

The Judgment of Princeton

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On May 24, 1976, a wine tasting took place in Paris at the InterContinental Hotel that wine-and-food critic Anthony Dias Blue has called the most important in the 20th century. Englishman Steven Spurrier, who owned a wine shop and wine school in Paris called Caves de la Madeleine, staged the event. He was in his 30s and regularly did things that the French wine establishment never thought of trying. His wine school, for example, was the first ever in Paris. Once he had a comparative tasting of the five famous French First Growths, something the masters of French wines never did.

In the fall of 1975, an American working for Spurrier, Patricia Gallagher, suggested that he do a tasting of California wines. Visiting Americans, including the *New York Times* writer Frank Prial, had been telling them that interesting but little-known boutique wines being made there. Gallagher explained to Spurrier that the following year was the bicentennial of the American Declaration of Independence, and anniversary events were being done all around the world. Why not a California wine tasting in Paris sometime in 1976? Spurrier quickly accepted the idea, and the two started their planning.

Over the Christmas holidays of 1975, Gallagher visited northern California and with the help of Robert Finigan, a leading American wine critic who lived in San Francisco, visited some leading Napa Valley wineries. She returned to Paris with a few bottles of the wines, which convinced Spurrier that the California products were worth showing to the French. He traveled to California in the spring of 1976 and like any other tourist went around the area buying his favorite wines to ship back to Paris. He decided to concentrate on Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon because those were the most prized French varieties and also the best wines the Californians were making.

After returning to France, Spurrier put together an esteemed panel of nine French judges. The Englishman was well respected in the French wine community, and his group included Aubert de Villaine, the co-owner of Burgundy's Domaine de la

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Romanée Conti, and Christian Vannequé, the head sommelier of the Tour d'Argent restaurant. The French wines were Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, and the country's best labels, including Ramonet-Prudhon Bâtard-Montrachet and Château Haut-Brion.

When the scores were tabulated, the wine world was stunned. The winners: Chateau Montelena Chardonnay and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon. The tasting put California wines on the map and encouraged winemakers in many countries to make wines as good as the French.

While planning the 2012 conference of the American Association of Wine Economists at Princeton University, Orley Ashenfelter and Karl Storchmann, two officers of the *American Association of Wine Economists*, decided to replicate something like the Paris tasting. But instead of French and California wines, this time it would be French wines and local New Jersey wines. People have been making wines there since colonial days, although after American Prohibition most of them were underwhelming sweet ones made with local blueberries and peaches. A small cadre of vintners, though, has been striving in recent years to produce better wines using the world's leading *viniferas*.

The idea of the Judgment of Princeton, as the tasting was informally called, began on Mother's Day 2011 on a patio outside Amalthea Winery in the small southern New Jersey town of Atco. Owner Louis Caracciolo had invited Ashenfelter and Storchmann to a tasting of his wines. Caracciolo, who studied food engineering at the Pratt Institute in New York City and has a host of patents in that field, planted his first vineyard in 1976. At first, he drew on his experience helping his Italian-born grandfather make wine. Unlike most New Jersey winemakers, Caracciolo wasn't interested in sweet fruit wines. His goal was to produce ones made with French grapes and in the French style. His model was Château Margaux, and he had spent many days with its director Paul Pontallier, when the American was explaining his new technology for cleaning wine barrels with ozone water.

Caracciolo's production was modest, less than 5,000 cases annually, but he slavishly followed the strictures of winemaking that he learned at Margaux and other French wineries. In fact, Amalthea's seven *Europa* wines are styled after great French wines. *Europa I*, modeled after Margaux, is a blend of 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, and 5% Cabernet Franc. *Europe VII*, a tribute to Château Figeac, is a third each of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. *Europa IV*, in the style of Cheval Blanc is 66% Cabernet Franc and 33% Merlot. New Jersey winemakers watched Caracciolo's progress with interest and respect, and some began to follow him. Charlie Tomasello, a New Jersey producer whose blueberry wine sells well around the world, nicknamed him Louis Lafite.

Caracciolo took the bold step of holding blind tastings that pitted his own wines against some of the best in the world. His first such tasting in October 2007 included

France's Château Cheval Blanc and Château Mouton Rothschild as well as Napa's Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. He later did several similar ones with other top brands. Amalthea wines regularly did very well, often scoring higher than more famous and more costly ones.

With Ashenfelter and Storchmann in May 2011, Caracciolo held another blind tasting that included Château Latour and Château Lascomb as well as some of his wines and those of other New Jersey's quality producers. No one was keeping score, but the two visitors, who had previously had limited experience with New Jersey products, were pleasantly surprised by the Amalthea wines. Caracciolo explained to his visitors that some other New Jersey winemaker were making similar European-style wines, although he admitted that they were a minority among the state's more than fifty wineries.

