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California's vines climb in quality, popularity

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An event that forever changed the wine world occurred in Paris on May 24, 1976. Noted wine maven Steve Spurrier organized a "blind" tasting to compare California and French wines. Unexpectedly, the nine French wine experts chose California's Chateau Montelena Chardonnay and Stags Leap Cabernet Sauvignon as the winners over several well-known French wines. While Europeans were shocked and Americans pleased, California's reputation as a source of fine wines was established.

During the subsequent 30 years, the quality of California wines has improved steadily. And so has their popularity. California-grown wines account for two of every three bottles sold in the U.S. and more than \$800 million worth of California wine is exported every year.

Celebrate the 30th anniversary of that special day in Paris by opening some California wines. Here are several recommendations.

The quintessential California wine is Zinfandel. The Rosenblum Redwood Valley Annette's Reserve 2003 (\$30) is beautifully balanced with blackberry and chocolate flavors. Other good Zins to serve with steaks or burgers from the grill are the raspberry and licorice flavored Lolonis Redwood Valley Zinfandel 2003 (\$20) and the Coppola Diamond Red Label Zinfandel 2003 (\$17) that has black cherry and plum notes.

As a further affirmation of the importance of California winemaking, several French companies have invested in California properties. An example is the Boisset family, owners of a large number of wine and spirit producers around the world. In 2003, Boisset purchased the De Loach Vineyards, located in California's Russian River Valley, and soon after, attracted winemaker Greg La Follette to oversee production. At a recent tasting, Jean-Charles Boisset explained, "Our goal is to keep the sense of place, not to reproduce what is done in France." He believes that each property has its own unique

characteristics and their ambition is to "have the wine reflect its origin, its identity." La Follette, a former musician, then physical chemist who taught at UC Davis before becoming a winemaker, agrees: "The key is to match technique to the growing conditions ... working with what nature gives us to maintain the purity of location."

At a recent tasting, they poured a number of their latest releases including the very good De Loach Russian River Chardonnay 2004 (\$16), which has hazelnut aromas and oak, apple and tropical fruit flavors. More opulent is the De Loach O.F.S. Chardonnay 2004 (\$30), with a richer body and creamier mouth-feel along with honey, apple and spicy oak notes.

Their Pinot Noirs are clearly "New World" wines, although Boisset is reluctant to use this term. The value-priced De Loach Russian River Pinot Noir (\$18) is lighter in style, with red berry, cherry and cola notes. Made from older vines with small yields, the excellent De Loach O.F.S. Pinot Noir 2003 (\$35) has gorgeous cherry and raspberry flavors and a touch of pepper and sweet spices. Well balanced with a complex long finish, buy as much as you can find because these vines were recently uprooted to replant the vineyard.

Beaulieu Vineyards will donate a portion of their May and June sales of their wines to the Chesapeake Bay Trust to support Bay restoration projects. The "BV" brand includes the renowned Georges de Latour Private Reserve as well as the value-priced BV Costal Estate bottlings. The Beaulieu Vineyard Carneros Chardonnay 2002 (\$18) is a great value, with melon, apple and light oak notes. Another very good wine is the black cherry and coffee-flavored Beaulieu Napa Valley Zinfandel Signet Collection 2001 (\$28).