

# Judgment at Jarvis | A 'coming out' party puts Jarvis wines on top of the world's best

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Winemaker Ted Henry held a candle in one hand and in the other a tastevin, a replica of the shallow silver saucer an 18 century Burgundian colleague would have used to check the taste and the color of his wines deep inside a dimly lit cellar.

We were not really going to be tasting the wines this way, although we all had a tastevin on a red and blue ribbon, and we each had a try at studying a deep red wine, against the shiny cup. It was, explained vintner William Jarvis, just to set the mood for the eight of us gathered in the candle-lit tasting room deep inside the mountain that is home to Jarvis Winery.

For the past 20 years, Jarvis and winemaker/consultant Dimitri Tchelistcheff with the more recent addition of Ted Henry, who joined the team in 2008 — have been working quietly in this mountain retreat, crafting their wines. Now they were ready to see how they rated against the world's

best.

This was not so much another Judgment of Paris, Jarvis observed, as a "a coming-out party." The wines we'd be tasting, however, could easily have been part of that famous 1976 event, where California wines beat the best of the French in a blind tasting.

After that romantic introduction, the lights went back on and there were all the ingredients of a modern day tasting: the row of glasses, the score sheet, the spit bucket, glass of water and dish of plain crackers. Jarvis added one more item to this: tiny but powerful flashlights — they come in handy, he explained, in his winery that is so entirely contained within a mountain that the grapes, once delivered from the estate vineyards don't leave the subterranean world again until they're bottled and on their way to market.

There were eight of us altogether: Wilford Wong, a wine judge and critic, Charles Olken, founder of the Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wine; George Starke, a wine

columnist for the St. Helena Star, Paul Franson, a long-time wine writer, Bob Ecker, a travel, wine and food writer, Byron Vaughn, associated publisher of Santé Magazine and Karen McNeil Fife, chairman of the wine studies program at the Culinary Institute of America. How I ended up on this list was a puzzle to me, but an irresistible invitation.

Joining us were 16 wines we'd be tasting and ranking over the next couple of hours. Jarvis and his wife Leticia, after welcoming us, left us to a team of outsiders, wine professionals John Ruch and Lynn Higgins, who'd be pouring.

"It was important to Mr. Jarvis that this be a completely blind tasting," Ruch explained.

To begin with, we had five chardonnays, all from the 2007 vintage. Among them was a Burgundian classic, the Grand Cru Bouchard Chevalier-Montrachet, which retails for about \$250 a bottle, as well as a \$39 a bottle Maté's Chardonnay from Kumeu River in New Zealand and an Aus-

tralian, the Leeuwin Art Series chardonnay, (\$89). Also in this mix was the \$95 Jarvis Reserve Chardonnay and the \$95 Jarvis Finch Hollow Chardonnay.

The method was to taste, rank, and then, one by one, read our own results aloud, to be tallied up. The results put Jarvis Reserve Chardonnay solidly at the top, followed by the Leeuwin. Tied for third were the Bouchard Chevalier-Montrachet and the Jarvis Finch Hollow. Last ranked was the Kumeu River.

So far, so good.

Next up, three tempranillos, a variety Jarvis planted in the estate vineyards because, he noted, "Dimitri was interested in it."

Who to judge the Jarvis tempranillo against but the Spaniards? Hidden within three brown bags were the 2008 Jarvis tempranillo (\$53), the 2008 Dominio de Pingus, Flor di Pingus (\$75) and the 2008 Domino de Pingus Psi (\$35).

Results: No. 1 was the Jarvis again, followed by the Flor di Pingus and

then Psi.

This was getting interesting.

The third round were eight reds, all 2006, and there were some doozies — Bordeaux wines of legend — on the list. I freely admit I might have been content to just sit and breathe the scents as these wines were being poured; and my ranking sheet — which I saved — was nothing short of a wine-stained mess. I tasted the first wine, experienced bliss, decided there couldn't be one better and wrote down "No. 1." I tasted the second wine, went back and tasted the first wine and wrote down two No. 1s. And so it went until I had eight No. 1s. With a sense of obligation, I embarked on the a new round, gave up and wondered if I could turn in a list that explained I'd happily retire with any one of these bottles. By the third try, I gave out numbers, but I still thought they were all No. 1s.

Fortunately, the other judges fared better, at least they read out their numbers with confidence. And the numbers were all

over the map.

The results:

Tied for No. 1 were the Jarvis Lake William (\$105) and Premier Cru Chateau Latour (\$550). Coming in at No. 2 was the Jarvis Science project (\$105); and number three, another Jarvis Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (\$145).

No. 4 was another tie: a Premier Cru Chateau Margaux (\$550) and a Premier Cru Chateau Haut Brion (\$520). At No. 5 was the Jarvis Cabernet Sauvignon, and bringing up the finish, the most expensive wine, the Premier Cru Chateau Mouton Rothschild (\$600).

What did it all mean?

Jarvis explained the wines "chose themselves as the best-rated wines in the world for the three categories.

"It was a good 'Coming Out,'" he concluded. "I'm happy with our wines that placed first, but it doesn't lessen my respect for the other world wines. They were great as always."

Any way you look at it, by candlelight, flashlight or electric overhead light, it was an event to remember.