At the time, the two economists were just beginning the planning for the 2012 conference in Princeton, and while the winemaker and his guests were still enjoying them that afternoon, it was decided to include in the program a tasting of New Jersey wines. Caracciolo was confident that local producers could put together a good showing. The 2010 vintage, which was still in barrels, had been a particularly good year in New Jersey.

Over the next few months, the details of the tasting took form. The plan at first was to invite all conference members to an event at a local winery where both leading French and New Jersey wines would be poured. The logistics, and the cost, of such a program, however, turned out to be overwhelming. Finally it was decided to do an event modeled as close as possible on Spurrier's Paris Tasting.

The first challenge was to determine the New Jersey wines to put up against the best of France. Larry Coia, the president of New Jersey's Outer Coastal Plain Vineyard Association, asked winemakers from all over the state to submit Chardonnay and Bordeaux-style red wines for a taste-off that would select six wines in each category to represent the state. It was decided to have six New Jersey wines and four French in each category because that was how Spurrier had done it. Coia, an oncologist by training and grape grower by passion, was neutral and respected by all. Winemakers entered more than one hundred wines. The planners also set out a few basic rules. For example, while a winery could enter as many wines as it wanted, it could have only one final entry in each category.

Spurrier had been a wine merchant, and Mark Censits, the founder of *CoolVines*, a New Jersey retailer who has stores in Princeton and Westfield, also joined the planning group to handle the logistics of getting French and New Jersey wines to Princeton. Since he had a liquor license, winemakers could ship bottles to him. Later he also bought the French wines for the competition.

Then on May 26, 2012, seven experienced wine drinkers met at Orley Ashenfelter's home just off the Princeton campus to make the first cut of the New Jersey wines. The tasters and the wines were divided into two sections, with

one tasting whites and the other reds. They evaluated a total of forty reds and twenty-five whites, with one group in Ashenfelter's garden, and other in his living room. Each group selected its favorites, and then the judges together picked the twelve wines to face the French. Decisions were often tough. One winery, for example, had to pick which of its two Chardonnays that had made it to the finals to enter.

Next the planners selected the French wines. In recent years and largely because the Chinese have become major consumers of top French wine, prices for the ones Spurrier had at Paris have skyrocketed. Mouton Rothschild, for example, now can cost nearly \$1,000 a bottle. It would have been easy to select lesser French wines than those in the Paris Tasting. But it wouldn't have meant much if New Jersey wines scored better than France's Mouton Cadet, which costs less than \$10.

Vintages for the *Judgment of Princeton* were decided in the same way that Spurrier selected the wines for the Paris Tasting: they were the vintages then being sold in retail stores. He bought the California wines when he visited wineries during his tour of California vineyards in the spring of 1976. Spurrier then selected the French wines from the inventory of his Paris wine shop, so they were the wines he was currently selling.

The eight French wines ranged in price from \$70 to \$650 wholesale, with most in the \$100–150 range. The New Jersey wines cost from \$12 to \$50, and the majority were under \$40.

While the wines were being bought, Ashenfelter and Storchmann were busy selecting the judges. Their choices again reflected the types of judges at the Paris Tasting, which had included for example sommeliers, wine journalists, restaurateurs, and winery owners. They also reached out to include Europeans in the group. There were nine judges—just as at Paris.

Ashenfelter arranged to stage the event at Prospect House on the Princeton campus in what had once been the dining room of Woodrow Wilson, who was president of Princeton University before he became president of the United States. The elegant room was a fitting location for a dignified wine competition. Everything was in place for the tasting on Friday afternoon, June 8, 2012:

The White Wines

- Amalthea Cellars Chardonnay 2008 (NJ)
- Bâtard-Montrachet Marc-Antoine Blain 2009 (F)
- Baune Clos des Mouches Joseph Drouhin 2009 (F)
- Bellview Chardonnay 2010 (NJ)
- Heritage Chardonnay 2010 (NJ)
- Meursault-Charmes Jean Latour-Labille 2008 (F)
- Puligny-Montrachet Domaine Leflaive 2009 (F)

Silver Decoy Black Feather 2010 (NJ)
 Unionville Pheasant Hill Single Vineyard 2010 (NJ)
 Ventimiglia Chardonnay 2010 (NJ)

The Red Wines

Amalthea Cellars Europa VI 2008 (NJ)
 Bellview Lumière 2010 (NJ)
 Château Haut-Brion 2004 (F)
 Château Léoville-Las Cases 2004 (F)
 Château Montrose 2004 (F)
 Château Mouton Rothschild 2004 (F)
 Four JG's Cabernet Franc 2008 (NJ)
 Heritage Estate Reserve BDX 2010 (NJ)
 Silver Decoy Cabernet Franc 2008 (NJ)
 Tomasello Cabernet Sauvignon Oak Barrel 2007 (NJ)

