

The famous “Judgement of Paris” tasting in 1976, in which a line-up of Californian wines substantially dented the French claim to vinous supremacy, vindicated the American belief that their wines stacked up comfortably against the top French examples. For the wine world however the result was hardly uncontroversial. How competent were the judges? (Pretty good: they included the owner of the Domaine de la Romanee Conti and the sommelier of the legendary Tour d'Argent restaurant.) How credible was the French selection? (Two First Growths and two Seconds in the cabernet line-up.)

What no one seems to have considered was the apples-and-pears nature of what had appeared to be a comparison of like products. The Californian and Bordeaux reds were cabernet-based, the whites chardonnays. It seemed fair to assume that what was being judged was like-for-like. At one level, this is entirely true: every blind tasting compares like (a class of red wines, a class of pinot noirs, a class of wines from a particular vintage) but at the same time there is an “unlike” component: Stellenbosch wines are different from Swartland wines, high elevation chardonnays are different from maritime ones.

When you are judging a competition you can award gold medals to a number of different styles, a chardonnay from Elgin and a chardonnay from Paarl. When you are being driven to a preference between two wines however, you are being asked to decide on whether a particular Elgin chardonnay is better in absolute terms than a particular chardonnay from Paarl. Sometimes the very intrinsics are what tilt a decision - hence the apples-and-pears factor.

Last month I conducted my annual tasting in Hong Kong for Christie's most important wine clients. This year there were 13 Cape wines across a number of categories, all paired blind against comparable international benchmarks. For example, Jordan's Nine Yards was set against Etienne Sauzet's Batard Montrachet, Kanonkop's Paul Sauer against Chateau Lynch Bages and Vilafonte Series “M” against Chateau Trotanoy.

The guests are invited simply to choose their preferred wines from each of the flights. The idea was to focus on enjoyment rather than the distraction of trying to identify origin. This year I sat next to one of the auction house's best-heeled and most knowledgeable punters (these two attributes don't always come together, sadly). It was his comments which alerted me to the apples-and-pears nature of choosing a single “winner” from a short line-up.

At the top end of the market it's no longer an easy exercise to separate one country's wines from another's on a qualitative basis. The best are equally good. My companion in Hong Kong recognised this so he decided that once he had made his choice, he could still take a stab at origin. He was never wrong, and on several occasions his preferred wine was South African.

Every time he motivated his decision by highlighting features which relate more to origin than to winemaking, for example the nature of tannins in Cape cabernets, the acid-fruit balance in our chardonnays. Confident of his taste, as well as of his judgement, he saw no reason to pretend that the French wines were always better - which is often what happens when people are asked to choose between international benchmarks and relatively unknown contenders.

At the Judgement of Paris tasting, the French judges assumed that the quality of their top wines would shine through, and were lost the moment these differences weren't obvious. After that they were left to choose on the basis of pleasure. In the pre-climate change 1970s many of the French classics were lean and austere while the Californian wines had a warmth and generosity about them. Provenance, in fact, triumphed over perceptions of brand identity: they liked the taste of the Californian wines more than they liked the taste of home. It's no surprise that Odette Kahn, editor of the Revue du Vin de France, tried unsuccessfully to get her ballot form back before she stomped from the room.