

8-21-2014

Oregon-Burgundy Challenge

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Recommended Citation

Cary, Stephen J., "Oregon-Burgundy Challenge" (2014). *Stephen Cary Documents*. Document. Submission 2.

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“OREGON-BURGUNDY CHALLENGE”
INTERNATIONAL WINE CENTER, NYC
SEPTEMBER 12, 1985

The “Oregon-Burgundy Challenge” was held at the International Wine Center (IWC) in Manhattan, NYC.

It was a blind, comparative tasting of Pinot Noirs from the 1983 vintage of Burgundy, France and Oregon, USA. That was a good year in Oregon, quite ripe, and the French had touted their wines highly prior to the event.

The International Wine Center began in 1982 as a school dedicated to advancing wine knowledge and appreciation through their rigorous training program. It continues in that role today. The event was staged in the upstairs class/meeting room of their earlier original Manhattan facility.

The idea for a comparative tasting came from a number of sources. Several Oregon winemakers, in particular, Myron Redford of Amity Vineyards, had done blind, side-by-side tasting of their wines and Burgundies in a successful attempt to get retailers attention. Many Oregon Pinot Noir producers had done their own comparisons and were convinced their wines would do well against Burgundies. On the other hand, the market, both locally and throughout the country had not yet reached the same conclusion. Stephen Cary was an Oregon winebroker in the 1980’s who introduced a number of Oregon brands to the East Coast market. In frustration with the lack of respect the Oregon PNs were receiving he proposed a broader Oregon-Burgundy tasting in early 1985 during a visit to the IWC. IWC President Al Hotchkin assured him that would be a poor marketing ploy as Oregon would not fare well against Burgundy. Nevertheless there was strong support for the idea in the Oregon industry and it grew to the point that the Oregon Wine Advisory Board got involved as a way to make it a fair and open tasting.

The event was funded by the Oregon Wine Advisory Board (OWBA). That organization would eventually morph into today’s Oregon Wine Board. In making every effort to avoid any hint of bias, the OWAB gave the IWC free reign to select both the Burgundies and the judges for the event with no input from the OWAB. All Oregon Pinot producers were invited to submit a 1983 Pinot Noir to a OWAB selection panel. The OWAB panel then selected 10 Oregon Pinots from the 27 entries they received. The IWC picked the seven Burgundies based on reputation. Those included Commune, Premier Cru, and Grand Cru wines. The IWC also

selected the 25 judges. They included sommeliers, retailers, wholesalers, and members of the press from the NY/NJ area, all known for their knowledge of Burgundy.

In NY the judges sat down to 17 glasses of unlabeled wine. They were aware there were 7 Burgundies and 10 Oregon PNs represented. Well-known wine writer Terry Robards conducted the tasting. The judges were asked to do two things, decide the origin of each wine, and pick their three favorites. Bill Blosser represented the Oregon industry and was joined by a number of other Oregonians, including this reporter who, like Bill, tasted but did not judge.

As a group the judges did not get 50% right regarding origin. One wholesaler, who specialized in Burgundies, admitted he did not correctly identify even one of the 7 Burgundies. Many years later he confirmed that admission to this reporter.

In terms of favorites, Oregon placed 1st, 2nd, 3rd, tied for 4th and for 5th. Yamhill Valley Vineyards came first followed by Sokol-Blosser, Adelsheim, Eyrie, and Knudsen-Erath. There is a slight discrepancy in the press reports at the time about the average retail price of the Oregon wines but all agree it was around 50% of that of the Burgundies, \$11-\$14 vrs \$24 per bottle.

At the conclusion of the event several comments were made that the Burgundies were too young or in a 'down phase' and just needed more time to show their true colors. There was adequate wine left unopened so it was suggested the tasting be repeated at some point in the future. The rerun happened in February, 1987, in somewhat unscheduled fashion. Different judges were selected by the IWC for the retrial. This time around Oregon placed 1st, 2nd, and tied for 3rd (3 Oregon wineries and 1 Burgundy). Eyrie and Knudsen-Erath shared first, followed by Adelsheim, Sokol-Blosser, Yamhill Valley, and Alpine.

The Oregon wines in the tastings were:

Yamhill Valley Vineyards
Sokol-Blosser Vineyards
Adelsheim Vineyards
The Eyrie Vineyards
Knudsen-Erath Vineyards
Amity Vineyards
Elk Cove Winery
Hidden Springs Winery

**Alpine Vineyard
Siskiyou Vineyard**

The first nine listed are in the Willamette Valley. At the time of the tastings there were no sub-appellations in the Willamette Valley. Siskiyou Vineyard, now Bear Creek Winery is in the Rouge Valley of Southern Oregon.

The Burgundies present were:

**Volnay Cuvee Blondeau, Hospices de Beaune
Beaune Clos des Mouches, Domain Joseph Drouhin
Gevrey-Chambertin, Philip Rossignol
Clos des Lambrays, Domain des Lambrays
Volnay Santenots, Domain Joseph Matrot
Chambolle-Musigny, Comte Georges de Vogue
Nuits-Saint-Georges, Domain Henri Gouges**

As a result of these tastings there was a surge of interest and appreciation for Oregon Pinot Noir. That was true on the East Coast but it was also true at home. The recognition from an august panel in NY brought the Oregon wineries greatly increased respect in Portland and throughout the Northwest.

The Pinot Noir producers of Oregon have much for which to thank Burgundy. Many producers from the home of Pinot Noir have been more than gracious in sharing their homes and their grape growing, winemaking knowledge with the Oregonians. As a result of such generosity the Oregon industry has not sought nor encouraged another large-scale head-to-head comparison.

This report is filed with major contributions from Myron Redford, Amity Vineyards; David Adelsheim, Adelsheim Vineyard; the Oregon Historical Society; Eyrie Vineyards; Ponzi Vineyards; and Sokol-Blosser Winery. Press accounts at the time from Dan Duff of the Oregonian Newspaper, Terry Robards, writing for the NY Post at the time, and David Rosengarten for the Wine Spectator have provided additional details. In a bit of an offhanded compliment the article head for the Wine Spectator in October of 1985 said “Burgundies Fizzle in N.Y.” The article itself was accurate and complimentary. Finally we need thank Mary Ewing-Mulligan MW, and the President of IWC for the corrections and additions she has sent along in the attached email.

Stephen J. Cary – 8/21/2014