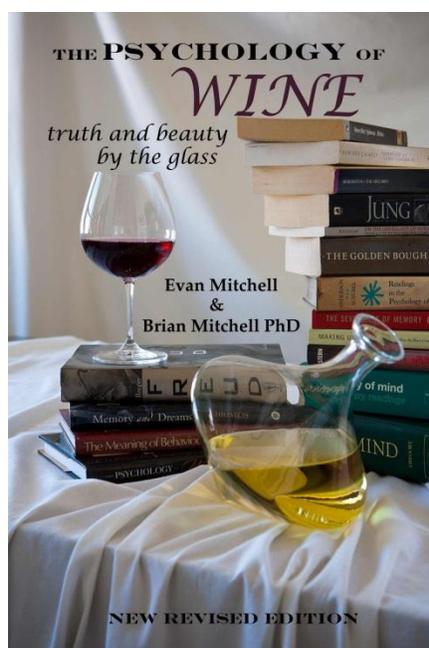


MERITAGE

**A chapter from the new revised edition of
The Psychology of Wine... truth and beauty by the glass
by Evan Mitchell and Brian Mitchell**

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CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Merry merry meritage

“When Spurrier invited them he told them it was for a tasting of California wines; he did not say that they would be tasting both California and French wines at the same time.” Ah, the consequences of a simple oversight.

We’re talking, of course, of the famed (or infamous, depending on your bent) 1976 “Judgment of Paris” – the historic taste-off between chardonnays and cabernet sauvignons from

California, and white Burgundies and red Bordeaux from France – described so dramatically in George M. Taber’s book of the same name. Steven Spurrier, an Englishman and respected Parisian wine merchant, had for some time been impressed by what he’d heard and experienced of the developments in California wines. In those days of course, to quote one of Taber’s own chapter titles, “France ruled the world.” The tasting event Spurrier had organized at the InterContinental Hotel in Paris was designed to showcase selected wines from California, to allow them to strut their stuff under the collective judgment of nine experts – the cream of French wine nobility. (In sharp contrast to the original Judgment of Paris from classical myth, in which the mantle of nobility fell to the beauty candidates – the goddesses Minerva, Juno and Venus – and the judge was Paris of Troy, a prince it’s true, but still a mere mortal.) Spurrier’s hope and expectation was no more (and it should be said, no less) than that the upstart New World wines would surprise and impress the tasting panel with the extent of their progress.

Seated, and discovering that the tasting would be expanded to include selected French wines, the judges now found that it was also to be blind (an obstacle not presented to Paris, who was given license to feast his eyes on his immaculate trio all disrobed, with no fear of retribution). In fact it was to be double-blind, as both Spurrier and his colleague Patricia Gallagher, whose scores were not to be counted, were also blind tasting. This last development added a further touch of formal authenticity to an event that was changing shape at each turn.

The rest, as they say, is history – and like all the best of history’s titbits, has been told and retold to several different ends. Suffice to say that not only did the California wines perform better than the French might have allowed themselves to expect, they performed in short better than the French – and so won both tastings. That’s to say an American wine was placed overall first in both the red and white categories, by a panel of distinguished French judges. *Quelle horreur!* (Which became *quelle horreur* squared thirty years later when, in an anniversary rematch conducted jointly in London and Napa for the red wines only, the California wines emerged even more triumphant.)

The reverberations of the 1976 Judgment of Paris are still being felt across the wine world, at both macro and micro levels. Fortunes were made almost overnight as the best performing California wines (and their prices) went stratospheric. Wine making reputations soared, while some others suffered. New World wine producing countries besides the US felt similarly vindicated and emancipated, and became more confident in their abilities and more able

to chance their arms in markets previously resistant. The French were ridiculed and vilified – the result widely seen as a humiliating comeuppance for their reactions (to their own verdict), and their long history of chauvinism in all matters of the vine. *Schadenfreude* is a universal sentiment, and it was certainly the emotion of the day. Echoes of it still persist, years later.

