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THE RISE AND FALL OF A WINE COUNTERFEITER

June 18, 2012

With the arrest of Rudy Kurniawan (on March 8, 2012), an extraordinary chapter in the history of wine fraud has begun to close. Two recent articles, Mike Steinberger's *A Vintage Crime* in *Vanity Fair*, and Ben Wallace's *Château Sucker* in *New York*, have ably chronicled the facts as we now know them, though I strongly suspect that further revelations may emerge.

Of course fraudulent wine is neither a contemporary phenomenon nor one that will disappear with Rudy's arrest. But what has happened in the decade in which Rudy Kurniawan flourished and then fell represents a loss of innocence, especially for Burgundy lovers, as what was once an insular province of connoisseurs, sharing dusty bottles while speaking a language few outsiders understood, became part of the larger marketplace for luxury goods, now eagerly sought as a badge of success by a rising class of wealthy consumers around the globe. Well within the term of memory, great wines, especially older Burgundies, were relatively affordable, and still treated with the deference due subtle and ineffable pleasures, rather than brandished as expensive trophies in contests of conspicuous consumption. Those of us who experienced it can mourn the passing of that era but we cannot bring it back.

Because my perspective is that of someone passionate about old Burgundy, and because I ultimately came to play a small role in Rudy's downfall, I thought that it might be useful to tell the story of Rudy Kurniawan's rise and fall as I saw it. I do not pretend to bring the kind of reportorial skills or narrative scope to this story that either Steinberger or Wallace did. What I hope to be able to do is to set down, as faithfully as I can recall, my observations and impressions during the time when Rudy was a major figure in the world of rare wine, well before the *denouement* of this extraordinary tale was known.

There are more than a few parallels between Rudy's career and that of Hardy Rodenstock a generation earlier. Rodenstock's fraudulent career, though, however splashy the "Jefferson" bottles of supposed 18th Century Bordeaux made it, was more limited in scope than Rudy's became. Interest in wine among a new and wealthy audience, where labels were far more important than the liquid inside, had certainly been growing for many years. But Rudy's arrival seemed to coincide with a new bacchanalian era, in which investment bankers and real estate moguls duelled not with pistols but with magnums of '47 Château Lafleur and jeroboams of '62 La Tâche. And Rudy was able to take advantage of a certain credulousness that went with this growing hunger for the old and rare—the fervent desire of these collectors to believe that their wealth and aggressiveness had given them unique access to trophies others could not have, compounded with a lack of knowledge both of how improbable it was that these rarities still existed in such large quantities, and of what these great wines were supposed to taste like. And where Rodenstock had largely confined himself to top Bordeaux, Rudy's fraud, beginning there, soon began creeping into hitherto relatively untouched corners of the wine world, particularly Burgundy.

Even now, there is still little understanding of how this baby-faced young man rose,

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seemingly from nowhere, to the point where he could fool many of the world's wealthiest collectors. Those who became a part of his world were, for the most part, badly burned and are understandably not eager to talk, while a fair amount of the internet commentary, indulging itself in an orgy of *schadenfreude*, has assumed every bottle he served or sold must have been fake and that everyone who ever drank wines with, or bought wines from, Rudy had to have been either a dupe or an enabler. As so often happens with tales that capture the broader imagination, events and characters get reduced to black and white, and all nuance is lost. The story of how he was able to fool so many bright, successful people for so long is however more complex—and ultimately more interesting.

I first became aware of Rudy by reputation; as best I can recall, this was probably sometime in early or mid 2004. His reputation as it came to me was that of a rich, young (at that time about 28) Indonesian who had rapidly become a fixture on the auction scene as one of the biggest buyers of great Bordeaux and Burgundy, and who was also aggressively buying these wines through European and other brokers. Some of my earliest impressions of Rudy came through the highly entertaining tasting notes/travelogue that John Kapon was then publishing in hard copy—tales of nights spent drinking massive quantities of rare old wines until they—or at least John—passed out. I would also see Rudy at the occasional auction I attended, always bidding heavily. Though I did not realize it until many years later, Rudy by early 2005 (and perhaps before) had also started to sell fraudulent wines at auction, though for a long time he claimed he was only a buyer and never sold, one of many untruths he told to maintain the illusion—including his name, his family connections, the extent of his wealth. (The story, as it was then being circulated, was that he was the youngest son in an incredibly wealthy Indonesian family, whose older brothers had sent him to the US with an allowance of \$1 million a month to stay out of the family businesses they were running.) While it is now known that Rudy Kurniawan is not his real name, and that he had been living here illegally for years, his family and background remain a mystery—as, more significantly, does the real source of the considerable amounts he was spending on wine and the good life.

