

TIME

Judgment of Paris

Americans abroad have been boasting for years about California wines, only to be greeted in most cases by polite disbelief—or worse. Among the few fervent and respected admirers of *le vin de Californie* in France is a transplanted Englishman, Steven Spurrier, 34, who owns the Cave de la Madeleine wine shop, one of the best in Paris, and the Académie du Vin, a wine school whose six-week courses are attended by the French Restaurant Association's chefs and sommeliers. Last week in Paris, at a formal wine tasting organized by Spurrier, the unthinkable happened: California defeated all Gaul.

The contest was as strictly controlled as the production of a Château Lafite. The nine French judges, drawn from an oenophile's *Who's Who*, included such high priests as Pierre Tari, secretary-general of the *Association des Grands Crus Classés*, and Raymond Oliver, owner of Le Grand Vefour restaurant and doyen of French culinary writers. The wines tasted were transatlantic cousins—four white Burgundies against six California Pinot Chardonnays and four Grands Crus Châteaux reds from Bordeaux against six California Cabernet Sauvignons.

Gallic Gems. As they swirled, sniffed, sipped and spat, some judges were instantly able to separate an imported upstart from an aristocrat. More often, the panel was confused. “Ah, back to France!” exclaimed Oliver after sipping a 1972 Chardonnay from the Napa Valley. “That is definitely California. It has no nose,” said another judge—after downing a Bâtard Montrachet '73. Other comments included such Gallic gems as “this is nervous and agreeable,” “a good nose but not too much in the mouth,” and “this soars out of the ordinary.”

When the ballots were cast, the top-soaring red was Stag's Leap Wine Cellars' '72 from the Napa Valley, followed by Mouton-Rothschild '70, Haut-Brion '70 and Montrose '70. The four winning whites were, in order, “Château Montelena '73 from Napa, French Meursault-Charmes '73 and two other Californians, Chalone '74 from Monterey County and Napa's Spring Mountain '73. The U.S. winners are little known to wine lovers, since they are in short supply even in California and rather expensive (\$6 plus). Jim Barrett, Montelena's general manager and part owner, said: “Not bad for kids from the sticks.”