

# French vs. California Wines JUDGMENT OF MONTREAL

THE YEAR 1976 BRIMMED WITH MEMORABLE EVENTS, INCLUDING A HISTORIC WINE TASTING IN PARIS THAT SAW CALIFORNIA UPSTARTS BEST SOME OF FRANCE'S FINEST WINES. THIRTY-THREE YEARS AFTER THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS, DO AMERICAN WINES STILL TOP THE CHARTS IN A BLIND TASTING?

BY SÉBASTIEN LAFRANCE

While having no wish to rewrite history, *Cellier* wanted to revisit the debate sparked by the landmark 1976 event. As it turned out, the French experts preferred the plusher, less astringent and more sensual Cabernets from California – no surprise to today's wine-drinker. But what happens when the Quebec palate gets involved? Are Quebec experts, with their one toe in France and the rest in North America, better able to distinguish between the great red Bordeaux and their California counterparts? As for the

wines themselves, have their styles changed sufficiently during the past three decades to significantly influence the outcome? We revisited the Judgment of Paris by assessing the finest Cabernet Sauvignons from the same two prestigious regions that supplied the wines for the 1976 tasting. To spice things up, we slipped in two "pirate wines" from other areas, though both were Bordeaux-style and Cab Sauv-based. One was Mas La Plana from Spain. "It was an obvious choice," says *Cellier* editor-in-chief Marc Chapleau,

JUDGMENT OF MONTREAL JURY (top left photo on facing page): Left to right, back, Jean Aubry (*Le Devoir*), Gilles Magny (SAQ wine advisor), Patrick Désy (*Cellier*), Don Jean Léandri (École Hôtelière de Laval), Nadia Fournier (*Le Guide du vin*), Marc Lepage (SAQ wine advisor) and Marc Chapleau (tasting organizer). Front, Véronique Rivest (*Châtelaine*), Jacques Benoit (*La Presse*) and Claude Langlois (*Le Journal de Montréal*). Absent from photo: Bill Zacharkiv (*The Gazette*).



PHOTOS: MURAT TANER/SEPA/CORBIS (FACING PAGE); JEAN TREMBLAY (JURY); BETTMANN/CORBIS (R. LÉVESQUE); STANLEY CUP; P. LE TRUDEAU (CONCORDE); GETTY IMAGES (S. STALLONE); GUY LEQUERREC/MAGNUM PHOTOS (R. CHARLEBOIS); JERRY ALEXANDER/CEPHAS (WINE BOTTLE); HENRY DITZ/CORBIS (THE EAGLES).

EVENTFUL 1976 (clockwise from top centre photo): Parti Québécois elected (René Lévesque); *Rocky* wins the Academy Award for best film (Sylvester Stallone); a Quebec singer performs in La Courneuve, France (Robert Charlebois); a California wine wins the Judgment of Paris (Stag's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon 1973); the Canadiens beat the

Flyers to take the Stanley Cup (Ken Dryden gives the "number one" gesture); the Montreal Olympics open (Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau); the Concorde makes its inaugural commercial flight (British Airways plane); the album *Hotel California* is released (the Eagles).

JUDGMENT OF MONTREAL *continued >>*



Once the tasting per se is over, the atmosphere at *Cellier* blind tastings buzzes as the judges discuss their impressions, compare notes and weigh the likelihood that they correctly guessed the provenance of the wines. Bill Zacharkiw, centre, huddles with Patrick Désy.

who oversees all the magazine's taste tests. "It's a sure bet and usually excellent value for the money." The other was Pepper Bridge from Washington State. "It was a real outsider in the sense that this region remains relatively little known and is only now starting to emerge from the shadow of California," Chapleau observes.

**METHODOLOGY**

The jurors – a who's who of Quebec wine experts – tasted the wines blind but were aware this was, essentially, a "do over" of the Judgment of Paris. The major difference with the 1976 event was that they would be tasting 16 reds rather than 10. They were given no other information at all. They had

no clue as to whether wines from 1976 were in the lineup, what the vintages were, and so on. And to ensure that the results would be as objective as possible, the two pirate wines were included without the judges' knowledge.