A watershed event in the history of wine – that’s what the doyen of aficionados, Robert Parker, called it. It’s clearly difficult to exaggerate the significance of the events of that May afternoon. But the psychological “facts” surrounding that day are quite another matter. Interpreted by most of the wine world, certainly the New World, as a classic instance of Gallic arrogance and hubris, this story lends itself to reinterpretation. Some French judges behaved poorly, that’s for sure. Others were almost gracious – a kind of grace under fire, under the circumstances. And it’s these circumstances that warrant closer examination.

So why not become for a while one of those French judges, and join us while we indulge in a little psychological conjecture. A “beautiful, sunny day in Paris” and the promise of an enjoyable afternoon, that’s what lies before you. A chance to demonstrate your undoubted expertise in the company of distinguished fellow professionals, and with wines offering ample scope for that most irresistible of emotional combinations – benevolent superiority. But no sooner sat, you’re hit with a triple whammy – the addition of French wines to the judging, a blind tasting, and the implied rigor of a double blind experiment.

“The nine judges seemed nervous at the beginning,” writes Taber.

Any wonder. All of a sudden there’s the feeling of being isolated and exposed. Even as the tasting of the whites begins, thoughts of “what if” are racing through your mind.

What if the American wines are better than I expected?

What if I rate the American wines too highly?

What if I don’t know the difference – (I will, won’t I?)

What if the individual scores are publicly announced?

Back to Taber’s eye-witness account, “From their comments ... the judges were becoming totally confused as they tasted the white wines. The panel couldn’t tell the difference.” Taber could – being privy to what wines were what.

Such confusion must play on your mindset.

Mon Dieu, this is much more difficult than I imagined.

What do the others think of this wine? Those two seem to be comparing notes.

“The judges began talking to each other ... They speculated about a wine’s nationality, often disagreeing.” More anguished thoughts.

“They don’t know either – or else they’re not saying.”

Finally, the tasting scores are announced. A 1973 Château Montelena chardonnay from the Napa Valley has trumped for first place the Grand Cru and Premier Cru wines from Burgundy’s famed appellations of Beaune, Meursault and Puligny-Montrachet. In fact three of the four top spots have gone to California wines. “When he finished, Spurrier looked at the judges, whose reaction ranged from shock to horror.”

Chauvinism? Patriotic mortification? Shame at this affront to the *Tricolore*? Is that what’s going through your mind? Defence of the Republic? Or are you rather more self-focused – more concerned about your own possible embarrassment, the potential damage to your reputation? With who knows how much more to come – because this isn’t over yet, not by a long shot, and however embarrassing the white results, well, this taste-off was always going to be defined by the reds.

Of one thing we can be certain – you and your fellow judges would have entered the day believing that the French whites were vastly superior, and would prove so in the tasting. So as you now face up to the reds your mind is grappling with the aftermath of the “disconfirmed expectancy” you’ve just experienced.

This is a phenomenon with a long pedigree in psychological research. Studied at length over decades, it has spawned a number of theoretical positions. But we’ll take our lead from the original, seminal work by Leon Festinger in the 1950s, outlined in his book *When Prophecy Fails*. Festinger and colleagues had managed to join the members of a sect of “true believers” awaiting the arrival of a spacecraft, prophesied to rescue them that day from a world about to be deluged and destroyed. When neither the craft nor the flood of water arrived as expected, Festinger’s prediction – that the sect members would respond by becoming firmer, rather than weaker, in their belief – was put to the test. And it came through with trumps. Counter intuitively, it should be said.

Now wind the clock back, sorry forward, to Paris and 1976. When it came to the tasting of the reds, as Taber has it: “Spurrier was certain that the judges would be more careful and would not allow a California wine to come out on top again.” One can well imagine the “circling of the wagons” mindset prevailing, a determination to get this *right* as a group (which

interestingly enough would have increased the pressure on you, our collaborative reader, to get it right as an individual – or risk being run out of town).

Decision time once again – “the room was hushed as Spurrier read the results”. And ... it’s California once again.

The 1973 Stag’s Leap Cabernet Sauvignon, a neighbor of the Montelena, snatched first place ahead of the celebrated Mouton-Rothschild (only then recently elevated from Second to First Growth status – the first and only time since the official classification of 1855), leaving also in its wake the Graves First Growth Haut-Brion, and the Saint-Estèphe “Super Second” Château Montrose – all from 1970, a famously sensational Bordeaux vintage.

