

J U D G M E N T  
O F P A R I S



California vs. France and the Historic 1976 Paris Tasting  
That Revolutionized Wine

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*New York London Toronto Syd*n

PART FOUR

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## THE NEW WORLD OF WINE

*The Paris Tasting destroyed the myth of French supremacy and marked the democratization of the wine world. It was a watershed in the history of wine.*

—ROBERT M. PARKER JR., 2001

## The Buzz Heard Round the World

*Wine is sunlight, held together by water.*

—GALILEO

The June 7, 1976, issue of *Time* magazine hit newsstands in New York City and a few other major metropolitan areas on Monday morning, May 31. The cover story was about a scandal involving the honor system at West Point. Back on page 58 in the Modern Living section was a modest story entitled “Judgment of Paris.” The lead story of the section was about a new theme park in Atlanta, and my article about the wine tasting filled out the last column. No photograph accompanied the Paris article, the normal sign of a significant story. In fact, the page it was on was overwhelmed by an ad for Armstrong tires. The last sentence of the first paragraph told it all: “Last week in Paris, at a formal wine tasting organized by Spurrier, the unthinkable happened: California defeated all Gaul.”

The day after the *Time* story appeared, something unusual was happening at Manhattan’s Acker Merrall & Condit, America’s oldest wine shop, then located on the Upper West Side on Broadway between West Eighty-sixth and West Eighty-seventh streets. Acker was one of the few liquor stores in the city at the time to carry a good selection of quality California wines. Owner Michael Kapon had been introduced to them in 1972, when a friend raved to him about the 1969 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon. Kapon tried the wine, liked it, and began carrying several Mondavi wines.

The Mondavi Cabernet moved well at \$4.99 a bottle, and Kapon always kept it in bins just under the displays of his top French wines such as Burgundy’s Romanée-Conti that sold for much more. His big sellers among California products, though, were still the Gallo and Almaden jug wines. Kapon sold five hundred to six hundred cases of those per month, compared with only a few cases of premium California wines.

Acker Merrall & Condit carried both Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon from two of the eleven California wineries that had taken part in the

Paris Tasting: Chateau Montelena and Freemark Abbey. The price for each: \$5.99 a bottle.

At midmorning the store manager went to the back room where Michael Kapon was working and told him that the supply of Chateau Montelena and Freemark Abbey wines was running out. The manager had asked one customer why he was interested in those wines. The person told him about the *Time* story. By noon Acker Merrall & Condit had sold out of the five cases of wines it had from the two California wineries at the Paris Tasting.

The scene was repeated in countless wine stores around the country. One New York City shop reportedly received four hundred calls asking about the winning wines the day after the article appeared. Napa Valley folklore tells of a desperate man rushing into the Wine and Cheese Center in San Francisco and imploring, "Have you got any Montelena?"

The appearance of the story in *Time* magazine was important for the future impact of the Paris Tasting. If no journalist had been there that day, the tasting would have been like the tree falling in the forest that no one heard. As Spurrier said later at the time of the twentieth anniversary of the event, "If we hadn't had a reporter from *Time*, there would have been no fuss at all."

*Time* had a readership of 20 million and talked directly to the American middle class, the exact group that was becoming more interested in wine. It was those people who read the story, told their friends about it, and suddenly had a new respect for California wines. Had the news been reported only in one of the new American wine newsletters or magazines, it might have attracted attention among wine connoisseurs, but would have been little noted by the general public.

If no one from the press had been present, it would have also been much easier for the French and others simply to deny or distort what had happened. As it was, a whole mythology about the tasting grew up as people in both California and France embellished the event. In fact, my major objective in writing this book was to set the record straight once and for all about what transpired that day in Paris. Nearly three decades later, it is still constantly cited as the turning point in the development of California wine.

The most influential wine writer at the time was Frank Prial of the *New York Times*, who four years earlier had started a weekly column entitled "Wine Talk," which appeared on Wednesdays. Prial took the unusual step of devoting two columns in a row to the Paris event, which got the news out to the public perhaps even more than the original *Time* story. At the time, New York City was the major wine-consuming market in the U.S., and his articles brought home the importance of this event in Paris, with French

judges, to many consumers who cared what happened in France and had previously paid scant attention to California wine.