Each judge was asked to record on his tasting sheet whether he thought the wine was French or Californian. As in all our taste tests, the panellists did not sample the wines in the same order. The highest and lowest scores for each wine were also discarded, as they prevent true reflection of general opinion. The wines, all purchased at the SAQ in early 2009, were served at about 15°C.

In theory, as one of the participants pointed out afterwards, the relatively cool serving temperature should have

benefited the California wines because it would tend to tone down the impression of high alcohol in them, while making the more tannic Bordeaux seem harder because it would tend to reinforce the impression of astringency in them.

**FRANCE FIRST**

So what was the upshot? Despite those potential obstacles, the French reds bested their California rivals! French wines took the top three positions, with Mouton Rothschild again grabbing first place, as it did in our taste test of 2001 Bordeaux wines (*Cellier* Autumn 2008).

Another surprise was that the wines that scored best had a relatively low alcohol content. That's normally a disadvantage because, as a rule, the headier a wine the more pronounced its glycerine, the more round and velvety it will be, and the more likely it is to charm even experienced tasters. But the Mouton Rothschild had just 12.5-percent alcohol. Even more surprising was the Diamond Creek from California, which with only 12-percent alcohol, ended up rating between two of its big, beefy compatriots (the Mondavi Reserve and the Arrowood Réserve Spéciale, each with almost 15-percent alcohol).

**HIGH PRAISE**

Most of the panel had nothing but praise for the Mouton Rothschild. "Very fine quality," "Very roasted [the wood]

PHOTO: JEAN TREMBLAY

JUDGMENT OF PARIS

WHO'S ON FIRST?

A red and a white from California were deemed the best wines at the 1976 Judgment of Paris, sending aftershocks around the wine world. The event created such enduring notoriety that last year Hollywood turned it into a movie called *Bottle Shock*.

But the Judgment of Paris conclusion was distorted, given a fact that almost no one has flagged: The overall score in the Cabernet Sauvignon category was 13 out of 20 for Bordeaux and 11 out of 20 for California. Similarly, in the Chardonnay category, it was 11.4 for France and 10.8 for California. So France in fact came out ahead in total points.

Yet California was chest-thumpingly proud of its wines, and understandably so. It was a remarkable feat simply to be compared to the great Bordeaux wines, at the time thought to be untouchable. Still, if one were to apply *Cellier* standards (inspired by the standards of consumer magazines like *Protégez-Vous*) to the 1976 tasting, California put a scare into France but didn't actually dethrone it.

So while the aftershocks have been endlessly discussed and brooded over, the Judgment of Paris wasn't an earthquake at all, but only a tremor.

At the 1976 tasting, the wines were of different vintages, even wines in the same category in some instances. This was the case in our tasting as well. Another fairly important part of the puzzle – as reported by George M. Taber, a reporter with *Time* magazine in Europe and the only journalist who covered the Paris tasting – highlights a vital difference between the two tastings. Taber relayed quotes from the judges that clearly showed that during the

blind tasting they were commenting aloud on their thoughts about the provenance and characteristics of the wines, and so may well have been influencing each other. At *Cellier* taste tests, by contrast, the atmosphere is like that at a monastery where the monks have taken a vow of silence.

Another oddity at the 1976 event was that a California Chardonnay (from the David Bruce Winery) got one mark of 0 out of 20 and another of 1 out of 20. Quite aside from the fact it should have been replaced prior to the competition, how can any wine that hasn't actually gone bad get such a score? Especially since by all accounts the judges were not using any scoring system worthy of the name. They were asked to rate each wine on a scale of 20 points in terms of various criteria, but were not given a specific grading framework. They were not told, for example, what mark to give a wine they thought was excellent – 15? 17? 19? The methodology at the tasting, organized by British wine merchant Steven Spurrier, appears to have been seriously flawed.

It's also worth noting that it was likely the first time that the French judges had encountered good Californian wines. And the American wines would have come across as exceptionally ripe and lush when contrasted to the Bordeaux of the day, which were tannic and occasionally astringent, and took long years to soften. In this context, maybe it's not so surprising that the 1976 judges fell under the spell of the "new" wines. — MARC CHAPLEAU

Note: For more information, see Wikipedia's very detailed entry on the Judgment of Paris, featuring everything from a list of the wines in the competition to the scoop on subsequent replications of the event (in Napa in 2006, a 1986 *Wine Spectator* tasting in New York, in 1978 in San Francisco, and so on).

