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# Renowned Wine Dealer Accused of Trying to Sell Counterfeits

By WILLIAM K. RASHBAUM and MATT FLEGENHEIMER  
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Rudy Kurniawan had ascended to the upper reaches of the wine world on both coasts, renowned as much for his palate as for his eye, fixed often on the highest of high-end bottles.

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Ricardo DeAratonha/Los Angeles Times  
Rudy Kurniawan, a wine collector, was arrested in Los Angeles by the F.B.I.

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His presence at auctions was constant, at events in Beverly Hills, and offerings at Sotheby's in New York. His interest by itself was enough to drive prices at the top of the market.

And as his collection brought in millions, Mr. Kurniawan made a show of his own authenticity, offering major buyers an unconditional return policy — exceedingly rare in the industry — while attracting a clientele that included the billionaire William I. Koch.

But on Thursday, in the culmination of persistent rumblings about the veracity of his products, Mr.

Kurniawan was arrested in Los Angeles by the Federal Bureau of Investigation on charges that he had tried to sell counterfeit wine that, if genuine, would have been worth \$1.3 million.

Mr. Kurniawan, who sold \$35 million worth of wine in 2006 alone, was taken into custody in Los Angeles on mail and wire fraud charges filed in federal court in New York, according to court papers. Prosecutors from the office of the United States attorney in Manhattan said they expected him to be transferred to New York in the coming days.

The criminal complaint in the case said that in 2008, Mr. Kurniawan consigned for auction at least 84 bottles of counterfeit wine purporting to be from Domaine Ponsot in Burgundy, France, which were expected to sell for approximately \$600,000. Although he represented the wine as authentic, it was not, prosecutors said.

He was also charged with trying to sell a single bottle that he claimed was a 1929 Domaine Ponsot. That was not possible, according to the complaint, because Domaine Ponsot did not begin estate bottling until 1934.

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Mr. Kurniawan, 35, of Arcadia, Calif., was also charged with fraudulently obtaining millions of dollars in loans to finance what prosecutors called his "high-end lifestyle."

Mr. Kurniawan was arrested by agents from an elite squad based in New York that focuses on crimes involving art, antiques and other collectibles. At a hearing in United States District Court in Los Angeles on Thursday, prosecutors said a search of Mr. Kurniawan's home had turned up materials used in the counterfeiting of wine bottles, according to a person briefed on the proceeding.

Mr. Kurniawan, according to the complaint, also consigned wine that had purportedly been bottled between 1945 and 1971 from the Clos St.-Denis vineyard by Domaine Ponsot, even though the domaine did not make wine from that vineyard until 1982. The wines were later withdrawn from the auction at the request of Domaine Ponsot's administrator.

When the administrator questioned Mr. Kurniawan about the source of the counterfeit wines, he maintained that he had obtained the bottles from a person in Asia and had given the administrator two telephone numbers for that person, according to the complaint.

But neither number led to that person or anyone else who sold wine, the complaint said; one number was for a regional Indonesian airline and the other was for a shopping mall in Jakarta.

Mr. Kurniawan's lawyer, Luis Li of Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP in Los Angeles, said he was evaluating the charges but declined to comment further. The arrest of Mr. Kurniawan, who is charged with three counts of wire fraud and three counts of mail fraud, was announced in a news release issued by the office of the United States attorney in Manhattan. "The bad-faith sale of any commodity you know to be a counterfeit, fake or forgery is a felony," Janice K. Fedarcyk, the F.B.I.'s assistant director in charge of the New York office, said in the news release. "Whether you are peddling a Picasso or a Petrus, a Botticelli or a Burgundy, unless it is what you say it is, the sale is a fraud."

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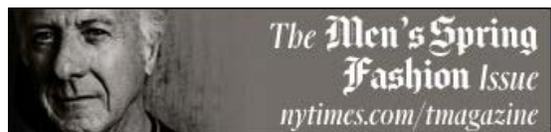
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Indeed, for years, restaurants and top cellars in New York and Los Angeles awaited the inevitable windfall that accompanied Mr. Kurniawan's arrival, as he and guests laid waste to the most expensive bottles on the wine list.

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"We knew of him," said Tim Kopec, the former wine director at Veritas, "prior to him walking through the doors."

In 2006, Mr. Kurniawan jarred industry observers by offering buyers a guarantee intended to protect against fraud. One former sommelier in Manhattan, who requested anonymity because he is named in the complaint, recalled the ploy as "a real move of bravado."

"It was very unusual, the first time I'd ever seen it," he said. But as Mr. Kurniawan's profile grew, the sommelier added, questions were raised about his collection's contents. How did a man so young, some fellow collectors began to wonder, amass bottles so rare?

The grumblings crested in 2009, when Mr. Koch filed suit against Mr. Kurniawan, claiming he had been sold five counterfeit bottles at the New York auction house Acker, Merrall, & Condit, according to news reports. Because of this recent history, arriving amid a spate of other industry allegations concerning counterfeit sales, Mr. Kopec said the arrest was unlikely to ruffle the wine world significantly. "The industry is rife with bogus wine, usually at the very, very highest level," he said. "That would be the most attractive segment if you were going to be unscrupulous."

Mr. Kurniawan is an Indonesian citizen whose asylum application was denied in 2001, when he was ordered to leave the United States, according to the criminal complaint, which was sworn out by F.B.I. Special Agent James P. Wynne, head of the Major Theft Squad.

Mr. Kurniawan, whom the complaint says is also known as Dr. Conti, appealed, but his appeal was denied and he was again ordered to leave the country. He did not comply, and since April 2003 has been living in California, the complaint said.

United States Magistrate Judge Stephen J. Hillman initially ordered Mr. Kurniawan released on a \$175,000 bond, secured by property. But after prosecutors expressed their concern that he would flee, the judge stayed his decision, and prosecutors have said they will appeal.

"Mr. Kurniawan's days of wine and wealth are over, if the allegations in this case are proven," the United States attorney, Preet Bharara said in the news release. "As alleged,

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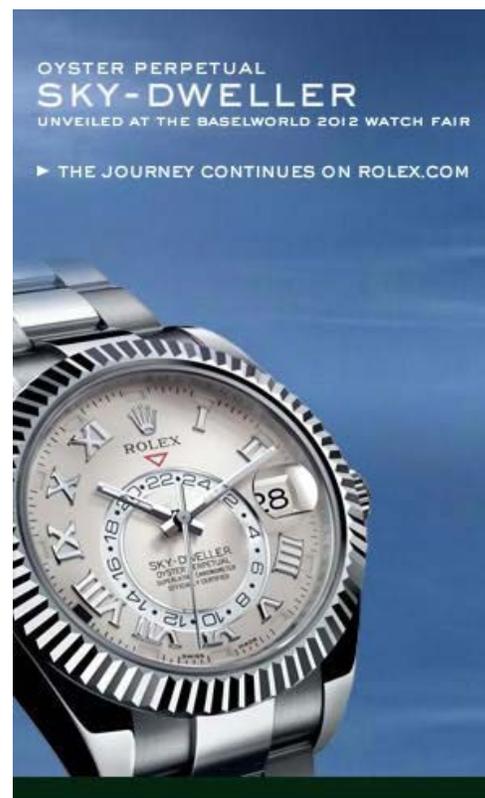
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Rudy Kurniawan held himself out to be a wine aficionado with a nose for a counterfeit bottle, but he was the counterfeit, pawning off prodigious quantities of fraudulent wine himself to unsuspecting auction houses and collectors.”

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