

## *Judgment of Paris*

By Wayne Nelson

**This time it happened in Paris, Virginia, and the results of this winetasting might surprise you.**

On a beautiful Saturday afternoon at the end of May in the town of Paris, Virginia—an hour's easy drive from DC—a telling event took place. It had been inspired by a 1976 winetasting in Paris, France, that did the unthinkable: It compared some of the top names in French wine with new and little-known wines from California. The results shook the wine world.

In 1976, California wines were getting little respect. The tasting's French judges were told that the wines were from both France and California. The tasting was blind, with the wines decanted into unlabeled bottles. As the tasting began, it quickly became clear to George M. Taber of *Time* magazine—the sole reporter present—that the judges were having trouble telling the French from the California wines. With great conviction, experts identified California wines as French and vice versa.

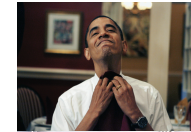
That tasting turned out to be big news and an interesting story, which Taber told in his 2005 book, *Judgment of Paris*, and which was also recounted in the 2008 movie *Bottle Shock*. More than three decades later, that famous tasting inspired another one.

My wife, Marti, and I have spent many pleasant afternoons visiting Virginia vineyards, of which there are now more than 200. Virginia ranks seventh in the nation in wine-grape production. Yet many Washingtonians we talk with still are skeptical about the quality of Virginia wines.

Wines aren't new to Virginia soil. The state's viticultural heritage dates back to 1619, when Jamestown settlers were required by law to grow ten grapevines each, making Virginia the birthplace of the American wine industry. One of the reasons Britain colonized America was to gain agricultural independence from the European continent. Both tobacco and wine were expected to be shipped directly to England more economically than they could be bought from Europe. England was then, as it is today, the world's largest importer of wine. While the plan worked for tobacco, the Virginia wine was too poor in quality to be shipped.

Two hundred years later, a wine-loving Thomas Jefferson imported Italian vines as well as an Italian vintner to begin his own winemaking venture. Other Virginians dabbled in the business, which peaked just as the Civil War broke out; the war eventually destroyed nearly all of Virginia's vineyards.

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Fast-forward to Prohibition, whose effects were felt longer in Virginia than in other parts of the country because of a strong religious influence on state law. In the mid-1980s, Virginia finally got serious about producing good wines. Unlike California's high-volume producers, most Virginia wineries are boutiques with limited production. In July 2008, *Travel & Leisure* magazine called Virginia "one of the five top new wine destinations in the world"—and it was the only one listed in the United States.

Yet for many people, even in Maryland and DC, Virginia wines have an image problem. Some wine drinkers remember the early versions, when the vines were young and the wines lacked the concentration of flavor that comes from older vines. Another reason is simply that many people just don't expect to find good wines made in Virginia.

But Virginia does have a growing wine industry—and it has a Paris, too. So my wife and I decided it might be fun to taste Virginia wines against French and other competitors in Paris, Virginia.

When we ran into Pierre Vimont, the French ambassador to the United States, at a wine gathering and mentioned the idea, he smiled politely and quickly moved away. The French are no doubt tired of tastings in which France's competitors have little to lose.

Undaunted, we asked Vincent Feraud, wine director at the Ritz-Carlton in Tysons Corner, for help. One of the country's top sommeliers, Feraud worked for legendary Washington restaurateur Jean-Louis Palladin for six years, beginning at age 22. He was sommelier at Lespinasse for its four-year existence, then at Maestro for its eight years. Out of friendship, Vincent agreed to oversee the tasting, albeit with a warning: "Virginia wines aren't very good."

In preparation for the tasting, we asked some Virginia winemakers and wine merchants for their best wine suggestions. We tasted the wines with Vincent and decided which would be used in the tasting.

Vincent paired the Virginia wines with wines of similar grape, vintage, and price from France and elsewhere. There were to be six comparison flights—for four of them, French wines would be tasted against the Virginians; the other two flights would pit wines from Chile and Austria against Virginia competitors.

When Vincent agreed to manage the tasting, he thought we were inviting a few friends for a low-key wine party. When he saw the list of attendees, his brow furrowed. "This is serious," he said. "You are challenging me."