On June 9, Prial discussed the Chardonnay wines in the tasting. He noted that in similar events in the U.S., "the latest only six months ago in New York," California wines had outscored top French Chardonnays, but "champions of French wines" argued that the American tasters were biased toward American wines and the French wines were perhaps damaged in shipment. Since the judges in Paris were French and the California wines had the disadvantage of travel, Prial asked, "What can they say now?"

In his second article—this one on June 16—Prial dealt with the Cabernet Sauvignon part of the event. This time he was more skeptical about the results, implying they may have just been a fluke. That was an explanation that appeared in several American publications at about the same time. The source for that view was probably Steven Spurrier, who was quoted in an article in the *Minneapolis Star* saying, "You can't expect 10 people drinking 20 wines to come out with the same answers twice." Just after the event Spurrier appears to have become concerned, probably with some justification, about the impact it was having and what that might mean for his future as a wine merchant in Paris. Spurrier's early comments to reporters dwelled on the randomness of blind tasting as if to play down what had happened. Gallagher was also unhappy that press stories, starting with the *Time* one, emphasized Franco-American wine competition, rather than the discovery of new California wines, which had been their goal in staging the tasting.

In his second article Prial also wrote: "Only the most naïve reader would conclude anything other than that on a certain day a certain group of French wine specialists agreed that California turns out some fine wines." He added that the variables in the tasting were too great and that it was unfair to compare the early-maturing Stag's Leap with Château Mouton Rothschild, which would reach its peak in perhaps twenty years. Nonetheless, Prial added, "The results were of course an enormous compliment to little Stag's Leap Wine Cellars."

Soon food-and-wine writers were doing their own stories about the Paris Tasting in papers all across the country under headlines like "U.S. Triumphant in French Tastings." For the Napa Valley's *Weekly Calistogan* the news was front page, above the banner, and carried the headline "Kids from the Sticks' Place First." Most of the stories lamented that the California wines were hard to find. The *Seattle Times* reported that Stag's Leap was selling for \$7.20 "but little is left." The *New York Times* noted that the winning red was unavailable in the New York City area.

There was a lot of flag waving in much of the American coverage. A column in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* on June 16 headlined "California Wines Beat French Wines!" The new *Wine Spectator* newsletter noted the event in its sixth issue in June under the headline "California Wines Top French." The *Los Angeles Times* headline: "Three Cheers for the Red, White and Cru."

Since reporters were writing about the event on the basis of secondhand knowledge, some resorted to descriptions that are best classified as fiction. Such stories helped spread a myriad of myths that have built up about the Paris Tasting. In the June 13 issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, Paris-based reporter Mary Blume, for example, wrote that the area where the tasting took place was "draped out in French and American flags," while the assembled journalists covering the event "drank French Champagne" and the judges gave interviews "for the benefit of American TV." In fact, none of those things took place. Neither, according to Spurrier, did an exchange when Spurrier supposedly told judge Odette Kahn that he was going to send the results "straight to California."

The American wine industry quickly grasped what had happened: the world's most esteemed experts—French experts and in Paris—had recognized that California vintners could produce world-quality wines—not just plonk. In his autobiography Robert Mondavi wrote, "The Paris tasting was an enormous event in the history of California wine making. It put us squarely on the world map of great wine-producing regions. I saw the impact everywhere I went. Suddenly people had a new respect for what we were doing. They saw we could make wines as good as the best in France."

