

Glass Acts

In Our Wine Tasting, Virginia Shows It Can Compete With France and Napa Valley

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The "Judgment of Paris" transformed the world of wine, marking California on the map in big, bold letters that could not be ignored. That May 1976 tasting galvanized an upstart American wine industry that had struggled in the decades since Prohibition and helped overcome a consumer perception here and abroad that American wines were inferior to their French counterparts.

The Paris tasting was immortalized in the 2005 book "Judgment of Paris" by George M. Taber and the 2008 movie "Bottle Shock." It has provided a model for countless wine tastings and parties in the decades since, setting the standard that wines should be evaluated based solely on what's in the glass, not on the label.

Where California was in the 1970s -- underappreciated for its quality -- Virginia is today. So when we decided to hold our own Judgment of Washington, it wasn't just to see whether the United States would best France today. It was to see whether local wines might surprise the judges now as much as Napa Valley bottles did more than three decades ago.

We invited six area wine professionals -- three retailers, three sommeliers -- to blind-taste a dozen chardonnays and a dozen red Bordeaux-style wines, telling them only that we were pitting the United States vs. France in a sort of oenological grudge match. Then we slipped in five Virginia wines and one from Maryland without telling anyone.

Could the locals hold their own against the more established competition from Napa Valley, Bordeaux and Burgundy? Could they overcome a market perception that they are expensive novelties that don't offer value to match their price? Or would they fall flat as overreaching pretenders?

When the scores were totaled and the wines unveiled, a California wine narrowly edged out a French rival for the top spot in each category. But Virginia was nipping at their heels.

"Wow, you're really swinging for the fences right away with this one," John Wabeck said as he sniffed the first red wine. Wabeck, a former chef who is now sommelier at [Inox](#) restaurant in Tysons Corner and a third-level master sommelier candidate, scribbled "classic Bordeaux structure . . . merlot-based? . . . cocoa powder" and scored it 90 points out of 100. Elli Benchimol, beverage director for the Stir Food Group, which includes [Zola](#) and [Potenza](#) restaurants and their affiliated wine stores, also noted cocoa powder and scored the wine 90, lauding its "beautiful structure." Brian Cook, sommelier at [Sonoma](#) and [Blue Ridge](#) in the District and [Redwood](#) in Bethesda, praised its "cured meat, savory cassis, mint, mocha" flavors and its "dusty tannins," awarding the wine 92 points.

The wine was Barboursville Vineyards' 2006 Octagon, a merlot-based blend of Bordeaux grape varieties that retails for about \$40. Four of the six judges mistook it for a Bordeaux. Ultimately, the Octagon trailed the Newton Vineyards 2005 Unfiltered Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley, a \$60 monster that wowed the judges with its unmistakably jammy fruit, velvety texture and spicy complexity. Second place went to Chateau Larrivet-Haut Brion 2005, from the Pessac-Leognan region of Bordeaux, every bit as French as the Newton was American. Like the Octagon, it retails for about \$40.

Napa Valley scored points for value, with cabernet sauvignon from Sterling Vineyards (\$25) and Beaulieu Vineyard's Rutherford bottling (\$20) impressing the judges. But Virginia came in big again, in a fifth-place tie between the Michael Shaps 2007 Cabernet Franc (\$35) and the Gordon Brothers 2003 Tradition from Washington state (\$45).

California also scored for value with the white wines. Our top finisher -- by a hair -- was the Chappellet 2007 Napa Valley Chardonnay, a \$32 charmer that fooled the judges into thinking it was French. Only Vanessa Moore, owner of Unwined retail store in Alexandria, identified it as a Napa wine. (Wine Spectator magazine loved it, too, rating it 91 points, about what our judges gave it.) The Chappellet was in a virtual dead heat with the \$50 Louis Latour Chateau de Blagny 2006 Meursault-Blagny Premier Cru. Our judges were unanimous that this was French. Two of them, Dominique Landragin, co-owner of the Cork & Fork stores in Gainesville and Bethesda, and Christian Bonny, wine buyer at Circle Wine & Liquor in Northwest Washington, even guessed the correct appellation. Bonny was so excited about this wine that he got tangled in similes, saying that "it keeps coming around, like a snowball rolling downhill," and after the next sip, "like a ferris wheel of stone fruit and cream."

Right behind the first two, though, came two Virginia chardonnays: Linden Vineyards 2006 Hardscrabble, which retails for about \$26, and the Michael Shaps 2007 (\$35). Fewer than 1.25 points separated the first four chardonnays, two of them from Virginia. The judges were unanimous in thinking the Shaps was from Burgundy. "Montrachet!" Landragin wrote, while Benchimol, Moore and Wabeck suspected Puligny-Montrachet. The Linden was mistaken for French by three of the judges, while the others suspected the West Coast.

What conclusions can we draw from our exercise? That U.S. wines are the equal of the French is no longer the surprise it was in 1976. Yet it is worth noting that when our judges were asked where they thought a wine was from, they tended to believe the wines they liked most were French. France still holds pride of place in our minds as the benchmark for fine wine.

But we cannot ignore that wines produced within a two-hour drive of Washington stood toe-to-toe with highly touted competitors from California and France. This result is a snapshot of what six judges thought about two dozen wines one July afternoon, yet it should send a signal to retailers, sommeliers and consumers that local wines can match the best in the world -- and they are beginning to do so. It's time to put our preconceptions aside and focus on the quality of these wines.

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