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Cellar beware



By Jancis Robinson

With the FBI investigating several cases of wine fraud in the US, the fake rate is rising. But there are some warning signs to bear in mind



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California physician Harin Padma-Nathan first tasted the famously rich Château Pétrus thanks to his mother-in-law and, after one of the drugs he was involved in developing became a worldwide success a decade or so ago, he decided to treat himself to 18 bottles of Pétrus 1982. He drank three of them, but last year when he noticed that each bottle was worth more than £4,000, he decided to sell them, along with some of his other smarter bottles in his locker – although none was as

valuable as the Pétrus.

He was horrified to find that, when Christie's staff came to collect the bottles late last year, they refused to take the Pétrus, citing disparities between the labels on his bottles and those used by the chateau itself. He was also puzzled. For 20 years he had bought wine from the same Los Angeles store, beginning with modest California wines and moving steadily up the price list, and had always been a thoroughly satisfied customer.

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The retailer denies responsibility for the disputed bottles and Dr Padma-Nathan is now locked in a legal wrangle with him. Such tussles are not uncommon. What distinguishes Padma-Nathan is that he doesn't view himself as a member of the connoisseurs' club and is unusually willing to talk about the possibility that he was sold a pup. "I do not claim to be an expert in wines and I am not at all embarrassed about the fact I was deceived," he told me. "But I do think this seedy aspect needs to see the light of day.

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"I claim no expertise in wine. For me it's binary – either good or not. But those were the premier bottles in my collection and it's heartbreaking." He added that he was "astounded by the amount of fraud in this field and the concomitant absence

of any public exposure of such cases. Examples of this sort are so rampant, but so few people are willing to talk about it because their egos are attached to it."

He is right about the omertà surrounding the issue of fake bottles. I emailed many wine collectors of my acquaintance asking for their thoughts on the subject and not one replied. They include a prominent New England businessman who, like so many well-heeled Americans, fell in love with wine a decade or so ago and has been badly served by his wine supplier. His extensive wine cellar, stuffed with apparently magical combinations of vintage and producer, proved to contain a substantial proportion of questionable bottles when it was inspected by an expert in authentication, Maureen Downey of Chai Consulting. According to her, "most of the large collections that I see that have had significant purchases of wines other than direct release [en primeur and/or direct from the producer], in the past 15 years have some fake wines in them."

Warning signs



Unless you know for sure that the wine has come direct from the producer, be wary of the following:

- An offer of only the very top wines eg first growths, Henry Jaye, Romanée-Conti, Roumier and de Vogüé
- Only top vintages such as 1990, 1982, 1961, 1959 and 1945
- High fill levels in apparently very old bottles

But the problem is not confined to the United States. Wherever there is a new market of inexperienced wine enthusiasts with money to burn, there seems to be someone ready to sell them a 1945 Romanée-Conti or a 1959 Château Lafite – exceptional wines of which there are minuscule quantities.

The extent of fake wine at all quality levels in China is jaw-dropping (labels on offer in wine shops brazenly include "Chateau Lafete" and "Bordeaux Port"). Even Hong Kong, home to some of the most sophisticated wine collectors in the world, has been seriously infected by some of the grandest fakes. The owner of Le Pin, for example, one of very few rivals to Château Pétrus, recalls being invited to a dinner in Hong Kong supposedly dedicated to his wine at which he and the most knowledgeable collector there were reduced to discreetly exchanging texts under the table about the (lack of) authenticity of each bottle.

In China the threat of loss of face, together in some cases with lack of knowledge, seems enough to silence any complaints about this lamentable state of affairs. Because, until recently anyway, it has been bordeaux that has been most prized by China's new wine buyers, the Bordelais have been taking steps generically to fight fraud, initially hiring a British lawyer with previous experience

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- Zero cork shrinkage in apparently old vintages
- Labels of varying levels of age and cleanliness on the same bottle
- Glass obviously younger than the vintage
- General inconsistencies

There is such a healthy trade in empty (refillable) bottles of expensive wine that some producers deliberately spoil the labels on bottles such as the one above, once their contents have been consumed.

of bringing Chinese counterfeiters in another field to the attention of the authorities. More than 100 wine bottlers in China have already been brought to book and the campaign against fraudulent wine there is ongoing.

Of course, it has to be said that on the scale of human misery, a rich man being sold a counterfeit bottle of a famous wine hardly ranks high. Although the fake rate has now reached such a level in the US that the FBI is investigating several cases, the strictly white-collar nature of this “crime” may have acted as a brake on a general clean-up of the fine wine business.

But one man, a lawyer and wine lover in southern California, has become so angry about the rising incidence of fake wine that he is determined to do something about it. Don Cornwell is the perfect champion of probity in selling wine. He has proved himself capable of paying sustained attention to the small details that distinguish a genuine bottle from the rest, and was last month hailed a hero by a legion of fine wine lovers for his forensic dissection of the photographs in one particular auction catalogue that was brought to his attention.

Thanks to the internet, he was able to share his concerns with thousands of connoisseurs just four days before the February 8 London sale, organised by a new entity on the wine auction scene: an alliance between Spectrum of California, whose principal expertise has been in stamps and coins, and Vanquish, a fine-wine supplier in London. On the night, some 20 lots of what looked like some of the finest, rarest burgundies in existence, from the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti and Domaine Comte de Vogüé, were withdrawn from the auction.

But Padma-Nathan is in no doubt about how he plans to avoid being duped in the future: “I have decided I am not going to buy any great wine unless directly from the producer.”

For tasting notes see the Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com

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Ironic Justice:

From now on, every time I see wine sold in the US that isn't real Port but allowed to be marketed as such I will think of this article.

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As I wrote in 2009, this practice, alas, is not limited to top bottles. I found it on a Chambolle Musigny and a claret de bordeaux, which I had bought on the web. No word from the FBI; perhaps the amount at stake was too little.

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