

SIPPING HISTORY

D.C. CELEBRATES THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS

by Kelly Magyarics, DWS

THERE IS PERHAPS NO OTHER VENUE MORE FITTING TO CELEBRATE an event that singlehandedly changed the American wine industry than the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. On May 16, 2016, the Washington, D.C. museum was the scene of an after-hours panel discussion about the significance of the 1976 Paris Tasting and a walk-around tasting of the latest vintages from the California wineries that unexpectedly beat out their French counterparts.

Key players on the panel, moderated by museum curator Paula Johnson, included Steven Spurrier, who owned a wine shop and school in Paris and organized the tasting; Warren Winiarski, founder of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, whose 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon beat out red Bordeaux blends; and George Taber, the only journalist who attended and covered the tasting (it was a slow news day at *Time*, admitted the native Californian). Mike Grgich of Grgich Hills Estate, the winner in 1976 for his 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay, was unable to travel due to back trouble but was represented by daughter Violet (and a cardboard cut-out!); Jim Barrett, founder of Chateau Montelena, who passed away in 2013, was represented by his CEO son Bo.

Guests at the walk-around tasting were able to sample wines from the winning wineries from the Paris Tasting, including Grgich Hills Estate and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and (shown) Chateau Montelena.



Taber, fluent in French, recalled that he was the only person on that day 40 years ago who knew the tasting order of the wines. He remembered how halfway through the white wine part of the competition he witnessed a judge pick up a glass, swirl it around, taste it and say (in French), “Ah, back to France.” When Taber looked at the scorecard and saw that the judge had actually tasted Freemark Abbey Chardonnay, he said to himself, “Maybe I’m going to have a story here after all.” He did, albeit shorter in print than the one he filed. For their part, when the winemakers received telegrams letting them know they won, they didn’t quite understand the significance right away. (Upon winning for his Cabernet, Winiarski recalls saying, “That’s nice.”)

Inspired by the hour-long discussion, the Smithsonian’s 300 guests had the chance



On Capitol Hill (left to right): Bo Barrett, Steven Spurrier, Judy Barrett and Rep. Mike Thompson celebrate House Resolution 374 and American wine.

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The Congressional Wine Caucus Looks to the Past—and to the Future—of American Wine

On the heels of the May 16 event at the Smithsonian Museum of American History that marked the 40th anniversary of the Judgment of Paris, the Congressional Wine Caucus held a reception and tasting on May 18, in the Cannon Caucus Room in the Cannon House Office Building in Washington.

Founded by Mike Thompson, Representative of California’s Fifth District, which includes the wine regions of Napa and much of Sonoma, and winemaker himself, the Congressional Wine Caucus has 182 members who work to protect and promote the country’s wine industry from grape to glass.

Around 500 guests joined Rep. Thompson, along with Steven Spurrier, who organized the Paris Tasting, and journalist George Taber, whose coverage in Time magazine helped legitimize American wines.

“The Judgment of Paris forever changed the world’s view of American Wine and gave rise to the international recognition and acclaim that the Napa Valley enjoys to this day,” said Rep. Thompson. “I [am] honored to recognize the 40th Anniversary of the Judgment of Paris on Capitol Hill.”

That evening, Rep. Thompson also introduced House Resolution 734, which had 64 bipartisan co-sponsors and was created for “recognizing and honoring the historical significance of the 40th anniversary of the Judgment of Paris, and the impact of the California victory at the 1976 Paris Tasting on the world of wine and the United States wine industry as a whole.”

Following the short ceremony, a Celebration of American Wine featured offerings poured from wineries—including some whose offerings won in Paris 40 years ago—such as Chateau Montelena Winery, Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, Heitz Wine Cellars, Clos du Val and Freemark Abbey. —K. M. SJ



The Judgment of Paris panel in Washington, D.C. (left to right): George Taber, Warren Winiarski, Ted Baseler, Bo Barrett, Violet Grgich, cutout of Mike Grgich, Bella Spurrier and Steven Spurrier.

to sample wines from Chateau Montelena, Grgich Hills and Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, paired with small bites. Budding viticulturists could try their hand at grapevine grafting, while would-be winemakers could practice blind tasting and learn more about the chemistry of wine.

Today, 40 years later, aftershocks from that afternoon in Paris can still be felt all over the wine world, as its landscape was forever altered. Ted Baseler, President and CEO of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates and Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars and also on the panel, called the Paris Tasting a victory for Napa, for California and for all of North America. Winiarski added, “There were a number of French astronomers at that tasting, and they discovered that the sun does not only go around France.”

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