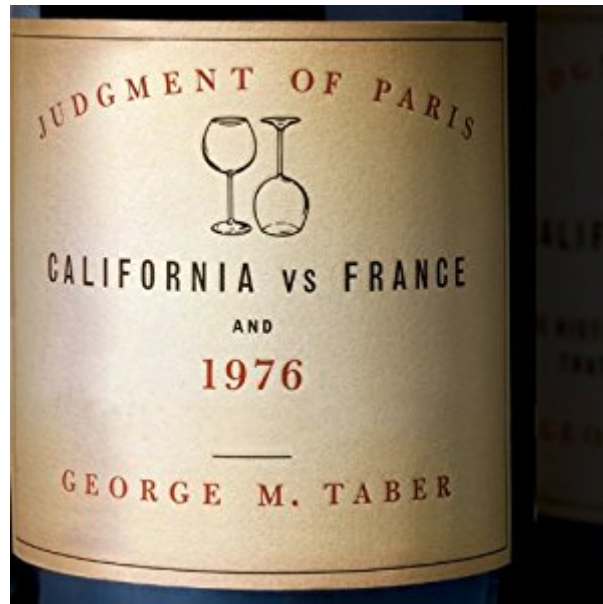


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Judgment Of Paris: California Vs. France And The Historic 1976 Paris Tasting That Revolutionized Wine



Synopsis

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History houses, amid its illustrious artifacts, two bottles of wine: a 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon and a 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay. These are the wines that won at the now-famous Paris Tasting in 1976, where a panel of top French wine experts compared some of France's most famous wines with a new generation of California wines. Little did they know the wine industry would be completely transformed as a result, sparking a golden age for viticulture that extends beyond France's hallowed borders to Australia, Chile, South Africa, New Zealand, and across the globe. Then Paris correspondent for Time magazine, George M. Taber recounts this seminal contest and its far-reaching effects, focusing on the three gifted unknowns behind the winning wines: a college lecturer, a real estate lawyer, and a Yugoslavian immigrant. At a time when California was best known for cheap jug wine, these pioneers used radical new techniques alongside time-honored winemaking traditions to craft premium American wines that could stand up to France's finest. With unique access to the main players and a contagious passion for his subject, Taber renders this historic event and its tremendous aftershocks in captivating prose, bringing to life an eclectic cast and magnificent settings. For lovers of wine and anyone who enjoys a story of the entrepreneurial spirit of the new world conquering the old, this is an illuminating and deeply satisfying tale.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Centered on a small, poorly attended (only one journalist present) wine tasting event in 1976-the famous Paris tasting organized by the English bon vivant and Paris wine retailer/writer Steven

Spurrier-George Taber tells the whole story first-hand (he was the journalist present!). In the process of giving all the details of the wines, the jurors, and the scores, the book actually covers the universe of contemporary wine issues, from the winemakers, both French and Californian, to the issues of wine economics and globalization. Taber begins the story with fascinating mini-biographies of the winemakers and winery owners (such as Mike Grgich, Warren Winiarski, and Jim Barrett), discusses the trials and tribulations of making their first wines, outlines each of the competition wines (California and French) in interesting detail and context, then, after describing the competition itself, follows the discussion with the chronology of the press and public reaction from the U.S. and abroad (mostly French-they were pissed).Positing the shattering of French wine hegemony by this `momentous' wine event, he then points the reader to the subsequent enabling of the `Globalisation of Wine', and in the remainder of the book, takes a number of diversions that relate to this hotly discussed topic, including a chapter on six recent International Wine Stars, and others that give a (relatively) non-judgemental perspective on contemporary wine trends, wine economics, wine styles, and more wine personalities.Very enjoyable and well written, it's a must read for the wine enthusiast, and for anyone interested in a succinct summary of many (non-technical) contemporary wine issues.

This is an exceptional book. George Taber was the only journalist at the famous 1976 Paris tasting and the person best positioned to tell its story. The story, however, is a fairly simple and straightforward one. Man arranges tasting of French and California wines; California wines win; the French are aghast. This was a small event with huge repercussions. Hence, Taber spends the bulk of the book detailing the background which led to the event and the results that followed it. In doing so he gives a panoramic, if selective, account of current practices in the French and new world wine industries and--in the strongest sections of the book--tells the personal stories of the individuals whose lives were intertwined with the event. With the latter he is providing, in effect, a history of several of the key players in the Napa wine industry: Andre Tchelistcheff, Mike Grgich, Warren Winiarski (my all-time favorite academic), Robert Mondavi, et al.Like all compelling stories this is a very personal one, the events all turning on individual experiences and individual decisions. Hence there is a beautiful 'reality' about it, a reality that continues today. When you visit some of these individuals' wineries you are still likely to see them there, behind their desks or in their cellars, doing their thing. They changed the world of wine and this is a crucial part of their story.

I found this a highly entertaining account of the growth of the California wine industry from the early

60's through the 90's. Taber writes in a breezy fashion without too much technical jargon. There are actually only about two chapters on the big tasteoff. Half the book is a prequel to how the featured winemakers arrived in wine country. Nice close about globalization that was fairly interesting. It just makes me want to buy wine only from independent producers.

About the same time when the computer disk drive was being invented in the prune orchard valley south of San Jose, giving birth to an immense new industry that would bring untold wealth to Californians, less than one hundred miles north, among the vineyards of Napa Valley that were abandoned during Prohibition, another high technology was being born. Wine making. Unlike innovation in computer industry, where nothing existed before, wine industry was some 4000 years old and an unlikely place for new ideas. Yet, into this environment entered several young men with improbable Slavic names: Dimitri Tchelistcheff, Warren Winiarski, and Miljenko Grgich, and with even less probable winemaking expertise. While Silicon Valley, without any established competition was creating products with ease by thinking "out of the box", the vintners of Napa Valley, by thinking "out of the barrel" produced some fabulous wines. The secret eventually reached a wine merchant in Paris who organized a blind wine tasting of 12 best California wines and 8 best French wines. The only reporter attending was from TIME magazine, George Taber. At a risk of giving away the punch line, after the smoke has cleared in Paris ... the best red was made by Winiarski and the best white by Grgich. Everyone who visits Napa Valley, once or often, should read this book. It reads like a novel, yet it effortlessly teaches you enough to start your own vineyard and make your own wine.

This book is a flat out excellent page turner as it goes through the general histories of the regions and winemakers involved, the competition in Paris, and the aftermath of the 'surprising' wins by the California wines. Highly recommended. Then Taber spends the last 20% of his book looking at a few wineries in a few wine regions around the world, and an update on the French and Napa regions since the competition in 1976. This all seems like incongruous useless filler to get the book from 240 pages to 300. Five stars for the first 80%, none for the last 20%.

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