That added prestige allowed the California wineries to begin pushing up prices, although very slowly at first. At the time of the Paris Tasting, the Chateau Montelena Chardonnay was selling in Chicago for \$7.00, while the competing Bâtard-Montrachet was \$12.50 and the Puligny-Montrachet was \$13.00. The winning Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet was \$7.49 at a store in Chicago, but the Mouton Rothschild there was \$25.00 and the Haut-Brion was \$23.00. The victorious American wines sold out quickly in the rare markets where they were even available. Warren Winiarski's partners urged him to pull back the remaining bottles of the 1973 vintage that were still on retail shelves, but it was too late to get many of them back. Stag's Leap had a suggested price of \$6.00 for its winning 1973 Cabernet but raised the price on the 1974 to \$7.50. Chateau Montelena had already posted its suggested retail price for its 1974 Chardonnay when the Paris results were announced. It was the same as for the prize-winning 1973: \$6.50. It did not later raise the 1974 price.

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In France the first reaction was to blame the judges. Baron Philippe de Rothschild, whose Mouton Rothschild had placed second, phoned one of the judges and asked haughtily, "What are you doing to my wines? It took me forty years to become classified as a First Growth!"

Claude Terrail, the owner of La Tour d'Argent, called his sommelier Christian Vannequé on the carpet when the restaurant's clipping service began sending dozens of articles from around the world about the Spurrier tasting that noted Vannequé's role as a judge. Vannequé says Terrail sternly told him never to do that kind of thing again. Vannequé tried to explain that it was a blind tasting and had been totally on the up-and-up. Terrail replied, "Christian, you don't understand. This is very bad for the French wine business."

According to Spurrier, Lalou Bize-Leroy, the codirector in the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, told her codirector Aubert de Villaine, another of the judges, that he had personally put back the progress of their great vineyard by a hundred years!

There were many calls for Pierre Bréjoux to resign as Inspector General of the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée Board. More than twenty-five years after the tasting, several judges still refused to talk with me about the event, saying it was still too painful. One French wine official in 2003 told me it was "our Waterloo," referring to the battle where Britain's Wellington defeated Napoléon and sent him into exile.

Judge Odette Kahn got her side of the story into print in the *Revue du Vin de France* under the title "On the Subject of a 'Small Scandal.'" Her report was partly factual but mostly defensive. She labeled the reports in American publications that California wines had outscored the French ones as "a nasty, slanted, and, I may say so, false conclusion." Kahn also spotted a conspiracy. She claimed that California wines that received high marks were always served just after a California wine that received poor marks, thus making the better wine score higher. In reality, as noted earlier, the wines were tasted in random order. She also said it was unfair that the wines were from various vintages and that the only valid comparison would be to taste wines from several years and several châteaux against each other. In conclusion, Kahn wrote, "The only lesson to be drawn from this tasting, in my opinion, is that certain winegrowers in California can produce (in small quantity, if my information is correct) wines of good quality, agreeable to taste. . . . I believe it is interesting for the French wine world to know this, but from this to proclaim (or to fear it to be proclaimed) that the California wines 'beat' our great wines, that is a leap, a very great leap."

A month after the tasting, Spurrier ran into Kahn at a reception for the first time since the event. The exchange was chilly, as a roomful of people watched.

When Spurrier greeted her, Kahn haughtily replied, "I'm not speaking to you."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Of course, my dear sir, we all know you completely falsified the scores."

"That's not true, and you know it."

After the Paris Tasting, Steven Spurrier in his own words was *persona non grata* in Bordeaux and Burgundy. Many French people dragged out a thousand years of bitter history and wars between France and England and blamed the results of the Paris Tasting on the fact that Spurrier was English. Even Bernard Portet, the French-born winemaker at California's Clos Du Val, told me, "My first reaction was that only a Brit could do this to the French."

One Bordeaux winemaker told Spurrier, "You've spat in our soup. We allowed you into our country, and you've done this to us—perfidious Albion!"

Nearly a year after the tasting, Spurrier and his shop manager Mark Williamson visited Domaine Ramonet-Prudhon in Burgundy to buy some wine. Its Bâtard-Montrachet had placed seventh in the tasting. As they were looking at the bottling operation, the owner's son André Ramonet approached and said, "You're the one who did that tasting. Never darken our door again. Get out!"

