 Batard Montrachet. Other comments included such Gallic gems as 'this is nervous and agreeable,' 'a good nose but not to much in the mouth,' and 'this soars out of the ordinary.'

"When the ballots were cast, the top-soaring red was the 1972 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, from the Napa Valley and produced by Warren Winiarski. This was followed by the 1970 Mouton Rothchild, the 1970 Haut-Brion, and the 1970 Montrose. The four winning whites were, in order, the 1973 Chateau Montelena from Napa, the 1973 French Meursault-Charmes, and

two mother Californias, the 1974 Chalone from Monterey County and Napa Valley's 1973 Spring Mountain. The United States winners are little known to wine lovers, since they are in short supply even in California and rather expensive (\$6 plus. Remember that this is a 1976 price. Much more in 2017) Jim Barrett, Motelena's general Manager and part owner, said "Not bad for kids from the Sticks."

When Spurrier was organizing the wine tasting he remembered to invite the press. The only reporter to attend was George W. Taber from TIME Magazine. After he published the results of the tasting, an unprecedented explosion took place in the world of wine. The game changer was one simple tasting, arranged by Spurrier and carried out by highly qualified judges. The French were embarrassed and they tried to offer as many excuses as they could think of. But it was too late. The results were published for all the world to see. Overnight the wine industry in the US was changed forever and for the better. The American wines that had been entered in the Paris tasting were officially recognized and credible.

A very important point to remember here is that the Paris Tasting was repeated several more times over a ten year period. The results were always the same or close to it. Spurrier never gave up with the confidence that he had in the California wines. The results of the tastings are published online for all to see.

WINESPEAK

Two items: first a movie and second a new wine region. The movie is called BOTTLE SHOCK. It's well done and portrays the Paris Tasting accurately. The movie was released in 2016 to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the Paris tasting. It was produced by the Sundance Film Festival. It should be easily obtainable.

Our second item also took place in 1976, which was a breakout year for Oregon Pinot Noir. I classify this as an amazing coincidence with what took place in Paris. Just as Steve Spurrier had confidence in his two American selections, so also did Dick Erath have confidence in his selection of Oregon as a place to grow Pinot Noir. He was convinced that the soil and climate of the Dundee Area were perfect for growing Pinot Noir grapes. He was also convinced that the close proximity to the Pacific Ocean would help to moderate the temperatures during the growing season. And the ocean effect helped to keep the temperatures warmer in the winter, which in turn kept the vines from freezing.

Dick was a pioneer and many others followed. He was granted a license to build a winery in 1976, and the rest is history. His winery flourishes today along with many others producing quality Pinot Noir.

I can only say that I wish I'd had a crystal ball in 1976.