

# The New World v the Old, a vintage rematch

**Commentary:** Wine Correspondent Jonathan Ray hails a turning point and offers five post-1976 world-beaters

By Sally Pook

AT THE time it was unthinkable. French wine, surely the finest in the world, was put to a blind taste test against the best California could offer. It was 1976, the tasting was in Paris, and wine from the New World was considered no better than cheap Retsina. Imagine the heart-stopping moment, then, when nine experts, all French, ruled that Californian wine was superior.

"You cannot underestimate how much the 1976 tasting shocked, and then revolutionised, the wine industry," said Steven Spurrier, who staged the event. "It was iconic, the first chink in France's armour, and a huge, huge shock."

The Judgment of Paris, as it has become known, was re-enacted yesterday, 30 years to the day after the original, with two teams of tasters in London and the Napa Valley, California, thanks to Mr Spurrier's wit and ingenuity.

The London tasting, held in the cellars of Berry Bros & Rudd in Piccadilly, included all of the original red wines tasted in 1976, along with new French and Californian wines, representing the best that has emerged from the two regions over the past 30 years.

Part of the point of the exercise was to see whether the 1970s Californian reds had aged as well as the great Bordeaux first growths. The views of nine of the best European tasters will be made known today.

Jasper Morris, one of only 250 Masters of Wine in the world, and the buying director of Berry Bros, said: "The Judgment of Paris was a wake-up call to the French. Wine-growers prone to complacency were forced to smarten up their act but it was also a rallying cry to other potential wine-growing countries."

At the time of the judgment, Mr Spur-

rier was running a small wine shop in Paris, the only Englishman to do so. He considered a Californian wine-tasting a suitable way to celebrate the American Bicentennial – and thought it would be fun to test it against the French.

At the tasting of 10 red and 10 white wines, evenly split between French and American in both classes, the panel awarded the top place in both categories to Californian wine. A Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 1973 topped the white wines, beating famous French names such as Puligny-Montrachet. In the red category, a Stag's Leap Cabernet-Sauvignon 1973, now unobtainable, beat names such as Chateau Mouton-Rothschild 1973 (now roughly £100 a bottle).

There was only one journalist there. The French media stayed away, assuming the result would be a bore.

George Taber, of *Time*, did attend, mostly, it was said, because he was on a wine tasting course. He had a scoop.

**THE so-called Judgment of Paris was indeed a turning point. Not only did it shake the supremacy of the French, forcing them to re-evaluate their winemaking, but it also gave New World producers the encouragement to believe in what they were doing.**

This impetus, coupled with changes in climate, improvements in technology and increased investment, has resulted in more countries making decent wine than would have been thought possible 30 years ago.

Thirty years ago I had my first holiday job in Oddbins. If memory serves, there were no New Zealand wines on our shelves, and none from Argentina. There were precious few Chilean or South African wines around and the only Australian ones available were the likes of Wallaby White and Kanga Rouge. And for every fine wine from the established regions of France, Italy, Germany and Spain there was

probably a tired, dreary, badly-made counterpart. As well as a wake-up call to the French, the Judgment of Paris gave consumers the licence to look beyond Europe. Today we thrill to the wines of the New World where varieties such as Carmenère, Malbec and

Viognier are finding new leases of life, and Pinot Noir continues to prove that it can flourish beyond Burgundy and Champagne. The Old World, too, is changing: there are vibrant new-wave wines from Spain, ripe and fruity reds from Portugal's Douro Valley, exciting reds, whites and rosés from Languedoc-Roussillon, ground-breaking Cabernet-Sangiovese blends from Tuscany, charming Grüner Veltliners from Austria and resurgent Rieslings from Germany. There is a tendency for Old World winemakers to be insular, but tastings such as the Judgment of Paris force them to raise their game.

But there are those who still find it difficult to understand the competition. Only three years ago I was in the Le Marche, in Italy, with a group of British buyers, tasting the region's delightful wines. One of the local growers took the buyers to task, asking why they insisted on buying Bardolino, Chianti and Valpolicella instead of wines from Le Marche. The buyers pointed out that the competition no longer came just from Italy, but from countries further afield, such as Chile and New Zealand. The poor man was astounded. "Chile makes wine? New Zealand makes wine? It can't be true!" he gasped.

Luckily for us, the UK remains the centre of the world's wine trade and we have a wider range available here than anywhere else, and a wider understanding. Post 1976, there is no better place to be a wine lover.



**1999 Nyetimber Premiere Cuvée Blanc de Blancs, England** (£21.99; Waitrose, selected independents): Who would have thought, in 1976, that West Sussex would be capable of producing a sparkling wine of world-beating quality? First produced in 1992, Nyetimber continues to confound the sceptics with its absurdly stylish, champagne-rivalling wines.

**2004 Hamilton-Russell Pinot Noir, South Africa** (£18.95; Averys 08451

283797): The French said that Pinot Noir would only grow in Burgundy, but now it flourishes as far afield as Central Otago, Oregon, California and, as we see here, South Africa. This silky, seductive example from Anthony Hamilton-Russell is a beauty.