The Judges

Jean-Marie Cardebat, Professor of Economics, Université de Bordeaux
 Tyler Colman, DrVino.com
 John Foy, Wine Columnist, *The Star Ledger*
 Olivier Gergaud, Professor of Economics, BEM Bordeaux Management School
 Robert Hodgson, Owner and Winemaker, *Fieldbrook Winery*, CA
 Linda Murphy, co-author of *American Wine* and *Decanter* columnist
 Danièle Meulders, Professor of Economics, Université Libre de Bruxelles
 Jamal Rayyis, *Gilbert & Gaillard* wine magazine
 Francis Schott, Stage Left restaurant, New Brunswick

The tasting order for the wines was determined by pulling the names out of a hat—just as Steven Spurrier did it in 1976.

Judges were seated three to a table, and all ten wines in the white flight had been poured in front of them. Before the tasting started, there was a brief explanation of procedures. It was announced that scoring would be on the basis of twenty points, which was the method Spurrier used and which remains a common European way of judging, rather than the one-hundred point American system. Some judges were unfamiliar with that, so it was explained.

Then the tasting started. There was little talking during the judging, with the nine participants quietly evaluating the glasses one by one and then scoring the wines. Sometimes judges went back for a second sample before writing down their score, and sometimes changed their initial number.



From left to right: Robert Hodgson, Tyler Colman, Linda Murphy.



From left to right: Jean-Marie Cardebat, Olivier Gergaud, Danièle Meulders.



From left to right: Francis Schott, Jamal Rayyis, John Foy.



Paper slips for the red wines. The letters were written on the slips after the drawing.

The white-wine tasting was completed in slightly over a half hour, and then the judges left the room, while waiters cleared the old glasses and then poured the red wines into new ones. The red-wine tasting went just as quickly and just as smoothly. There again was almost no discussion, and the judges carefully reviewed the ten glasses in front of them. Following the red-wine competition, the judges left the room.

Results of the tasting were announced shortly after at the nearby Woodrow Wilson School auditorium. Orley Ashenfelter and Richard Quandt, who is also a professor at Princeton, gave brief interpretations of the results. Quandt's full analysis of the tasting can be found in this issue of the *Journal of Wine Economics*.

Cameron Stark, whose Unionville Pheasant Hill Single Vineyard Chardonnay, placed second among the Chardonnays to Beaune Clos des Mouches Joseph Drouhin, was pleased with his result. "The tasting was like a small tremor, and for the first time we were taken seriously," he said. Stark is a graduate of the famed University of California at Davis wine program and worked in California before moving to New Jersey. He says the state is still searching to find its best grape varieties to grow in a region that must battle with excessive rain and humidity during the growing season. He thinks Chardonnay is perhaps the best white and has great hopes for Rhône Valley reds.

Heritage Estate Reserve BDX scored best among the New Jersey reds and placed third overall in that category after Mouton Rothschild and Haut-Brion. Heritage is a classic Bordeaux blend aged in French oak. Owner Bill Heritage says his family has been in agriculture for five generations, but he planted his first vines only in 1999. He has been gradually expanded wine-grape production, while still growing apples, peaches, and other crops common to New Jersey's Outer Coastal Plain, which he thinks is the state's best region for wine. Heritage made only 125 cases of the 2010 Reserve BDX.

Heritage says that the some dozen producers making quality wines in the state cooperate well together to lift everyone's output. He learned winemaking first through extensive reading and wine tasting to determine what people drank. He also has traveled to all major American wine regions and dreams of getting to France to see what he can learn there.

Looking back on the competition, Judge Robert Hodgson, a California winemaker, owner of Fieldbrook Winery, a judge at the California State Fair Wine Competition and author of several articles on scoring at wine tastings and competitions in this Journal (Hodgson, 2008, 2009a, 2009b), was quite content. He has been tasting wines for fifty years, has enjoyed many of the world's great wines, although he admits it was mostly in the old days when he could still afford them. He judged wines at the tasting on the basis of a new method he's been developing that scores on anticipation, balance, and satisfaction. Says Hodgson: "My ego got a real boost when Richard Quandt remarked that statistically speaking, I did quite well. My mantra is that someone will do well."

After the *Judgment of Paris* results in 1976 were announced, one of the judges demanded to have her scorecard back, seemingly to stop her scores from becoming known. After the *Judgment of Princeton*, some of the judges also objected to having their individual scores released. In both cases, though, the full tasting results were made public. The outcome of the Judgment of Princeton, just as it had been at the *Judgment of Paris*, was very interesting.

References

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