

Naples Winter Wine Festival

CALIFORNIA GOLD



COREY PERRINE/STAFF (4)

Server Laura Williamson pours wine Thursday for Debra Hazelwood at The Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples. A few dozen people came out to sample wines from Chateau Montelena Winery and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. The event celebrated the 40th anniversary of "The Judgment of Paris Tasting."

■ Naples tasting, luncheon marks 40th anniversary of Paris event that changed wine forever

By Julie Glenn

Daily News Correspondent; 239-263-4896

What if there had never been a "Judgment of Paris?"

That was the question posed at the beginning of a 40th anniversary commemorative event held at Naples' Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort on Thursday where the "Vintage Cellar" tasting and luncheon kicked off this year's edition of the Naples Winter Wine Festival.

It's been 40 years since British wine merchant Steven Spurrier hosted a blind tasting of Californian and French wines in the courtyard of the Intercontinental Hotel in Paris. He assembled a Who's Who of French wine and food influencers to judge wines he had hand selected from young California winemakers, among them Chateau Montelena and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. A young Time magazine correspondent, George Taber, figured he'd stop by even though he was sure there was no story there. Everyone knew the French would win.

But they were all wrong. California dominated.

The four-paragraph story Time magazine published about the upset, titled "The Judgment of Paris," changed the global landscape of wine forever.

This week, Spurrier and Taber reunited to mark the 40th anniversary of the upset with a group of Naples wine lovers who want to be part of history.

They were joined by Bo Barrett, of Chateau Montelena Winery, and Ted Baseler, of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, for a tasting featuring multiple vintages of each winery's 1976 winner: chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon respectively.

Speaking before the wines were poured, Spurrier recalled how the event came together.

"My colleague Patricia Gallagher and I initially wanted to just show the French what was happening in California, not necessarily do a blind tasting," Spurrier said.

"But about a week before the tasting, it occurred to us to have a comparison, so I contacted all the people on the judging panel to make sure they would agree to a blind tasting, they did, and that's how it came about."

A British wine merchant in the heart of Paris, Spurrier joked that he didn't really intend for the French wines to be shown up by California.

"What I was hoping was, perhaps to see two wines from California show up toward the top," he shared with the Naples crowd. "Of course, I didn't want to see the defeat of wine from where I work and live. Later, I was not much loved in Bordeaux and was even physically thrown



Emily Michael inspects a wine before tasting it Thursday at The Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples.

out of a chateau in Burgundy."

The sweeping victory of California cabernet sauvignon was led by Stag's Leap Wine Cellars' 1973 vintage, which took first place. Participants in this week's tasting had the opportunity to try the 1983, 1993, 1998, 2008 and 2012 vintages. There are very few bottles of the 1973 vintage left; two are at the Smithsonian and one will be auctioned off this weekend at the wine festival.

Sandi Moran, a festival co-chair this year, said tasting the different vintages side by side tells a lot about a winery's story.

"What's most interesting to me is how the winemaking style has evolved," she said.

Chateau Montelena Winery's 1973 chardonnay won handily over its Burgundian competitors and, for an example of how well their chardonnays age, tasters were treated to the 1992, 1998, 2001, 2004 and 2008 vintages.

Bo Barrett guided the tasting while joking about how much things have changed since that historic 1973 bottling.

"There were only three of us working in the cellar at the time, I was 20, and of course back then I was making \$3.15 an hour with no overtime, which there was plenty of with only three guys working," he said. "Things were so rudimentary, but we had the dream. We knew we could make

something good."

Taber, the Time journalist who accidentally stumbled into the wine story of the century, later wrote a book about the historic Paris tasting, even though he said: "The original story was buried in the 'modern living' section and was only four paragraphs long."

Twenty years later, he set out to write a book aptly titled "The Judgement of Paris." One of his favorite memories of that tasting day was when a well-known French taster held a glass aloft and remarked, "Now we are back to France."

"I was the only one holding a list of the wines in the order they were being tasted, I looked down to see what he was tasting, and it was a Californian," Taber said.

"That's when I thought I had a story."

It was a story that transformed the world of wine, not only for California winemakers, but for winemakers everywhere. In researching his book, he traveled to winemaking regions around the world where he heard stories about how that Paris tasting changed their outlook.

"In Australia, everywhere really, they'd say to me, 'Hey, if California can do this, maybe we can make world class wines too.' So the impact of something like that was far greater than just California," Taber said.



Adneris Cruz, left, snuggles with Bobbie Celler at Thursday's wine tasting and luncheon.



Violet Grgich, center right, sips wine along with others Thursday at The Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples.