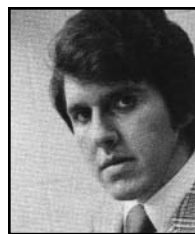


Fine Californian wines match French vintage



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By Michael Vaughan PhD

Last year Steven Spurrier and Patricia Gallagher of the prestigious Paris wine school, L'Academie du Vin, organized a comparative blind tasting of 10 "Cabernet Sauvignon" wines – six from tiny super-premium California wineries and four from highly-esteemed Bordeaux cru classe Chateaux.

Nine of the most distinguished wine tasters in France were invited to the tasting. A California wine "won" and the results were magnified out of all proper proportion by the American press. Time called it a "Judgement in Paris" in which "California defeated all Gaul." This gave the reader the erroneous impression that California wines were now better than the best French wines.

The result was humiliating to the French judges who had put their palates on the line. The French wine world screamed, suffered and raged. There were claims that the tasting order was stacked, that the judges were allowed to discuss the wines freely while tasting them, that the identity of the wines was revealed before the results were tabulated permitting some judges to "modify" their scores, and that the results were not subjected to any statistical analysis of significance. More important, some "experts" claimed that the tasting was unfair because California wines, with higher alcohol and lower acidity, have greater appeal in their youth in comparison to their French counterparts which are slower maturing. They suggested that the French wines might have easily defeated their Californian competitors had they been given proper aging.

Given these criticisms of the Paris tasting, I decided to try and repeat the experiment. Naturally it was impossible to get the same French tasters to participate since they had already been burned by the first experience.

As a second best, I was able to bring together 12 Canadian wine enthusiasts

which I divided into two groups: an "expert" group of five individuals who have had expensive tasting experience, and a "non-expert" group of seven amateurs. This enabled me to see whether it took an "expert" to tell a really great wine. [The Inn on the Park tasting of March 28, 1977](#)

The format was a blind, sit-down, tasting held in a quiet suite in Toronto's Inn on the Park Four Seasons Hotel. Each taster was asked to assess each wine according to a standard marking system, award it a specific score and then rank the wines in order of perceived quality. All the final scores and rankings were tabulated before the identity of the wines was revealed.

The object of the tasting was to settle two questions. First, could the very finest California Cabernet Sauvignon wines compare favourable with the greatest French Bordeaux? Second, were California wines only attractive in their youth? To answer the first question, I repeated the Paris tasting of recent vintages but added five wines which for quality reasons could have been included initially. To test the proposition that California wines are only attractive in their youth, while French wines need an opportunity to develop in bottle, I did two things. **First, a small sample of each of the recent vintages was placed in a small air-tight bottle and retasted a number of times during the following week.** If the suggestion was correct, the California wines should have "faded" rather rapidly in comparison to the French wines. The second test was much more conclusive. I organized a second comparative blind tasting of the best California and French wines with an average age of thirty years. According to the critics, the French wines should have easily defeated their California competitors.. Here then are the results of the two tastings:

The first tasting comprised of seven classic French growths and two great California wines. They were tasted blind

in the following order: 1949 Chateau Talbot (St-Julien), 1945 Chateau Mouton Rothschild (Pauillac), 1946 Inglenook Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (California), 1949 Cheval Blanc (St-Emilion), 1945 Chateau Haut Brion (Graves), 1947 Beaulieu Vineyards Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley, California), 1948 Chateau Leoville Las Cases (St-Julien) and 1947 Chateau Latour (Pauillac).

The first place wine among both "expert" and "non-expert" groups was the **1947 Beaulieu Vineyards Private Reserve!** It had a very dark red colour and was characterized by a full, rich, mature Cabernet Sauvignon taste. A truly great wine with a long, lingering, elegant finish. The second place wine, again according to both groups was the 1947 Chateau Latour. It was full, rich, with a cedary, herbaceous taste and long aftertaste. Also truly great. The scores attained by these two wines, at least among the "experts," were so close that it cannot be claimed that the Beaulieu Vineyards wine was significantly better than the Chateau Latour.