Expectancies were disastrously disconfirmed, yet again.

Like many powerful theories Festinger’s is at once elegantly simple and disarmingly complex. Our cognitions – those thoughts, attitudes, suspicions, beliefs that form a large part of our perception of the world – comprise pieces of information that for the most part are independent of each other. Indeed they may never be connected in our minds. This is of course a salve to our sanity. As H. P. Lovecraft famously wrote in the opening line of his best known horror story “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.” A greater mercy the more you think about it.

Some cognitions however *will* be connected. And this is where the problems arise. Conflicting cognitions, particularly about something important, provoke psychological discomfort – “dissonance” (hence the title of Festinger’s theory – Cognitive Dissonance). Just like physical discomfort, this mental upset can be extremely unpleasant, so we seek to escape from or at least to lessen it. The more our significant beliefs or attitudes are out of sync, the greater the magnitude of this dissonance and the greater the motivation to reduce it. Relief can be accomplished in a number of ways – removing dissonant cognitions, adding new consonant cognitions, reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions, or increasing the importance of consonant cognitions (to grossly oversimplify).

So if you believe French wine to be far superior to the US but you’ve just rated the best French wines inferior to (panic-stricken-indrawn-breath) California (and throw in the fact that your reputation is seriously on the line, and your countrymen are likely to be none too happy with those responsible for toppling French wine from fame’s loftiest perch). All that spells dissonance – it spells it big time and in italics. That *hurts!* Give me some options to lessen the pain! Well ...

- you could remove the dissonant cognition (OK – this has been a charade, give me back my scores),
- you might add new consonant cognitions (how about – the French wines develop more slowly than the American, this is a mark of their distinction and the reason why they were in fact at a distinct disadvantage, this tasting couldn't even be called “apples and apples,” and anyway they'll clearly surpass the usurpers given the benefits of further age),
- you could reduce the importance of the dissonant cognition (*oui, très amusant* – these California wines are good, not as good as the French, but a fresh and pleasant drop), or
- you might increase the importance of consonant cognitions (*Vive la France* – French wines have always been superior, just look at the prices they command).

Readers of Taber's *Judgment of Paris* may recognize these stratagems.

All of us face dilemmas on a regular basis, if not usually so portentous as this. We're constantly choosing between dissonance-reducing options in our lives. (Which solution will best enable me to deal with this unwanted mental conflict, and cause me the least distress?) But are these *conscious* choices – and if so against what criteria are they made? What if we get it wrong – choose an option that doesn't work? Can we go back and start again? Our mental responses appear so immediate it's hard to envisage that a conscious decision-making effort is occurring. Certainly we don't appear to weigh the alternatives in our mind before settling on one.

Work by the social psychologist Elliot Aronson and colleagues suggests that our self-concept may provide the key to how we'll react to dissonance – or more specifically, the extent to which we need to *protect* our self-concept. If this is of crucial importance to us then it's likely our prioritizing of options will happen at an unconscious level, and occur as it were automatically. And there are few professions in which the protection of self-concept would be more important than that of wine judge.

So, now you've traveled a mile (or at least a while) in their shoes, how much of the judges' reaction was due to chauvinism, and how much to dissonance-reduction strategies? Did you and the others just behave with typical “French” arrogance, or did you behave like human beings?

There were losers in the Judgment of Paris – in the version of history and the version of myth. Young Paris, who chose Venus as the most beautiful over her sister goddesses, was able to take for his reward the face that launched a thousand ships and the body that went with it, Helen

of Troy, née Sparta. This proved to be a dubious result for Paris (and more besides him), since it led to the Trojan War which saw his own and his homeland's ruin. A war of sorts also followed the 1976 version, an intensified struggle between Old and New World wines that continues today – in various forms and on various fronts, despite apparent truces.

Fairly or unfairly, it has to be said that the French judges were the main losers. So painful was that day for some that it's said they still refuse to discuss it.

But, winners are grinners – and losers can please themselves. The clear winners from 1976 were the California wine producers. Aside from other benefits they were freed from the tyranny of nomenclature.

