

## ALAN FELTUS

*Wine and Words*, 2004  
oil on linen, 31 1/2 x 39 1/2 in.



COURTESY FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK

## JOHN BRISCOE

# The Judgment of Paris

How America arrived  
on the world wine scene

**F**rom his young days Steven Spurrier had a fascination with wine. As a boy he could be found rearranging bottles in the family cellars in Holbrook Hall in Derbyshire, England. Wandering into adulthood, fortified with a hefty inheritance, this landed gentleman was accompanied by his interest in wine. In the autumn of 1970, at the age of twenty-nine, Spurrier still had not found a professional calling. One day that autumn, as he strolled Cité Berryer street in Paris, he happened upon a small wine shop called Caves de Madeleine. On the spot, he inquired if he could buy it.

The shop was owned by Madame Fougères, a widow who, following the death of her husband, had placed the shop for sale. Madame Fougères felt uneasy, though, about selling to an Englishman. To allay her concerns and prove his dedication to French wine and the integrity of the business, Spurrier toiled in the shop for six months for no wages, moving and delivering barrels around Paris. At the end of the six months, Madame Fougères was sufficiently satisfied with Spurrier's intentions, and his integrity, and sold him the Caves de Madeleine. Spurrier changed the selection of wines in the shop from *vin ordinaire* to the highest quality French wines. He imagined attracting affluent British and American wine lovers residing in or visiting Paris to his *petite* wine shop on Cité Berryer.

Spurrier jostled into France's wine elite and soon

gained enough respect to judge wine tastings throughout France. Customers entering his shop inquired about the history and nomenclature of the French wines he stocked. To educate customers and others interested in the topic, he founded a small wine academy named L'Académie du Vin. The classes were taught in English. The school was an immediate success, attracting even French students.

To assist in teaching the classes, Spurrier hired on a young journalist named Patricia Gallagher. Gallagher proved to be a strong complement to Spurrier's drive and vision. As they worked tirelessly together, the shop and school built a reputation around the world, even as far away as California. Winemakers from California came into the habit of leaving bottles of their best wines at Spurrier's shop when they visited Paris. They explained to Spurrier the changes and advancements occurring in wine made in California, and related how winemakers there were trying to emulate, in their own style, the best Bordeaux and Burgundy wine. Spurrier and Gallagher tasted the California wines and were impressed with their depth and clarity. Gallagher thought, why not put the best California wines on display in Paris, perhaps in a tasting, to show how far American wines have come? Spurrier thought such a tasting would be a fun event if nothing else. They agreed that America's bicentennial year of 1976 would be a perfect opportunity to showcase the California wines in Paris, and the event would reinforce the partnership and affinity America had shared with France throughout their history. Thus was the 1976 tasting conceived, and Spurrier and Gallagher began preparing for an informal afternoon event.

Neither Spurrier nor Gallagher had extensive first-hand experience with California wines, so they needed assistance in selecting the best California wines for the tasting. In the summer of 1975, Gallagher called San Francisco's Robert Finigan, author of the reputable newsletter *Robert Finigan's Private Guide to Wines*, inquiring if he could direct her to the best wineries in California during her short stay. Finigan was well acquainted with Spurrier and his shop in Paris and was delighted to help a friend. Gallagher was looking for cabernet sauvignons and chardonnays to oppose the French red Bordeaux and white Burgundies. In the red category, Finigan first thought of Warren Winiarski's cabernet sauvignon, an outstanding