The fact that a 30-year-old California wine was as good as the best French Bordeaux, however, was a victory in itself. Moreover, the Beaulieu was significantly better than six comparably-aged French "classics." This certainly debunks the contention that the greatest California Cabernet Sauvignon wines cannot age and are only attractive in their youth. In second and third place, according to the "expert" group, was the second California wine, 1946 Inglenook Cabernet Sauvignon, followed by 1949 Chateau Talbot. Again the third ranking wine was not significantly better than the fourth, although both were better than the remaining wines.

The second tasting of more recent wines was much more difficult to arrange because there were so many more wines to choose from and, secondly, great wines are often difficult to assess in their youth. Seven classic French Bordeaux were chosen along with eight California wines and were served in the following order: 1970 Chateau Montrose (St-Estephe), 1973 Chateau Moulinet (Pomerol), 1970 Chateau Ducru-Beaucaillou (St-Julien), 1968 Heitz

Cabernet Sauvignon (California-oldest of the tasting), 1972 Freemark Abbey Cabernet Bouchet (California), 1972 Sterling Vineyards Napa Valley Merlot (California - the only Merlot), 1971 Chateau Cheval Blanc (St-Emilion), 1970 Chateau Haut Brion (Graves), 1971 Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon Monte Bello Vineyards (California), 1970 Chateau Mouton Rothschild (Pauillac), 1970 Chateau Latour (Pauillac), 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (California-winner of the Paris tasting), 1974 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (California), 1972 Chappellet Vineyards Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (California) and 1970 Beaulieu Vineyards Private Reserve Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (California).

Because of the large number of wines tasted, there was much greater uniformity among the expert's ranking than with the amateur group whose palate was stunned by the onslaught of such magnificent wines. The tasting session lasted several hours with ample opportunity for the tasters to take breaks if required.

Top wine of the tasting among both groups was the 1970 Beaulieu Vineyards Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon. It received four first-place votes among the five "expert" tasters – and had a deep, complex aroma, lovely, big, fleshy taste and long, lingering finish. A classic wine that is extremely scarce and already commands a price in excess of \$20 a bottle. It did not rank in the Paris tasting because it wasn't included.

Unlike the first tasting, both second and third place among the experts went to California wines: 1971 Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon Monte Bello Vineyards followed by 1968 Heitz Cabernet Sauvignon. While the scores did not indicate that the Beaulieu was significantly better than the Ridge, both appeared to be better than the fourth ranking wine – 1970 Chateau Mouton Rothschild! This and the next best French wine, Chateau Montrose, exactly parallels the qualitative ranking of French Bordeaux wines attained in the Paris tasting supporting the expertise of this group. The winner of the Paris tasting, 1973 Stag's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon did not place in the top five – it appeared to have gone somewhat down hill.

Checking for longevity, I retasted the same wines several times during the following week. One of the winners, the 1968 Heitz Cabernet Sauvignon, collapsed. Both the Beaulieu and Ridge held their own, while a few of the better French Bordeaux wines appeared to improve marginally. This suggests that the best California wines can rank with the best Bordeaux and are probably just as long lived. Even though the 1970 Chateau Latour did not rank particularly well (it was extremely tannic, very firm and still closed), it will be much better when ready to drink with ten or more years of bottle age.

The big winner of this tasting is freelance consultant Andre Tchelistcheff who was the illustrious winemaker at Beaulieu Vineyards for over 35 years up to 1973. He considers his 1947 Beaulieu Vineyards Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon one of the greatest wines he has ever made-that year's dry but amazingly warm weather resulted in grapes with great concentration of flavour and natural sugar. Small oak barrel aging gave the wine sufficient tannin enabling it to stand the test of time.

Obviously great things are happening in California and it will be interesting to see how the current top runners compare in ten years time. **It's also nice to know that you don't have to be a wine expert to tell a really great bottle of wine.**

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[Click here](#) to see the which wines actually won the 1976 Judgement in Paris event