**2005 Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc, New Zealand** (£13.99; Oddbins, Selfridges, Thresher): Sauvignon Blanc was first planted in New Zealand as

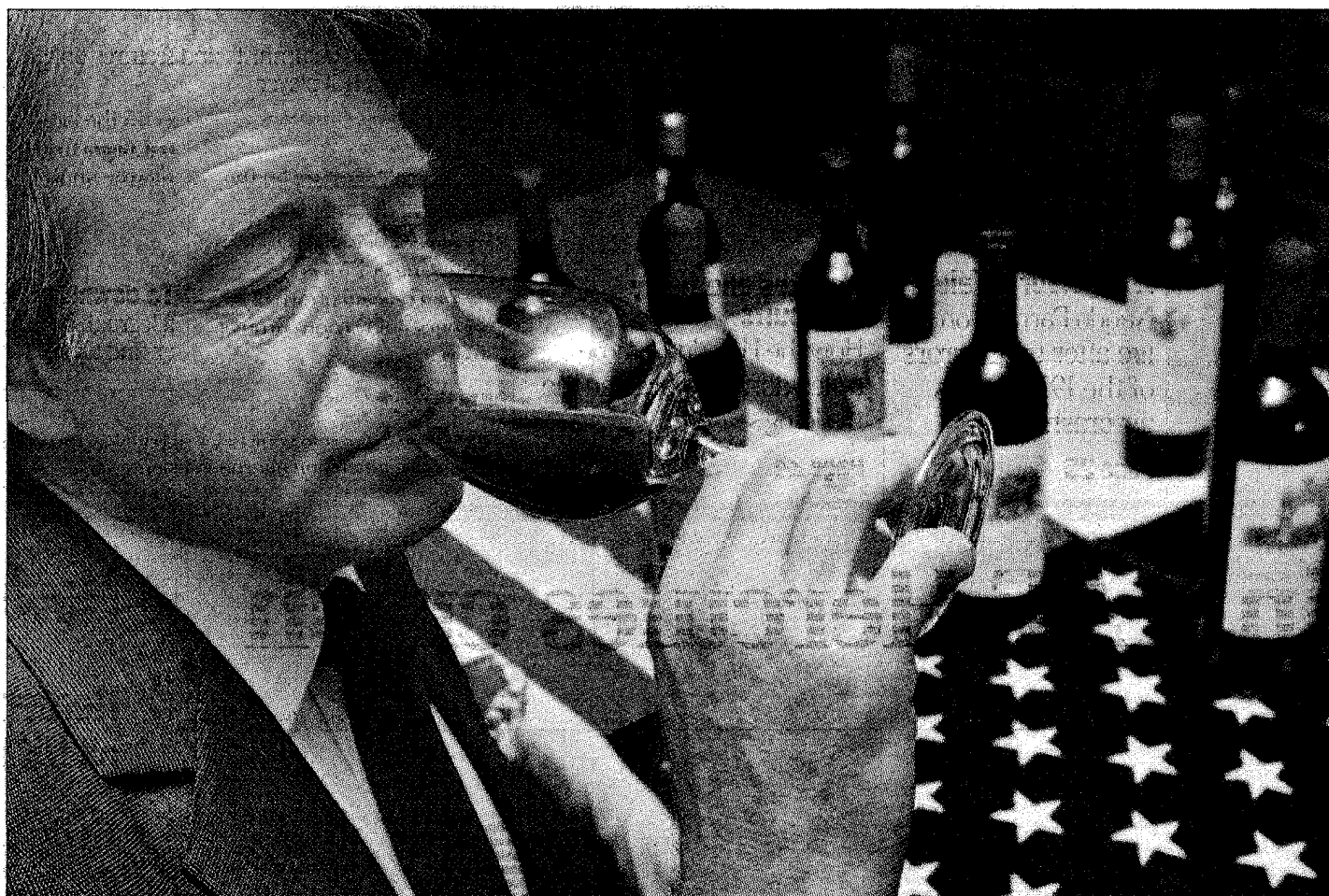


recently as 1973 and amazingly enough, considering its iconic status, Cloudy Bay's first vintage of the variety was only in 1985. Zesty and exuberant, it is a cracker.

**2004 Clos de los Siete, Argentina, pictured,** (£10.99; Oddbins, Majestic, Waitrose): Largely out of favour in Europe, Malbec now thrives in the high altitude Andean vineyards of Argentina. Here, in a blend overseen by Bordeaux-based guru,

Michel Rolland, it is the dominant grape, producing a soft, supple wine crammed with ripe dark fruit.

**2005 Laurenz V. 'Charming' Grüner Veltliner, Austria** (£13.49; Bibendum 020 7449 4120). The Austrians have grown Grüner Veltliner for ever, but we certainly never saw examples of this quality in the UK 30 years ago. Refreshing and elegant, but with agreeable depth, it is beloved of sommeliers for being a great food wine.





**Steven Spurrier (left) at the London tasting yesterday. He organised the 1976 Paris event (above), where New World wines such as Stag's Leap Cabernet-Sauvignon beat Chateau Mouton-Rothschild**