## JUDGMENT OF MONTREAL *continued >>*

but even so very digestible,” “Round tannins, an element of sweetness that’s a little New World,” and “Very good texture, fine wine!” were among the pronouncements. However, two judges were less enthused. “Too woody and tannins somewhat green” and “Velvety and full of bouquet, that’s about it,” they wrote.

The Mondavi Reserve, the top-placing California red, had “a satiny texture,” “pronounced menthol notes” and was redolent of “blackberry and blackcurrant.” But several judges, while acknowledging its “intense and concentrated” flavours, opined that it lacked finesse.

Comments about the second-place Pichon-Longueville-Lalande included “Tight tannins and polished *élevage*,” “Blackcurrant, sandalwood, a touch more depth and this could be a great wine” and “Very young but also very promising.” The remarks on Diamond Creek’s Volcanic Hill, the second-place finisher among the Californians after the Mondavi, ran to “Top-drawer, very tight, great finesse,” “Very ripe but harmonious,” “Bewitching nose of eucalyptus, cold coffee, pepper” and “Elegant, fluid, lively.” Its low alcohol content (about 12 percent) may have prompted the few less laudatory observations, as in “Lacks softness and roundness” and “Slightly lacking in balance.”

France won the Cabernet Sauvignon tasting but only by a very slim margin: Its wines had an average score of 88 points, compared to 87.7 for the reds from California. As to the pirate wines,

neither really impacted the final results, though their decent scores – 87.2 for the Spanish wine and 85.1 for the Washington State – suggest they are very good wines overall.

### CHARDONNAY SHOCKER

The Judgment of Paris also included Chardonnays from both France and California. Loosely speaking, the Judgment of Montreal recreated this exercise, but as with the reds, we inserted some pirate wines – in this case three products from other countries.

The upshot? A thunderbolt to the Bordeaux-California axis – because a wine from Ontario’s Niagara Peninsula was deemed the best of the Chardonnays. And an aged Australian, Rosemount Estate’s Roxburgh, tied for second place with a French wine, a Saint-Aubin Premier Cru from Hubert Lamy.

So France won out over California again – getting even for the 1976 defeat. Worth noting, however, is that the non-American New World Chardonnays that were slipped in as pirates had an average score of 87.1 points, versus 87 for the French wines. A razor-thin margin, to be sure, but significant in that at the time of the famous 1976 tasting, there was no way Australian, Canadian and New Zealand wines could have hoped to be considered in the same ballpark as their French and California counterparts.

### FALLING FOR NIAGARA

Clos Jordanne’s Claystone Terrace Chardonnay, produced under the supervision of Thomas Bachelder, a

Quebec native, took the top spot comfortably. “Good, well-contained opulence, lots of freshness and volume” was a typical assessment, in this case from a judge who was unsure whether the wine was from Burgundy or California. That may be because Claystone Terrace possesses attributes generally found in both American and French wines. Other observations included “Unmistakable, straightforward, balanced” and “Very nice palate, fine spicy finish.” There were quibbles, though, including “Close to being excessively woody” and “Too bad there’s residual sugar.”

Some panellists found the Roxburgh from Australia to be almost maderized and therefore a wine whose best years were behind it. But others had more favourable reactions: “Evolved, certainly, but not oxidized, there’s still freshness” and “The hazelnutty and oxidative hint adds to the complexity, a hint of honey, hyper-tasty!”

The Hubert Lamy Saint-Aubin, which tied for second place with the Roxburgh, garnered appraisals such as “Pronounced but fine wood, elegant,” “Concentrated and persistent,” “Buttery nose, very delicate flavours” and “Very nice woody Burgundy bouquet.” Detractors had comments like “Lacks length” and “Good, but no great depth and rather modern in style.”