While the American press was gloating about the Paris results, the French press all but ignored the event. It wasn't until August 18, nearly three months later, that *Le Figaro*, one of France's leading dailies, took note of it. The article was entitled "Did the War of the Cru Take Place?" With heavy sarcasm, the article reported that they were "crying in the thatched cottages of Burgundy," but that the results were laughable and "cannot be taken seriously." The story went on to quote Charles Quittanson, an eminent enologist, as saying that he had been very surprised to learn of the results. He dismissed the event, saying that it only goes to show what "silliness" can take place in a blind tasting.

It was not until November that *Le Monde*, France's most prestigious paper, reported the tasting. Continuing the fiction that was growing up around the event, the writer, Lionel Raux, began his story by saying it had taken place under a portrait of Thomas Jefferson. Outside of that, Raux's article was a straightforward piece, based almost entirely on the *Time* and the *Los Angeles Times* stories. In an opinion piece entitled "Let's Not Exaggerate!" that accompanied the main article, Raux condescendingly wrote

that Spurrier didn't know how difficult it is to stage an impartial blind tasting, adding that in any case the French wines were too young and had not yet matured to their full flavor.

The results of the Paris Tasting have been the subject of more discussion and debate than any wine event since the Bordeaux classification of 1855. They have even been the topic of high-level scientific interest. Three leading international experts, two economists and a statistician, examined the results on a strictly technical basis in two separate studies.

Orley Ashenfelter and Richard E. Quandt are professors of economics at Princeton University and also wine connoisseurs. Ashenfelter publishes the wine newsletter *Liquid Assets: The International Guide to Fine Wine*, which now has an Internet Website, [www.liquidasset.com](http://www.liquidasset.com). Ashenfelter and Quandt recalculated the results for only the Cabernet Sauvignon part of the tasting, using more rigorous academic methodology that is undoubtedly statistically superior to Spurrier's simple 20-point system that just added up all the scores. The Ashenfelter and Quandt approach takes into account the differing scoring styles of each judge. Some of the judges, for example, gave a wide range of scores, while others scored in a much narrower one. Ashenfelter and Quandt eliminated any distortion in the results caused by the differing scoring styles. The study, which promised to "rigorously analyze the famous 1976 Paris tasteoff," was published in the summer 1999 issue of the statistical magazine *Chance* and is also available at the Liquid Assets Website.

The Ashenfelter and Quandt results, though, turned out to be very similar to those of Spurrier. As they wrote in their paper, "It was no mistake for Steven Spurrier to declare the California Cabernet the winner." In their scoring, Stag's Leap places first followed by Château Montrose, Château Mouton, and Château Haut-Brion. So the winning wine is the same and the top four are also the same, although there was some shuffling in second, third, and fourth places. There is also juggling in the finishing order of the next six wines.

This analysis of the 1976 tasting is somewhat flawed, however, because they took the tasting scores, as they state, from the July 1976 issue of the *Connoisseurs Guide to California Wine* newsletter. That article included the scores of Spurrier and Gallagher in the final results even though their ratings were excluded in scoring on the day of the tasting. The results sent to the two winning wineries after the event clearly gave the "Official Jury Results" separately from the "Results Including Mr. Spurrier and Miss Gallagher." The results Spurrier announced on the day of the tasting and the ones he used later in talking with the press were only those of the "Official Jury."

The official results and those including the Spurrier and Gallagher scores, however, vary little. In the Chardonnay competition, the first four wines are in exactly the same position. There is some minor variation among the next four, and the final two are in the same position. In the Cabernet Sauvignon tasting, the top two wines are the same; the next two are the same but in reverse order; the next five vary a little, and the last wine is the same.

The other academic study was done by Dennis V. Lindley, one of the world's preeminent statisticians and a pioneer in an obscure field known as Bayesian statistics. Lindley taught at the University College London, and an international award in statistics is named in his honor. His analysis of the Paris results has not been published, but it is also available at [www.liquidasset.com](http://www.liquidasset.com). Lindley too included the scores of Spurrier and Gallagher, perhaps to increase the number of judges used to assess the wines or perhaps in the belief that they had been used in the official tabulation.

