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Historic tasting of Napa Valley's best in the Louvre

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David Stoneberg | Posted: Thursday, June 23, 2011 12:00 am | (0) Comments

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Three hundred people enjoyed a dozen mostly Napa Valley chardonnays and cabernet sauvignons on May 24 at a reception that was part of the G8 Forum at the Louvre Museum in Paris, France. Submitted photo



Wines served at the Louvre

Chardonnay

- Hyde de Villaine, 2008 Carneros
- Knights Bridge, 2008 West Block, Knights Valley
- Peter Michael, 2007 La Carriere, Knights Valley

Cabernet sauvignon

- Casa Piena, 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon, Yountville
- Chappellet, 1997 Signature Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley
- Colgin, 2005 Red Wine IX Estate, Napa Valley
- Favia, 2003 Red Wine Cerro Sur, Napa Valley
- Harlan, 2005 Estate Proprietary Red Wine, Oakville
- Screaming Eagle, 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville
- Sine Qua Non, 204 Ode to E Syrah, Sta. Rita Hills
- Sloan, 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford
- Staglin, 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford

It was historic. French President Nicolas Sarkozy offered the Louvre to a St. Helena man, Joe Schoendorf, for a VIP reception that included some of Napa Valley's greatest chardonnays and cabernets.

The reception for 300 invited guests went off without a hitch and the French loved it. "They came up to me and said, "We don't get to drink wines like this. We can't buy them here,"" Schoendorf said. One of the attendees took a gentle shot at the California cabernets, asking Schoendorf, "Don't you think the alcohol level is a little high in these?" The St. Helenan responded, "You mean like in the great years of Bordeaux?" The repartee, though, was friendly and "it was all great," Schoendorf said.

One of the attendees, John Clippinger from Harvard University, said the Louvre party was "really amazing" with an "unbelievable selection of wine. I will think about that until the end of my life. And when I am on my deathbed and the reel of my life is running, the party at the Louvre is going to make the final cut."

Schoendorf concurred: "That's how I feel. Of the memories I've had going to wine tastings and doing things, that makes the championship."

Schoendorf engaged Matt Wilson and Greg Castells to organize the tasting, to get the wines, ship them to Paris and to set up and pour at the event. Wilson called it an amazing event.

"It was such a privilege. I couldn't believe the response," he said. "The crowd was astonished to see the quality of the wines. Gregory and I were speaking French and it was spectacular. The French really enjoyed the wines."

It wasn't a fluke that Schoendorf was able to serve California wines in the symbol of France, but how he was able to do it is an interesting story. Schoendorf has spent

45 years in the high-tech world that is based in the Silicon Valley. He is one of the partners of Accel Partners, a venture capital firm recently named No. 1 in the world by Forbes magazine. Accel has backed most of the Silicon Valley's biggest names, including Facebook and Groupon. Schoendorf, who sits on the board of directors of the World Economic Forum, knows the players.

Maurice Levy, who is the CEO of Publicis, one of the world's largest advertising companies, called Schoendorf about three months ago. He told Schoendorf he had just met with Sarkozy, and had an opportunity for the St. Helena resident. The world's major countries were meeting at a G8 forum in Paris on May 26 and 27. Prior to that, on May 24 and 25, Sarkozy wanted Levy to put together a mini-forum of 1,000 people: the CEOs of the world's important Internet companies, from Rupert Murdoch



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Levy wanted Schoendorf's help in getting those from the Silicon Valley to attend, including Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Groupon's Andrew Mason, among others. During a long dinner meeting in Paris, Schoendorf heard more about and committed to the project, with one condition.

"I said, 'All right, I do this. I want to check it out, but I'll do this. I want one condition.' I said, 'This is going to be an expensive undertaking. We're going to bring Silicon Valley's best people here, because most of the people in the Internet today are still Silicon Valley people. In my life, I've had the pleasure of living in two great valleys in California, I've spent my business life in Silicon Valley. When I came to California in 1966, it wasn't too long after that that I discovered the Napa Valley. I fell in love with that. When I was in business full time, it was my escape, we'd come up whenever we can. We now have a home there, and frankly, I think their wine technology is as good as anyone's in the world. I'd like to serve Napa Valley wines at this reception.'

"I was fully expecting to be told, 'We're sorry. Not possible.'"

Schoendorf said the French didn't say no at that meeting, but they didn't say yes, either. He wanted a hard commitment from them, because he didn't want the event to be shut down for political reasons. Four or five days later, the French gave him the go-ahead, but with a condition of their own: They wanted the reception to start with French Champagne.

Schoendorf said he called Daniel Lalonde, president and CEO of Moët & Chandon, which produces Dom Perignon. Schoendorf told him about his plans and Lalonde, who loves the Napa Valley and whose company owns Newton, said he'd be delighted to provide the Dom Perignon, which was poured all night for those who wanted it.

Once the deal was set, Schoendorf went to work, getting the Internet players to attend. He also called Matt Wilson and Greg Castells, of Soutirage Napa Valley, to help get the wines. He had only three chardonnays on his "must serve" list: the Hyde de Villaine, a Knights Bridge and a Peter Michael, the later two from Knights Valley.

Why the HdV? Schoendorf said, "Because I think it is one of the great chardonnays. It has the heritage of Larry Hyde and has the winemaking of Stephane Vivier, a Frenchman. So, it's California dirt meets French winemaking with a pretty interesting, reasonably priced chardonnay." He said managing director Tim Carl, who is a St. Helena native, at Knights Bridge "is hitting it out of the park right now" and Peter Michael is one of his favorite wines.

Schoendorf had just one more request: A Chappellet cabernet sauvignon. The three asked a dozen wineries, Harlan, Screaming Eagle, Colgin, and all asked how they could help. "The only rule was to give us two cases — not more, not less — and it can't be new releases, it has to be library wine, because we want to show the French a little age," Schoendorf said.

It wasn't a competition, either between Sonoma and Napa Valleys or between California and French wines, Schoendorf said, but an exposition. He added, "We have two great valleys in Northern California. Napa/Sonoma does wines and Silicon does the Internet. I want to show you (the French) both of them."

About a week after he engaged Wilson and Castells, Wilson calls up Schoendorf. "He asked, 'Do you know what day May 24 is?' and I said, 'No.'" It turned out, ironically, that the reception was on the 35th anniversary, to the day, of the Judgment of Paris, where two Napa Valley wines bested the best French wines at the Intercontinental Hotel, which is not far from the Louvre.

Schoendorf responded, "We didn't set the date, we didn't pick the date, but don't let that out, because someone will think we're trying to back-door them."

In the end, it wasn't an issue and Schoendorf said he went up the escalator in the Pyramide du Louvre, which is where the tasting and reception was going to be, a few minutes before it was to start.

"There were 100 people lined up, ready to come in. These were the players, nobody was a hanger-on, because we didn't invite anyone like that," he said.

"It was spectacular."

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