What can we conclude from this fascinating exercise that appears to have upset the 1976 wine cart? France can hold its head high again but should continue looking over its shoulder – especially when it comes to Chardonnay! ■

## JUDGMENT OF MONTREAL

### CABERNET SAUVIGNON

1	91.8	CHÂTEAU MOUTON ROTHSCHILD*	PAUILLAC/BORDEAUX	2004	12.5% alc.	\$490.00
2	91.1	CHÂTEAU PICHON-LONGUEVILLE-LALANDE	PAUILLAC/BORDEAUX	2004	13.0% alc.	\$124.00
3	90.6	CHÂTEAU MONTROSE*	SAINT-ESTÈPHE/BORDEAUX	2004	13.0% alc.	\$99.00
4	89.9	MONDAVI CABERNET-SAUVIGNON RESERVE	NAPA/CALIFORNIA	2005	15.0% alc.	\$150.00
5	89.4	DIAMOND CREEK VOLCANIC HILL	NAPA/CALIFORNIA	2000	12.0% alc.	\$300.00
6	89.3	ARROWOOD RÉSERVE SPÉCIALE	SONOMA/CALIFORNIA	2002	14.8% alc.	\$118.50
7	88.9	RIDGE MONTE BELLO*	SANTA CRUZ/CALIFORNIA	2004	13.2% alc.	\$199.00
8	88.6	CHÂTEAU BRANAIRE-DUCRU	SAINT-JULIEN/BORDEAUX	2005	12.5% alc.	\$98.00
9	88.2	CHÂTEAU LÉOVILLE-LAS-CASES*	SAINT-JULIEN/BORDEAUX	2003	13.0% alc.	\$381.00
10	88.0	CAYMUS SPECIAL SELECTION	NAPA/CALIFORNIA	2005	15.2% alc.	\$145.75
11	87.2	TORRES MAS LA PLANA	CATALONIA/SPAIN	2003	14.0% alc.	\$45.00
12	87.1	CHÂTEAU LA GARDE	PESSAC-LÉOGNAN/BORDEAUX	2005	13.5% alc.	\$36.00
13	85.8	PAUILLAC (3rd WINE, CHÂTEAU LATOUR)	PAUILLAC/BORDEAUX	2004	13.0% alc.	\$85.75
13	85.8	CHÂTEAU HAUT-MARBUZET	SAINT-ESTÈPHE/BORDEAUX	2005	12.5% alc.	\$74.00
15	85.5	HEITZ MARTHA'S VINEYARD*	NAPA/CALIFORNIA	2002	14.5% alc.	\$168.00
16	85.1	PEPPER BRIDGE	COLUMBIA /WASHINGTON	2004	13.9% alc.	\$77.25

### CHARDONNAY

1	88.8	CLOS JORDANNE CLAYSTONE TERRACE	NIAGARA/ONTARIO	2005	14.0% alc.	\$37.50
2	88.5	HUBERT LAMY CLOS DU MEIX 1er CRU	SAINT-AUBIN/BURGUNDY	2005	13.0% alc.	\$43.75
2	88.5	ROSEMOUNT ESTATE ROXBURGH	HUNTER VALLEY/AUSTRALIA	1999	14.0% alc.	\$44.25
4	88.0	JEAN-CLAUDE BOISSET LE LIMOZIN	MEURSAULT/BURGUNDY	2006	13.0% alc.	\$68.00
4	88.0	LOUIS JADOT CLOS DE MALTE	SANTENAY/BURGUNDY	2005	13.5% alc.	\$41.50
6	87.4	JOSEPH DROUHIN CLOS DES MOUCHES*	BEAUNE/BURGUNDY	2006	13.5% alc.	\$108.25
6	87.4	KUMEU RIVER ESTATE	AUCKLAND/NEW ZEALAND	2006	13.5% alc.	\$32.00
8	87.3	MER SOLEIL	CENTRAL COAST/CALIFORNIA	2005	14.5% alc.	\$49.00
9	87.1	SONOMA-CUTRER LES PIERRES	SONOMA/CALIFORNIA	2002	14.5% alc.	\$50.00
10	86.8	CHÂTEAU MONTELENA*	NAPA/CALIFORNIA	2006	13.9% alc.	\$44.50
11	85.5	MOMMESSIN 2 TERROIRS	POUILLY-FUISSÉ/BURGUNDY	2006	13.5% alc.	\$30.00
12	85.3	J.-N. GAGNARD LES CHAUMES	CHASSAGNE-MONTRACHET/BURGUNDY	2005	13.5% alc.	\$48.25
12	85.3	ARROWOOD	SONOMA/CALIFORNIA	2004	14.1% alc.	\$34.00
14	85.1	LA SOUFRANDIÈRE LES QUARTS	POUILLY-VINZELLES/BURGUNDY	2005	13.0% alc.	\$44.50