Among the guests were Scott Calvert, former sommelier at the Inn at Little Washington; L'Auberge Chez François sommelier Richard Dunham; Virginia winemaker Michael Shaps; former *Washingtonian* food and wine editor Robert Shoffner; Basson Al-Kahouaji, owner of Bacchus Wine Cellar in Georgetown; Deborah Martin, the first and only female *grand sénéchal* of a chapter of La Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin, the international Burgundy society; and David Vaughan, *maître* of the Washington chapter of the Commanderie de Bordeaux.

The rest of us were recreational tasters with varying degrees of knowledge. So that we could assess the

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differences of opinion between the experts and the recreational tasters, the experts' score sheets were secretly marked for identification later.

Tasters were asked two questions about each flight: Which wine do you prefer, and which is from Virginia?

The tasting took place on a summery afternoon at the historic Ashby Inn in the town of Paris, in the heart of Virginia's hunt country. We sat at tables arranged in a horseshoe shape so Vincent could easily pour the wines and talk with the participants. To ensure that the tasting was blind, the bottles were covered so as to give no hint of their origins. Small plates of food, matched with the wines by Vincent and former Ashby Inn chef Laurent Chosset, were served with each flight.

As guests arrived and mingled, they sipped two sparkling wines—a non-vintage French Champagne from Paul Goerg (about \$45 a bottle) and a 2005 sparkler (\$30) from the Kluge vineyard near Charlottesville, both dry *blanc de blancs*. The result was a dead heat as to the favorite, but opinions about the origin of each wine diverged: Half the tasters, both expert and recreational, thought the Virginia sparkler was the French Champagne. It was going to be an interesting tasting.

We took our seats, and the second round was served—two Chardonnays. After the widespread misidentification of the sparkling wines, the room was quiet as tasters focused on getting this pair right. In the end, the experts overwhelmingly favored the 2006 Linden Hardscrabble Chardonnay (\$24) over a 2007 Domaine Chatelain Petit Chablis (\$22.50); the rest of us were evenly split. But the experts were overwhelmingly wrong about where their favorite came from, assuming it was the French entry; a slight majority of the recreational tasters correctly identified the Virginia wine.

The third pairing was two bottles of Viognier, the “state grape” of Virginia. Viogniers create a lot of buzz at winery tastings because there are so many good ones. Winemaker Michael Shaps, also a taster at the event, sat at the edge of his seat hoping not to be embarrassed by the showing of his 2007 Monticello Viognier (\$35) against the French entry, a 2007 Domaine des Cantarelles Viognier (\$28) by Jean François Fayed. When the French wine was poured, its darker color immediately hinted at a flaw in the wine, which tasting it confirmed. When Vincent blurted out, “I am going to call the importer,” everyone knew which was the non-Virginia wine. Michael Shaps's Virginia Viognier won in a landslide.

By the time the fourth flight was poured, the conversation was noticeably louder and the experts were lauding Vincent for the challenge presented by his pairings. In this flight, the tasters had difficulty discerning what grape they were tasting. When one suggested that it was Merlot, Lynne Christopher, a lawyer from Warrenton—echoing the movie *Sideways*—shouted, “If this is a Merlot, I am out of here!” To which Vincent replied to her husband, “Mr. Christopher, start your car.” The Virginia wine, a 2005 Tarara Merlot (\$14), proved the clear favorite over a 2007 Chilean Merlot from Casa Lapostolle (\$16), the famous vineyard owned by the family whose founder brought the world Grand Marnier.

Three wines were paired in the fifth flight, the last of the red-wine pourings. These were a Bordeaux-style blend that Virginia's winemakers have mimicked well. The 2005 Barboursville Octagon blend (\$40) and

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the 2007 Glen Manor blend (\$28), both from Virginia, were pitted against a 2004 Pontet-Canet Pauillac Grand Cru (\$35), which has a world-class reputation. The experts correctly identified the French wine, but most of the rest did not. And surprise: The Octagon was the overall favorite, the Glen Manor came in second, the vaunted Pontet-Canet third.

The final flight, pairing two dessert wines, a 2005 Alois Kracher Auslese Cuvée (\$22) from Austria and a Barbourville 2005 Passito Malvaxia (\$30), ended the tasting as it had started—with an equal number of tasters liking each wine and most people correctly identifying the Virginia entry.

So what did this 2009 Judgment of Paris, Virginia, prove? At the very least, that Virginia wines are entitled to more respect. As one of the judges said when it was over, “I would never, ever have tried a Virginia wine, and now I will.”

*This article first appeared in the September 2009 issue of The Washingtonian. For more articles from that issue, [click here](#).*

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