Looking first at the Chardonnay tasting, Lindley classified three wines, two of them California, as standouts at the top, and one, the David Bruce wine, as a standout at the bottom. The rest he noted were closely grouped in the middle. Wrote Lindley: "The first conclusion is that the American Chardonnays did as well as the French, but that there are real differences between some wines. If the French were expecting to give high marks to their own wines in comparison with those from Napa, they failed." Lindley concluded that overall the California Chardonnays did better than the French ones.

As for the Cabernet Sauvignon results, Lindley determined that the judges scored the French wines as a group higher than the California ones. He wrote, "The French reds are really judged better than the Americans with a mean score that is higher by 2.0." After weighing other factors, he concluded that there was a statistical dead heat for first place between Stag's Leap and Château Mouton.

Lindley, though, takes a little magic out of the wines when he renders the results into such equations as  $E(h_i) = 0.76_i + 0.24x_i$ ,  $s.d.(h_i - h_j | \text{data}) = 1.10$ .

Any critique of the Paris Tasting must start with the realization that no one, certainly neither Spurrier nor Gallagher, thought they were about to make history. This was just supposed to be an amusing afternoon of tasting interesting wines. If they ever dreamed that the international wine world would still be picking over the details of the event nearly thirty years later, they would have undoubtedly done many things differently.

Keeping this in mind, there are—beyond the myths, the outright falsehoods, the complex statistical equations trying to take a more academically rigorous approach to the results—four basic complaints that have been made against the Spurrier tasting.

*Charge One: The 20-point system was too limiting, and there were six California wines but only four French wines in each category, thus statistically stacking the competition against the French and in favor of the Americans.*

The 20-point method was then the standard procedure of judging wine in Europe and the U.S. But on having the six California wines? Guilty as charged. Spurrier never thought of the tasting as a face-off. Since he had the extra wines, he simply wanted to show more of them to the French judges. Naïve? Absolutely. A plot? Hardly.

*Charge Two: Spurrier didn't choose the best French wines or the best French vintages.*

It was impossible at the time to stage a fair comparison of aged French wines and aged California wines because the Californians didn't have any old wines. These were still very young wineries. It was only the second vintage the two winners had ever made. Spurrier selected recent wines from both sides that were being sold at the time. That was what people could go into a store and buy. He said then, and still says today, that he chose French wines that would be similar to their California counterparts. The Meursault Charmes, he felt, was the "fattest" of the Burgundies and a lot like the California Chardonnays. Joe Heitz had said that was his model. Spurrier thought the Ridge Monte Bello Cabernet was similar in style to the Léoville-Las-Cases, which is why he selected it. No one can deny the quality of Spurrier's French selections: two First Growths and two Second Growths among the reds, and one Great Growth and three of the most highly praised First Growths among the whites. Finally, Spurrier has always maintained that he consciously picked French wines he thought would win.

*Charge Three: The French wines were too young.*

All the wines, both French and Californian, came from the five vintages 1969 through 1973, with the majority from 1970 to 1973. The American wines were equally as young as the French. It was widely assumed that the French wines would improve with age; no one knew what would happen to the California wines in the bottle since the wineries had no track record. They too could improve with time. Also the vast majority of wine, even in France, is drunk soon after release. Only a few connoisseurs drink twenty- and thirty-year-old wine. The comparison of equally young wines is closer to the consuming public reality. And even in its youth, a great wine shows its greatness.

*Charge Four: Blind tastings like the Paris one are inherently flawed and capricious.*

This is undoubtedly true. There have been countless embarrassing cases of stupendous errors in blind tastings. But the alternative is even worse. Spurrier and Gallagher were concerned that the French judges, whether willfully or accidentally, would score their own wines high and the California ones low if they knew the origin. And they were probably right. British wine writer Jancis Robinson in his classic book *How to Taste* wrote: "It is absolutely staggering how important a part the label plays in the business of tasting. If we know that a favorite region, producer, or vintage is coming up, we automatically start relishing it—giving it every benefit of the tasting doubt."

