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



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The Judgment of Paris

How America arrived on the world wine scene

From 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

effort in the Bordeaux style. In the white category, Finigan confronted a difficult task matching chardonnays with French Burgundies because the California wines tended to be more opulent in taste. Finigan considered both Chateau Montelena and Chalone as contrasting examples of quality California chardonnays.

In the end Finigan presented Gallagher with a list of wineries upon her arrival in California. Perhaps surprisingly, the list did not include established, prominent California wineries such as Beaulieu, Robert Mondavi, or Inglenook. (Beaulieu Vineyard and Inglenook had by now been sold to corporate liquor conglomerates; only Robert Mondavi Winery remained independent.) Instead, Finigan chose to showcase the new generation of boutique wine-makers including Winiarski, Mike Grgich, and Joe Heitz.

Gallagher returned to Paris with several bottles and presented a full report to Spurrier. She did not have time to visit all the wineries suggested by Finigan, nor to choose the wines to be included in the tasting. And so, in March of 1976, Spurrier traveled to California to make the final selection. At most wineries, Spurrier received a warm welcome. When Spurrier called Heitz Wine Cellars to schedule an appointment, however, he confronted the hardworking, self-made, and outwardly gruff Heitz on the phone. A difficult conversation followed.

“I don’t receive people. Are you a journalist?”

“No.”

“Are you a wine merchant?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I don’t export. And anyway, I don’t have time.”

“Mr. Heitz, I’d like to come and see you anyway. You are a great name in California wine, and I’d like to meet you.”

In his own style, Spurrier arrived at Heitz Wine Cellars uninvited and proceeded to have a lengthy conversation with Heitz regarding the emergence of California wine. Heitz even offered Spurrier a glass of chardonnay and asked his opinion on it. Spurrier’s carefree and genial nature enabled him to gain the trust of both France’s and California’s inner wine circles. He was the last person one would expect to start a controversy between the two countries.

For his tasting, Spurrier decided to match six California cabernet sauvignons with four French Bordeaux reds and six California chardonnays with four Burgundy whites.

He needed two bottles of each California wine and had to meet the problem of transporting twenty-four bottles of California wine to France. Such a quantity of wine would not pass through customs. As it happened, André Tchelistcheff, formerly of Beaulieu, was to lead a wine tour in France just prior to the tasting, and everyone in his tour group volunteered to carry a bottle of wine in their luggage to Paris.

Upon his return to Paris, Spurrier assembled the most prestigious possible panel of judges. The judges were well-known and respected in French wine circles. But in his invitation, Spurrier discussed a tasting only to celebrate the up-and-coming California wines. He failed to mention that French wines would be tasted as well. Distinguished restaurant owners and wine editors agreed to attend, lending greater legitimacy and importance to the tasting. Spurrier could hardly have foreseen that the results would have a damaging effect on the reputations of the judges.

Finigan gave little thought to the Paris tasting after selecting the California wines for it. And the same might be said for Gallagher and Spurrier himself. Finigan and Spurrier each approached the event with no particular objective other than an afternoon of fun and a little exposition of California wines to the revered French judges, unaccustomed as they were to California wines. They were curious how California wines would compare to their French counterparts, in the opinions of the French judges.

For the tasting, Spurrier purposely selected French wines from his shop that he believed would easily defeat the California wines. None of the California winemakers or owners indulged in a fantasy of beating the French in the tasting.

On May 24, 1976, at three o’clock on a sunny Monday afternoon in Paris, the retinue of distinguished French tasters assembled at the InterContinental Hotel. Spurrier’s preparations had come together perfectly. The California wines had all, miraculously perhaps, arrived in France intact and had rested in Spurrier’s cellar blissfully for several weeks. An hour prior to the tasting, all of the wines were poured into neutral bottles to let them breathe and ensure that their nationality could not be distinguished from the bottle’s shape. The tasting would be blind, simply to help assure objectivity. Spurrier and Gallagher thought that, if presented with labels, the French judges might

automatically choose the French wines. The wines would be tasted in random order to further obscure their origin.

Spurrier began with a short introduction. He thanked the judges for coming and explained that he was staging this event as part of America’s bicentennial celebration to showcase the interesting wines that had emerged from California recently and to honor the role France had played in California’s wine development. He announced the inclusion of several similar French wines into the tasting. This was the first the judges knew they would taste French wines alongside the California wines. None of the judges objected, however, and so the event proceeded.

Although Spurrier invited a host of national and international press, only one reporter was present at the start of the tasting, George Taber, a correspondent from *Time* magazine. Taber’s presence was crucial, for without him the May 24 tasting might just have been another inconsequential blind tasting that the world never heard of. In fact, without his presence, great pains might have been taken to obliterate all memory of the event.

Scoring for the tasting was conducted on a standard twenty-point scale with four equally weighted criteria for eye, nose, mouth, and harmony. The white wines were judged first and it was apparent that the judges were confused as they tasted. They talked among themselves, a rarity during a tasting. They quibbled about the origin of the wines. Their comments reflected their bewilderment. One judge proclaimed, “Ah, back to France!” as he sipped a 1972 California chardonnay. Another announced, “This is definitely California. It has no nose,” while tasting Bâtard-Montrachet, a top Burgundy white. Even if the judges intended a French white wine to win, it appeared they could not distinguish between the two nationalities.

