Frédéric Rouzaud, President of Maison Louis Roederer, with Merry Edwards at her Russian River Valley estate.

BETTER THAN

Right

MERRY EDWARDS REFLECTS ON A LIFETIME OF MAKING WINE
The debate over the use (and misuse) of oak in wine has endured for decades, and as winemakers continually fine-tune their oak regimes, the opportunity for discussion only deepens. The issue of French versus American oak has long been a focal point of this back-and-forth, with proponents of both types offering valid justification for their choices.

The team at Jordan Vineyard & Winery, which just switched to 100% French oak for its celebrated Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (see the sidebar on page 83), felt it would be instructive to bring together sommeliers in Charleston, South Carolina, to examine Cabernets aged in French oak and American oak in a side-by-side blind tasting dubbed “Oak’s Influence on Cabernet Sauvignon.”

“We’ve never done anything like this before, but we thought it would be interesting for sommeliers to taste two Cabernets from the same region—one aged in French and one in American oak,” said Lisa Mattson, Director of Marketing & Communications for Jordan. “It could make for a fascinating discussion.”

The ten wines featured at the tasting in Charleston, SC, were Cabernet Sauvignons from California, Washington, and Australia.
Charleston’s vibrant restaurant and retail scene makes the city one of the most exciting food-and-wine destinations in the U.S.—and an ideal venue for the tasting, which was held at The Oyster Shed at Leon’s Fine Poultry & Oyster Shop, a historic venue outfitted with reclaimed wood, high ceilings, exposed beams, and original brick.

The panel was moderated by Desmond Garrity, owner of retail shop Crushed Fine Wine in the upscale Charleston suburb of Mount Pleasant. Participating industry experts included Ashley Broshious, Wine Director of Zero Restaurant + Bar at historic luxury hotel Zero George; Andres Contreras, Manager and Wine Director of bustling Broad Street seafood restaurant The Establishment; Donald Funk, Wine Steward at local Italian favorite Al di La Trattoria in West Ashley; Davis Hong, CEO and Executive Chef of the inventive 843 Korean BBQ & Sushi House in North Charleston; Bill Netherland, Wine Director of Hospitality Management Group, Inc., which owns pioneering local restaurants Magnolias and Blossom; and Joshua Walker, owner/ operator of cutting-edge boutique retailer and wine bar Wine & Company on Charleston’s historic Meeting Street. The wines were poured and later revealed by Angela Smith, Regional Sales Director–Southern U.S. for Jordan Vineyard & Winery.

The Wines

Mattson and Smith selected ten wines for the tasting, striving where possible for Cabernet Sauvignons using 100% French and 100% American oak. Finding Old World Cabernet Sauvignons aged in the latter proved problematic, so all of the wines on the table were from New World regions in California, Washington, and Australia. All except one were from the 2015 vintage.

The participants tasted the wines in randomly mixed sets of two, with conversation ensuing after each set. The wines in each set were revealed before the tasting proceeded to the next two, and as Mattson had hoped, all of the pairings did indeed lead to fascinating discussions. (Note: The oak regimes as listed were provided by the producers.)

WINES 1 AND 2

**The Fableist 2015 373 Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles**

- 76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, 5% Tempranillo, 5% Cabernet Franc, 4% Petite Sirah
- 100% American oak (225-liter barriques, 25% new)

**DAOU 2015 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles**

- 76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Cabernet Franc, 8% Merlot, 7% Petit Verdot
- 20 months in French oak (50% new)

Contreras aced the oak on The Fableist, which he found had “red fruit and some darker fruit.” “I went with American oak on this because I felt it has more spice,” he concluded. Hong also guessed American oak, noting the wine’s “dark plum fruit and medium tannins.”

“There’s a lot of extraction in these wines,” noted Broshious, while Funk found “green pepper, licorice, and tea” in the second wine, correctly deducing that it was from Paso Robles. After the reveal, Walker summarized, “If we all said nice things about both these wines and they’re from Paso, that’s notable.” Netherland added that he “wouldn’t have been surprised if [the DAOU] had been a recent-vintage Bordeaux.”

WINES 3 AND 4

**Dunham 2015 XXI Cabernet Sauvignon, Columbia Valley**

- 100% Cabernet Sauvignon
- 60% new oak (80% new French, 20% new American), 40% neutral oak

**Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon, Luchessi Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains**

- 100% Cabernet Sauvignon
- Predominately French oak

“Approachable and jammy,” said Funk of the Dunham expression, while Hong liked its “spice, vanilla, and red fruit”; Broshious, meanwhile, found “boysenberry; cherry, and cherry cola.” Walker commented, “The first wine was interesting in that the color saturation, pigment, even the staining viscosity and the tears—everything pointed to ripeness, with tannin structure being very bright and soft.” Most tasters who hazarded an opinion on the Dunham guessed American oak, which may serve to prove Walker’s quip: “If we all agree, we’ll be wrong.”

The Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard Cabernet prompted much discussion before and after the reveal. Tasting blind, Walker was of the opinion that it “has everything you want in Cabernet Sauvignon: loads of complexity, really nice graphite, pencil lead, pencil shaving. Of the first four we’ve tasted, it’s the best built to age.” Netherland agreed: “It’s the most complex and structured so far. This is the first wine I felt I’d rather lay down than drink.” Broshious concluded that it was “ageworthy because it’s not overripe.” The reveal of the cool Santa Cruz Mountains appellation confirmed this.