The most definitive answers to some of these charges can be found in the many reenactments of the Spurrier tasting that have taken place since 1976. The results have been surprisingly similar to the original. Granted these were mostly done with American judges who were not always wine experts. Unfortunately, there does not appear to have ever been a retasting—at least not again in public—done by French judges.

The closest to a rematch took place twenty months after the original tasting on January 11 and 12, 1978, at the Vintners Club in San Francisco. Spurrier flew in from Paris to participate in the event, and many of the California winemakers were present on the night their wines were tasted.

The Chardonnay competition was held on January 11. While the club normally had thirty or so tasters for one of its regular weekly wine samplings, on this occasion there were ninety-eight. In that blind tasting the overwhelmingly American judges ranked the 1974 Chalone first, just one-tenth of a point higher than the Chateau Montelena that had won in Paris. The consensus comments of the judges on the Chalone wine: "deep gold; perfumed oaky nose; rich, buttery, powerful, long ripe, youthful." In Paris Chalone had scored third. In third position in San Francisco was the 1973 Spring Mountain, and in fourth was the 1972 Puligny-Montrachet Les Pucelles.

The following night ninety-nine tasters showed up for a similar blind tasting of the Cabernet Sauvignons. The 1973 Stag's Leap again walked off with first place, a half point ahead of the 1970 Heitz Martha's Vineyard. The consensus comments of the judges about the Stag's Leap: "deep cherry color; vanilla nose, fruity; fat, chocolate, round, supple." In third place was the 1971 Ridge Monte Bello, and in fourth the 1970 Chateau Mouton Rothschild.

As the crowd left the Cabernet tasting, Joseph Heitz, whose Martha's

Vineyard wine had come in ninth in Paris but second at the Vintner's Club rematch, walked over to Stag Leap's Warren Winiarski and said good-naturedly, "I'm catching up with you."

The tenth anniversary of the Paris Tasting in 1986 offered a good occasion to see how the wines were aging. Early that year, the *Wine Spectator*, an American magazine, staged a retasting of just the Paris Cabernet Sauvignons. Chardonnay wines were not considered on the grounds that they would be past their prime. The judges, all Americans, were four *Spectator* staffers and two outsiders. The results were published in the magazine's April 1–15 issue. Using the *Wine Spectator's* 100-point system, rather than Spurrier's 20-point one, the judges placed the 1970 Heitz Martha's Vineyard first with 93.5. It was followed by the 1971 Mayacamas, the 1971 Ridge Monte Bello, the 1973 Stag's Leap, and the 1972 Clos Du Val. The highest-rated French wine, the 1970 Chateau Montrose, placed sixth followed by the 1970 Chateau Mouton Rothschild, the 1971 Chateau Léoville-Las-Cases, the 1969 Freemark Abbey, and the 1970 Chateau Haut-Brion.

Spurrier helped put together a tenth anniversary rematch in September 1986 at the French Culinary Institute in New York City. The tasting this time was again limited to the reds for the same reason as at the *Wine Spectator* rematch. This time all the wine came directly from the producers except for Chateau Haut-Brion, which refused to have anything to do with it, and Freemark Abbey, which also declined to participate. Spurrier bought a bottle of Haut-Brion on the open market for the retasting, but Freemark Abbey was not included. The judges were eight Americans, mostly from the New York City wine trade. Just as in Paris in 1976, the wines were treated carefully, being decanted an hour before the tasting.

Spurrier's results this time were different, but California won again. The tasters commented that the 1973 Stag's Leap seemed to be over the hill, and it finished sixth. The winning wine was the 1972 Clos Du Val from the Napa Valley, which had placed eighth in Paris. Second place also went to another California wine, the 1971 Ridge Monte Bello. Then came the French in third, fourth, and fifth positions: 1970 Chateau Montrose, 1971 Chateau Léoville-Las-Cases, and 1970 Chateau Mouton Rothschild. The 1970 Chateau Haut-Brion rated last among the nine wines. Several of the judges said that they had difficulty distinguishing between the French and California wines—just as their Paris counterparts had ten years earlier.