\* Also in the 1976 Paris competition. Note that all red wines in the *Cellier* taste test were Cabernet Sauvignon-based except for the Château La Garde, made from 60-percent Merlot.

### PIRATE CALIFORNIA FRANCE

Prices valid as of early April 2009. Some products may still be available. Go to [www.saq.com](http://www.saq.com) or talk to an SAQ wine advisor.

### WHAT THE SCORES MEAN

A score of 80 corresponds to two and a half stars and denotes a good wine. At 85 (★★★), a wine is very good; at 90 (★★★★), excellent; and at 95 (★★★★½), exceptional. There is such a thing as a perfect score (100 or five stars), but Quebec connoisseurs have picky palates and rarely award it. Note that scores in blind tastings like this tend to be on the low side, as jurors are inclined to apply all of their critical faculties and employ a take-no-prisoners approach.

Technical coordinator and results compiler: Julien Chapleau. Special thanks to the judges for their time and expertise.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- All 10 panellists correctly identified the provenance (France or California) of the Mouton Rothschild, Heitz's Martha's Vineyard and Jadot's Clos de Malte.
- Nine of the 10 judges correctly identified the provenance of the Château Montrose, Château Latour's Pauillac, Mondavi's Reserve, Caymus' Special Selection, Jean-Claude Boisset's Le Limozin and Caymus' Mer Soleil.
- Eight of the judges(!) mistook the Australian Roxburgh for a Burgundy. A majority thought another of the pirate wines, the Washingtonian Pepper Bridge, was Californian.
- Participants were informed that wine No. 25 (the 1999 Roxburgh) was markedly older than the other Chardonnays, so that they would not discredit it for being overly mature compared to the other wines.
- In the reds, the Diamond Creek (a 2000 vintage) from California was similarly older than the other wines, but the judges were not informed of this because a wine of this calibre is supposed to be able to easily withstand a decade of aging and because its oxidative character was minimal, as organizer Marc Chapleau ascertained when he sampled all the wines in advance.
- As a rule, the judges were able to identify the California reds with little difficulty. In the Chardonnays, the French wines were most often recognized as such.
- For four of the tasters, the Caymus was clearly the poorest of the 16 reds.
- Looking at the results, it seems that when the judges thought they were dealing with a French wine, they would accord it higher marks. Or if they graded a wine and then guessed its provenance,



**Baroness Philippine de Rothschild in her Pauillac vineyard. By winning the Judgment of Montreal, her Château Mouton Rothschild atoned for the insult to France in 1976.**

the higher the marks they had given it, the more likely they were to think the wine was French. On the other hand, they often mistook Bordeaux for Californians, so it's impossible to know whether the pro-Europe bias common to many Quebec wine experts affected the final outcome.

- Hubert Lamy's Clos du Meix garnered the most similar reviews (favourable) of all the wines, red and white, while Gagnard's Les Chaumes and Mondavi's Reserve got the most mixed assessments.
- In the Cabernet Sauvignon category, France dominated California and the pirate wines. In the Chardonnay category, it again bested California, but was itself bested by the New World.
- The average alcohol content was 13.1 percent for

all the French wines in the taste test, and 14.1 percent for all the California wines.

- Note that the alcohol content on the label may not be the wine's actual alcohol content. In Quebec a margin of error of plus or minus about one percentage point is allowed, so a wine labelled 14.5-percent alcohol may contain anywhere from 13.5- to 15.5-percent alcohol. Because the pronounced presence of alcohol makes a wine seem slippery and sweetish, and therefore pleasing to the taste buds, most producers on both sides of the Atlantic tend to provide wines with more rather than less alcohol.
- There was just a few dollars' difference in the average price of all the French and California wines. M.C.