Despite offering a plethora of tasting notes, few expressed opinions on the oak, perhaps reflecting the attitude of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard owner/winemaker Jeff Emery: “My philosophy on oak is that if you can obviously find it, then I haven’t done my job right.”
Broshious felt that these were “the two most red-fruited of the group” but noted that “the oak is not as prominent as on the previous wines.” Walker correctly surmised that the “racy, spicy” expression had “all attributes that I attribute to American oak—serious intensity, with vanilla shining through.” Contreras also nailed the American oak on this one, expressed through the wine’s “dill and coconut” notes.

Several panelists pegged the geographical origin of Wakefield’s “big and lush” (in Funk’s words) Cabernet; Walker agreed with Contreras and Broshious in noting that it “feels like South Australia through and through.” Broshious remarked on its “cherry-cola notes and stem inclusion,” while Walker also noted the “soda components and sarsaparilla” as well as “tons of ripeness and a nice long hang time—almost raisinated.” Hong correctly picked up the influence of French oak on this “subtle and very well-balanced” wine.

**WINES 5 AND 6**

**Jordan 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County**

- 77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot, 2% Malbec
- 100% French oak for 13 months, 47% new and 53% one-year-old barrels

**Ridge Monte Bello 2015 Monte Bello Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains**

- 77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Merlot, 7% Petit Verdot, 5% Cabernet Franc
- 97% American oak, 3% French oak

Hong appreciated the “well-balanced” nature of the first wine in this set, while Funk labeled Jordan’s 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon from the Alexander Valley a “favorite” for its elegance and dark-chocolate tones. Contreras picked up meaty notes with “peppercorns, dark-red fruit, and tight tannins.”

Delving deeper, Broshious opined that the Jordan was “the first wine that’s showing tertiary notes; it smells like an old-barrel cellar, with caramel, barnyard, wet soil, and aromas of wisteria and lavender. I think it’s Bordeaux!” Those comments would certainly be music to the ears of Jordan winemaker Rob Davis, who strives for “balance, elegance, and refinement” by using French oak and percentages of three other Bordeaux varieties in this blended Cabernet Sauvignon. The panel’s assessment also confirmed the realization of founder Tom Jordan’s dream of creating a true Bordeaux-style wine in California.

Contreras described the Ridge Monte Bello as showing a “slight pyrazine nose,” with “herbal red fruit” and “pronounced acid.” Netherland found it had “more overt wood on the nose.” After the reveal, Broshious remarked that “Ridge has been letting their grapes hang longer and longer; I would not expect this Ridge to age like some of the ones from the 1990s.”

**WINES 7 AND 8**

**Silver Oak 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley**

- 97.7% Cabernet Sauvignon, 1.3% Merlot, 0.5% Petit Verdot, 0.3% Malbec, 0.2% Cabernet Franc
- 24 months in 50% new and 50% once-used American oak

**Wakefield 2015 St. Andrews Cabernet Sauvignon, Clare Valley**

- 100% Cabernet Sauvignon
- French oak, 40% new, 60% two to three years old

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“There’s no wine here that we’re trying to put down or build up,” concluded Smith at the close of the tasting. “It’s meant to be educational for all of us.” In a witty understatement, Contreras put it more simply: “There are no dogs on the table.”

Commenting on American versus French oak, Broshious noted that American oak is changing—“[it’s] grown longer, with tighter rings, and dried for three to four years”—making it easier to confuse with French oak. Walker’s conclusion was that “there is a mystery to wine that will always go deeper than the sum of the parts. We’ve been tasked with a big responsibility to be open-minded, to allow the world of wine to be very big. I feel really happy with the diversity that it brings when winemakers do different things.”

“Having so many Cabernets side by side, with different types of oak aging, was eye-opening,” Contreras said. “It was really exciting for me personally to be proven wrong when I thought I was fairly certain of an oak type.” The lesson: “There is no superior oak. The winemaker is utilizing oak in a manner that benefits the wine,” he added.

“If we walk away with anything today, it’s that oaks are different,” summed up moderator Desmond Garrity. Or, as Funk put it in a musical analogy: “Love both for what they are. Sometimes you want to listen to the Stones and sometimes the Beatles. No wrong choices here!”

**CONCLUSIONS**

Why French Oak at Jordan?

Several years ago, second-generation owner John Jordan and founding winemaker Rob Davis began to source Jordan Vineyard & Winery’s Cabernet Sauvignon from Alexander Valley benchlands instead of the valley floor—a shift in terroir that results in riper fruit with intense flavors and more refined tannins that Davis felt called for a change to the wine’s oak regimen. He sourced Colbert oak from the Tronçais forest for its tight grain and ability to bond with the Cabernet’s tannins while highlighting the wine’s aromatic notes. The result is distinctly Bordeaux-like.

“We don’t want the word ‘power’ in our tasting notes,” Davis recently told The SOMM Journal. “Balance, elegance, refinement, length of finish—these are the qualities I strive for in our wines.” Arriving after the winery used a combination of French and American barrels for nearly 40 years, the 2015 Jordan Cabernet Sauvignon is the first release that used 100% French oak; according to Davis, it “exudes great fruit character and fine structure that French oak supports and elevates. I’ve been dreaming of releasing a wine like this for decades.”

Earlier this year, Davis announced his transition to focusing fully on wine-growing at Jordan, turning over day-to-day winemaking responsibilities to his protégé of 13 years, Maggie Kruse.  

**WINES 9 AND 10**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Penfolds 2015 Bin 707 Cabernet Sauvignon, Barossa Valley</th>
<th>Quilceda Creek 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon, Columbia Valley</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100% Cabernet Sauvignon</td>
<td>100% Cabernet Sauvignon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 months in 100% new American oak hogsheads</td>
<td>20 months in 100% new French oak</td>
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Of the revealed wines, Andres Contreras said there were “no dogs on the table.”