When cab sav gets it together with merlot, cab franc, malbec, petit verdot ... the outcome is frequently auspicious. Such wines tended to be called *Bordeaux blends* – since Bordeaux had the fame of giving life, legend and longevity to these wines. Imagine if you were a California producer in those days, laboring to improve your wines in the face of a status-driven bludgeoning from French producers. How galling it must have been (no pun intended) to be described in terms of your competitor? A recognition that you must remain forever in their shadow. How do you escape the cringing admission “we cannot even define ourselves – we're defined by them”? *Them* being the Bordelais, their styles and standards, their tastes and textures, their body, breed and brawn. (Think “Kleenex”, “Google”, “Coke”...)

The Paris taste-off broke the shackles. With such glory coming their way, why should the Californians continue to call their prestige reds *Bordeaux blends*? (Rumors that certain parties felt the wine world should rename the wines of Bordeaux *Californian cuvees* are a little overstated.) Some years later the break became formal, with the movement to find an overarching name that would appropriately describe superior Californian blended wines. In true democratic, meritocratic American style, a competition was held, the winning suggestion selected, and that name registered with the U.S. Department of Trademarks and Patents.

And what was it? *Meritage*. A blend (how apt) of *merit* and *heritage*, with the additional distinctions of rhyme and pun and a sense that's sure to set French teeth on edge, or perhaps even set them gnashing. Whether the name eventually acquires the *cachet* of its competitor, only time will tell. According to Robert Parker the 1976 Paris event marked the democratization of the wine world. Meritage may have been its first flag.

All this of course might very easily not have been. George M. Taber, then a correspondent for *Time*, had not been singled out for attention when the publicity for the event started. He was sent a simple press release. Not for a moment expecting that the American wines would make history at the expense of the French, Spurrier and Gallagher had concentrated their promotional efforts on the Parisian wine writing press. However, and prophetically in the light of events, these had all declined. A tasting of California wines wasn't deemed newsworthy in the Paris of the day. So Patricia Gallagher pursued Taber to get him to attend, and fortuitously he did. Without his objective witness of what occurred it's doubtful if the story would have seen the light of day, certainly not in as prominent a way – and who knows how long a re-match would have taken to arrange, and under what French terms.

One of the judges in Paris is later reported to have said – “We take wine too seriously, and that makes it sad.” Too seriously, we might ask, in relation to what? Art and music are taken seriously without that appearing to be sad, as are literature and dance. Politics and sport are taken seriously, and the list of course goes on. Is it “we” that are sad, because wine is taken seriously? That would be serious indeed – a serious loss of enjoyment, and reflection, and inspiration. Perhaps the “it” refers to the Paris verdict and its aftermath? If that's so, then *c'est la vie*. Or is the “it” referring to the wine itself? Why should the wine be sad? It, of all the parties, has no reason to be.

The events in Paris contained much in the way of melodrama – heroes and villains, expectation and surprise, chance and mischance, laughter and disaster. And there was no shortage of human interest angles either, with winners and the losers joined in a genuine and passionate love of wine. But there was another victor in all of this, one that passed unnoticed.

Imagine if we can, how the first flowers must have “felt” when they grasped the significance of the honeybee. Another creature, animal and alien, was joining with them in a mutually beneficial enterprise; had initiated a symbiotic relationship – without ever realizing it, or its significance (so it seemed to the flowers). The vine was a huge beneficiary of the events of Paris – as much as if the verdict had brought with it an enormous new source of pollination.

This judgment signalled the “Enlightenment” of the wine industry. By trampling on the old order it opened up the wine world to new ideas, rational and science based. New styles of wine emerged that were controversially different from the older Old World styles, and proving popular they encouraged more wine growers and greater cultivation of the grape. Even *terroir*,

the official standard, the hole card of the Old World, took on a more open meaning. New World wineries could point with conviction to their own dirt and rocks and terrain and clime, their own *terroir* credentials. And all the while the symbiotic love affair continued. More vines were planted, more grapes harvested, more wine made, more pleasure taken ...

Should you venture into a vineyard, even an Old World vineyard, late in the evening, and stand among the vines, quietly, well might you pick up their murmur on the breeze – “*Salute* to the Judgment of Paris, and to those who made it possible.”

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