It was difficult by the tenth anniversary, or thereafter, to take seriously the French objections that they had been robbed or tricked by Spurrier in 1976. The California wines had stood the test of time. Now all the red wines, both French and Californian, were coming up to fifteen years of bottle aging and

were at or near their peak. The results of the two most highly publicized retastings showed that the California wines were probably aging better than the French ones were. Said James Laube, a *Wine Spectator* judge: "The extra decade of bottle age was kinder to California Cabs than to the Bordeaux."

In 1979, three years after it had passed up the opportunity to have a reporter at the Spurrier tasting, France's *GaultMillau*, the food-and-wine magazine, staged the Wine Olympics in Paris. The magazine didn't want to just repeat the earlier event; it had to take things to a whole new level. It wasn't going to be just California versus France; this tasting was going to put on display the entire panoply of international wine. Spurrier had shown that France was no longer alone in producing great wine. Now *GaultMillau* wanted to take things one giant step further with the Wine Olympics.

A total of 330 wines of thirty-three countries were tasted by sixty-two experts from ten nationalities. France dominated in the number of wines selected to compete and the number of judges, although the wines came from as far away as China and the judges included representatives from Australia and Britain.

The wines were selected in a somewhat bizarre way and were divided into twenty-two categories. The French wines came mainly from the stock of Nicolas, the largest French wine chain. They included some of the very best French wines but also some modest ones. The California wines were from a variety of sources including the American embassy and Spurrier's Caves de la Madeleine, which by then carried a few of them. The selection of California wines also included both high-quality ones such as Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and lesser ones like Gallo.

The Wine Olympics resulted in another surprisingly good showing by California wines in Paris, particularly among the whites. In the Chardonnay tasting the 1976 Trefethen Vineyards from the Napa Valley came out on top, and California wines picked up six of the top ten positions. Among the Sauvignon Blancs, two Napa Valley wines, a 1977 Sterling Vineyards and a 1976 Spring Mountain, finished first and third.

In the red-wine tastings, the California wines did not do quite as well, although they placed six of the top ten among the Cabernet-Merlot blends, while France got the remaining four spots. A California wine, 1975 Hoffman Mountain Ranch, placed third in the Pinot Noir competition. California wines also did well in the Petite Sirah competition.

*GaultMillau* concluded in its story reporting the results, "There exist in California today a few properties or companies whose wines—although very expensive—can be considered among the best in the world."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### A Dream Fulfilled

*Anyone who knows his history must surely know his wines.*

—ARNOLD TOYNBEE

Shortly after the results of the Paris Tasting in 1976 became known, Mike Grgich's phone at Chateau Montelena started ringing with offers for him to move to other wineries to be the winemaker. Relations at Chateau Montelena between managing partner Jim Barrett and Grgich had gradually been deteriorating. Both Lee Paschich and Barrett had been increasingly taking a more active role in the business, while Grgich wanted to run his own operation. He felt that too many people who didn't know anything about making wine were telling him what to do. So the winemaker listened closely to the offers and had follow-up conversations with many people. Most of the proposals, though, were only for Grgich to do the same job at a better salary than he was getting at Chateau Montelena. Grgich wanted more than that. He had worked for others for long enough; now he wanted his own winery.

Ever since he had arrived in the Napa Valley in 1958, Grgich had dreamed of being the master of his domain. Originally he thought that within a year he would have saved up enough money to buy one of the more run-down ghost wineries. But as time passed, he saw the prices—and the interest rates—gradually climb. So he told himself that he'd buy something as soon as they came down. But they never did, and by the mid-1970s his dream had all but evaporated. After the Paris Tasting, though, Grgich returned to the goal of having his own place.

The first thing he had to do was raise some money. He informed Barrett that he would be leaving at the end of his five-year agreement. His contract with Chateau Montelena gave him the right to cash out his 5 percent ownership position for \$50,000. In addition, he sold the stock Ernie Hahn had given him for \$45,000.

The parting was bitter on both sides. Grgich told people that he didn't