Once all the white wines were judged, Spurrier collected the scorecards and decided to announce the results at the end of the intermission. During the intermission, Taber talked to one of the judges, Claude Dubois-Millot, who later admitted,

We thought we were recognizing French wines, when they were California and vice versa. At times we’d say that a wine would be thin and therefore California, when it wasn’t. Our confusion showed how good California wines have become.

But in his invitation, Spurrier discussed a tasting only to celebrate the up-and-coming California wines. He failed to mention that French wines would be tasted as well.

At the end of the break, a stunned Spurrier slowly announced the results to the panel of judges. Chateau Montelena had triumphed with a total of 132 points, defeating Meursault Charmes Roulot by a quite substantial margin of five and a half points. Every judge ranked a California chardonnay first. Chateau Montelena was bestowed the top rating by six of the judges, and Chalone was ranked first by three of the judges. California chardonnays claimed three of the top four spots in the tasting. The judges’ reactions to the announcement of their voting were a mixture of puzzlement, shock, and horror. They could not comprehend how they could have so overwhelmingly chosen California wines—or, how the California wines had so thoroughly duped them.

The tasting continued. The reds were poured, and the judges scored them. Spurrier was certain another California wine would not win. He suspected the judges would carefully identify the French wines and score them high and automatically rate the California wines low. As the tasting proceeded, the comments from the judges regarding the nationalities of the wines were mostly correct. The California cabernet sauvignons and the Bordeaux reds should have been inherently easier to distinguish.

The story resounded with the American public. Americans realized they had arrived on the world wine scene and now produced wines on par with, or even superior to, the French.

Nonetheless, when Spurrier read the results to the hushed judges, the room erupted again, abuzz with shock. Stags' Leap, another California wine, claimed the win by a narrow margin of one and a half points over the French Chateau Mouton Rothschild. French wines were ranked first by seven of the nine judges and landed in positions two through four in the results. Ultimately though, the victor once again hailed from California.

Following the announcement of these astonishing results, the French were, in general, complimentary and respectful of the California wines, though they were surprised at the leap in quality California wines had accomplished in a brief amount of time. Some of the judges, however, were downright irate, including Odette Kahn, editor of the *Revue du vin de France* (Review of French Wine). Kahn promptly marched up to Spurrier.

"Monsieur Spurrier, I demand to have my scorecards."

"I'm sorry, Madam Kahn, but you're not going to get them back."

"But they are my scores!"

"No, they are not your scores. They are my scores."

Kahn slowly realized that Spurrier would not hand her scores back to her. The results were final. California had upset the best of Paris.

In the aftermath of the tasting, Taber called the principal winemakers and owners involved to gauge their reactions. Jim Barrett, co-owner of Chateau Montelena, was attending a luncheon at a fancy French winery as part of the Tchelistcheff-led wine tour. He was informed a call was waiting for him and immediately worried it would be bad news from home. Instead, it was Taber informing him his wine had just triumphed in a blind tasting against the best French wines in Paris. Barrett replied, "Not bad for kids from the sticks." He returned to the luncheon. Muffled whispers flitted around the tour group about California's great success while they endured a ironically condescending speech by a Frenchman explaining that California wines might one day be as successful as French wines. The speech finally concluded and the tour group boarded the bus. As the bus exited the winery it erupted in wild screaming and cheering for California's great success. Barrett gave Tchelistcheff a big hug. They had at last realized their dreams.

In California, Grgich received the news the next day at Chateau Montelena and began shouting at the top of lungs in Croatian, "I'm born again! I'm born again!"

Winiarski was visiting Chicago when his wife called and mentioned that he had won some "tasting." Winiarski replied, "That's nice," not at all recognizing the full significance of his accomplishment.

Spurrier and Gallagher also did not foresee the commotion that ensued once *Time* magazine hit the newsstand shelves on June 7, 1976. Buried in the back on page fifty-eight in the Modern Living section was a story titled "The Judgment of Paris." The last sentence of the first paragraph said it all—

"Last week in Paris, at a formal wine tasting organized by Spurrier, the unthinkable happened: California defeated all Gaul."

That day, wine stores across the country sold out of the winning wines from the competition. *Time* was read by twenty million middle-class Americans beginning to develop a taste for wine. The story resounded with the American public. Americans realized they had arrived on the world wine scene and now produced wines on par with, or even superior to, the French. California winemakers knew they were producing world-class wines, but the Judgment of Paris affirmed and publicized it.

In the month following the *Time* article, Frank Prial, author of a column for the *New York Times* entitled Wine Talk, dedicated two successive columns to the significance of the Judgment of Paris, further broadening publicity of the event. The implications of the tasting were described and celebrated in newspapers and magazines across the country. Some of the facts of the tasting were magnified, taken out of context, or fabricated altogether. The significance of the event, though, remained: California wines were of an exceptionally high quality and should be considered on par with the finest French wines.

John Briscoe is a San Francisco poet, author, lawyer, and scholar. He is a distinguished fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, has tried and argued cases in international tribunals and the U.S. Supreme Court, and has published a range of books, essays, and poetry. *The Lost Poems of Cangjie* will be published this fall by Risk Press. *Crush: Wine and California from the Padres to Paris* was a finalist for the 2016 California Historical Society Book Award and will be published by University of Nevada Press in 2017. This article is excerpted from that book and is printed here with the kind permission of the University of Nevada Press.