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California wows Bordeaux at home

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Adam Lechmere

California has triumphed again at an extraordinary tasting at Chateau Brane-Cantenac – but this time there was no competition.

Last Friday's blind tasting of 12 iconic California wines was attended by dozens of Bordeaux top brass, among them May-Eliane de Lencquesaing, former owner Chateau Pichon-Lalande, Christian Seely of AXA Millesimes, Hubert de Bouard of Chateau Angelus, Kees Van Leeuwen of Chateau Cheval-Blanc, Eric d'Aramon of Chateau Figec, and Lilian Barton of Leoville Barton.

Visiting American winemakers included Chuck Wagner of Caymus, Amelia Ceja from Ceja Vineyards, Ravenswood founders Jim and Julia Wisner, and Betty O'Shaughnessy and Paul Woolls from O'Shaughnessy Winery.

Guests tasted and marked the wines using the 20-point scale, and ranked them 1-12. The tasting was organised by the Vintners Club of California - all the wines were 2002 Cabernets, and all have been top performers in previous club tastings.

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There were surprises. Ridge's Monte Bello, one of America's – and the world's – most lauded wines, came 11th out of 12. Last position was taken by the Isosceles Reserve from Justin Vineyards in Paso Robles.

In first position was Rocca Family Vineyards (which also featured in Decanter magazine's 'One to Watch' column last year) followed by Caymus Vineyard's Special

Selection, and in third, L'Aventure's Estate Selection.

The tasting was characterised by vigorous and good-humoured debate. As Brane-Cantenac owner Henri Lurton said in his introductory speech, 'We don't often do this sort of thing [examine California wines in depth] in Bordeaux.'

The Bordelais were fascinated. 'I very much enjoyed it. It was very interesting to be able to "lose" Bordeaux and think of California for a while,' de Lencquesaing said, adding that she thought only one or two of the wines had true potential for ageing.

Van Leeuwen was impressed by the elegance of the wines. 'I had expected more blockbusters, but there was much less extraction than I thought there would be.'

He added, 'You have fixed ideas about how wines will taste but the reality is very different – and much more complex.'

Brane-Cantenac's marketing director Corinne Conroy, who initiated the tasting, said, 'It is very educational and enlightening. A lot of people in Bordeaux are open minded and curious and on Friday, it showed.'


For their part, the visitors were delighted to be there. Jim Wisner, addressing the room, said, 'Bordeaux is an animal many of us had never seen before, and we were unsure how the wines would be received. But it has been wonderful. When I see all the Bordeaux people of importance here today, I am super-pleased about that.'

The wines (ranking in brackets):


Caymus Vineyards, Special Selection, Napa Valley (2)
Flora Springs, Rutherford Hillside Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (8)
Justin Vineyards, Isosceles Reserve, Paso Robles (12)
L'Aventure, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles (3)
O'Shaughnessy Estate Winery, Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (5)
Palmaz Vineyards "Gaston", Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (10)
Ramey Wine Cellars, Jericho Canyon Vineyard Cabernet Blend, Napa Valley (6)
Ridge Vineyards, Monte Bello, Santa Cruz Mountains (11)
Robert Craig Wine Cellars, Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (7)
Rocca Family Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Yountville, Napa Valley (1)
Wente Vineyards Nth Degree, Karl Wente Cabernet Sauvignon, Livermore Valley (4)
ZD Wines, Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (9)

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 We are so excited that our commitment to excellence both in the vineyard and in winemaking has resulted in such an honor. Blind tastings here in California have been extremely supportive of our Rocca wines. We are thrilled and honored that our French colleagues also enjoyed our wines enough to vote it number one in the Bordeaux blind tasting. Merci!

Mary Rocca, Rocca Family Vineyards, Napa, CA, USA

 Indeed, I thought it was a wonderful tasting and great project – kudos to Brane-Cantenac. At our lunch table, we had enlightening exchanges about those wines w/ Thomas Duroux (Palmer), Arianne Kaida (Descaves) and Didier Cuvelier (Poyferré) and later w/ Chuck Wagner (Caymus). Different qualitative, or stylistic, approaches but highly informative. Great fun. Congrats to our compatriot D. Meneret who came in 3rd place w/ l'Aventure.

Laurent Ehrmann, Managing Director, Barrière Frères (Négociant), Bordeaux

 I just finished reading your article on the tasting at Chateau Brane-Cantenac and was not surprised that the Rocca Family Vineyards 2002 Cabernet was chosen number one.

Some time ago a friend gave me a bottle of Rocca Family Vineyards Cabernet. This is not unusual since I'm a resident of Sonoma California. Sharing wine bottles and recommendations are a common event that affords one an opportunity to sample the non-mainstream wines. I was quite taken with the Rocca Cabernet and so was my

tasting partner.

The 2003 and 2004 cabernets are excellent as well as the 2003 syrah.
Congratulations to Rocca Family Vineyards.
Craig DuMonte, Sonoma, California, USA

Dear Mary,

Thank YOU for sending the wines through the Vintners Club and making this whole event possible. We really enjoyed tasting them and wish you could have been with us on such a great day.

I am glad the tasting came up to your expectations. Bravo again! and please do come to visit us at Brane. We'd love to welcome you here when you are in Bordeaux next time. Please send us your info (email address etc) if you may.

Corinne S.Conroy, Chateau Brane-Cantenac, Bordeaux, France

I enjoyed reading your article on the Chateau Brane-Cantenac tasting and was delighted to read that Rocca Family Vineyards 2002 Cabernet was chosen number one.

I was given several bottles of Rocca wine as a gift and found them excellent and I am not surprised that the 2002 Cabernet took first place at this extraordinary event. By the way, you should taste the 03' Cabernet ; I've had both and found the 2003 even better!

Janis Johnson, Corte Madera, CA, USA

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