

Hey, France, Jerseyans can make wine, too

Published: Sunday, June 10, 2012, 7:38 AM

By **Emily Brill/Times of Trenton**

PRINCETON BOROUGH — Can New Jersey wine hold its own against fine French Chardonnay?

At the “Judgment of Princeton” wine competition on the Princeton University campus Friday, attendees weren’t so sure — until they saw the results.

The competition pitted New Jersey wines against their famous French counterparts, inspired by the 1976 “Judgment of Paris” contest that put Napa Valley wines on the map.

At the Princeton competition, Unionville Winery of East Amwell and Silver Decoy Winery of East Windsor bested four French wines to take second and fourth Chardonnay, respectively, out of 10 entrants.

“New Jersey wines can play with the big ones,” said Karl Storchmann, a member of the American Association of Wine Economists, which sponsored the contest.

Earlier in the day, Storchmann had expressed confidence that New Jersey wines would “make a good impression,” but little hope that they would win the competition.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he had said.

He was right, in part.

Of the four French wines and six New Jersey wines entered into each category, the No. 1 bottles were French.

But New Jersey Chardonnays scored second, third and fourth place, outranking three pricey French wines.

“A cheap, local wine could turn out to be as good for you as a famous, expensive wine,” said Robin Goldstein, author of “The Wine Trials.”

The fourth-place Chardonnay, Silver Decoy’s “Black Feather,” sells for \$13.99 a bottle.

Compare that to the winning French white wine, which goes for about \$90 a bottle.

Or the winning French red wine, which costs \$650 a bottle, Storchmann said.

“The New Jersey wines cost 5 percent of that,” Storchmann said.

INDUSTRY ‘EXPLODING’

Gary Pavlis, a state agricultural agent who works with developing vineyards, said New Jersey’s wine industry is “exploding.”

"The quality is incredible now ... and with this 'locavore' thing, people are really discovering New Jersey wines," Pavlis said.

Goldstein, who lives in California, said he would encourage people to forgo expensive dinner wines and pick up local bottles.

"It's good to support local producers and the community," Goldstein said. "Give the underdog a chance."

Silver Decoy Winery co-owner Mark Carduner said New Jersey might not be such an underdog in the wine industry anymore.

"I think the quality is there. In international competitions ... regional competitions and competitions in California, wines in New Jersey do very well," he said.

Carduner said Silver Decoy grows its grapes in Robbinsville and sells primarily to people in New Jersey and to residents of Bucks County, Pa.

CUSTOMER BASE EXPANDING

But his customer base is expanding, and thanks to a new state law that allows direct shipment of wines, it could expand further, he said.

The new law isn't going to drastically change the wine industry, but it will provide opportunities for growth, Pavlis said.

"Having another marketing channel is just another step toward profitability," Pavlis said.

Wineries such as Tomasello in Hammonton, which took fifth place in the red wine competition, already ship wine overseas, Pavlis said.

Wineries would need to ship overseas to reach three of the Princeton competition's judges, who hailed from Belgium and Bordeaux, France.

The judges ranged from winemakers to wine writers to wine economists, those whose strong "academic" interest in the drink has led them from tasting to tasting in search of the best methods to prepare wine.

Pavlis said he encourages New Jersey winemakers to experiment with their own methods.

As farmers improve, the industry will grow, he predicted.

And as the industry grows, winemakers like Carduner may have the chance to bring their wines to an even wider audience.

After all, perhaps the only thing holding Garden State wines back is the stigma.

"The beauty of competitions is that they occur blind, so there's no preconceived notion: 'This is a wine from New Jersey; it can't be great,'" Carduner said.

Contact Emily Brill at (609) 989-5721 or ebrill@njtimes.com.