How did he succeed, despite his sudden appearance from nowhere, in fooling so many people? The cornerstone of the scheme, I believe, was that he liberally and even lavishly served real, great wines both to his intended “marks” and also to critics and to acknowledged connoisseurs, then sold the marks fake versions of the wines that they had drunk with such pleasure and that both the critics and knowledgeable friends were extolling. Again, for those who would believe every bottle he ever served was fake, let me repeat that this was not the case, and that if it had been, I seriously doubt the scheme would have succeeded. First, a great deal of Rudy's entertaining, in New York at least, consisted of ordering \$50,000 or more worth of wine off the lists at Cru or Veritas. These were not wines from his cellar; rather, the point was to reinforce the story that he was a generous trust-fund baby without a care in the world, just a party dude who loved to drink great wine. (My own exposure to this was limited to two or three of these events—I was certainly curious, and if the orgiastic, “because we can” nature of these events was repulsive, the chance to drink super-rare bottles provided an offsetting attraction. Ultimately, though, I began to feel uncomfortable being a recipient of this largesse from someone whose motives I could not discern—though it was only later that I began to have real doubts about what he was up to.) As only emerged much later, these sprees were in fact relatively cost-free, as Rudy would have the empty bottles returned to him and refill them, and I suspect that by the time he came to resell them, they may well have been worth even more than what he had paid for them, due to the rising market he was creating.

That rising market is the second nuance of this scheme. As far as I can tell, Rudy started out buying and then counterfeiting mostly Bordeaux and, among Burgundies, DRC. But he soon must have realized that there were easier wines to counterfeit, and turned his attention to other Burgundy producers, particularly Roumier and Rousseau. First, the variations in labeling, bottling, branding of corks and other practices of most Burgundy producers made it harder to create a uniform standard against which counterfeit bottles could be measured. Second, Rudy had a perfect foil in a major collector (and a good friend of mine), who bought these producers' wines voraciously and almost regardless of price, so that Rudy could when he wished drive up the market for these wines simply by bidding aggressively, knowing

that my friend would ultimately outbid him—and knowing also that he would help sustain demand for the additional bottles of these wines that Rudy would soon provide to the market. Small wonder, then, that this eventually led Rudy to begin reproducing wines from Ponsot, the same collector's other favorite producer, though in the end it proved his undoing.

If the heart of the scheme was to open real bottles, and then sell fake versions of them, clearly Rudy had to serve wines not just from restaurant lists but more importantly from his own collection, both for his "marks" and others who might help spread the word. As one of the largest purchasers of rare wines in the worldwide market, Rudy had no shortage of genuine bottles to serve (and again, he could recoup his costs by refilling them with something else and reselling them). Rudy also possessed an excellent palate—though I suspect he may have used a few parlor tricks to identify wines in blind tastings. My impression was that he was very good at analyzing and remembering tastes, certainly far superior to some of the wealthy label drinkers with whom he often consorted. But the group around Rudy also included some quite discerning collectors, with palates and a depth of knowledge superior to his. Nonetheless, impressed by what they tasted, they provided credibility for him with less-knowledgeable collectors. Indeed, some of them fell for the con as well, presuming that when their new friend sold them bottles privately, they were from the same source as what they had tasted, and that they were getting in on the "inside."

It is hard to pinpoint, after so many years, just when my doubts began. At Acker's Top 100 tasting in October 2004, there was considerable talk about how a number of the Bordeaux were clear or probable fakes (in the former category, a magnum of '59 Ch. Haut Brion that tasted like a cheap Rhone; in the latter, a magnum of '47 Lafleur), though the Burgundies generally fared better. Rudy was at this tasting, and I recall his crowing about how well the bottles he had supplied had shown—though whether that was true or not, I could not say, as he didn't identify which were his.

However, by the next year, at Acker's follow-up event, the Top 100 All-Stars tasting in October 2005, I began to have real questions, as did my friend Allen Meadows, about a number of the Burgundies, including bottles of Romanée-Conti, that Rudy had supplied. But as these were wines few of us had ever tasted before, and they were plausible even if counterfeit, I did not detect much doubt among my fellow tasters, and even among those of us who did have doubts, we still were inclined toward the possibility that the provider of those wines had himself been duped.

When "The Cellar" sale at Acker took place in January 2006, it seemed natural to me (though apparently not to others) to wonder whether this amazing flood of Roumier, Rousseau, etc. could in fact be real. Here were wines produced in minuscule quantities, of which I had seldom seen more than single bottles despite many years of searching, now available in case+ quantities. Thus, the six-month unconditional guarantee that Rudy offered seemed to provide a good opportunity to test my and others' doubts. As my good friend Don Stott had bought a substantial number of the Roumiers and Rousseaus, he and a group of us hatched the idea of putting the Roumier bottles to the test—and of inviting Christophe Roumier to join us.

Before that tasting could take place, the October 2006 Cellar II sale occurred, and that sale raised further doubts about how so many of these ultra-rare bottles could suddenly have surfaced. In the run-up to Cellar II, I had the opportunity, along with Allen Meadows, to taste some of the Burgundies being offered in that sale. The formal pre-sale tasting was held downstairs in the private room at Cru. Allen had been invited, but was leaving on a late flight to France, and in any event was really only interested in the Burgundies (there was plenty of Bordeaux being served as well), so he suggested that he and I have a bite to eat in the bar at Cru and arrange to get a taste of the Burgundies being served that night. It was an interesting experience, instructive then and even more so in retrospect. To reiterate what I have said before, Rudy owned, and served when it suited his purposes, many great bottles, and certainly the '62 Rousseau Chambertin Clos de Bèze we tasted that night (Rousseau's first Bèze) was both authentic and spectacular. Rudy's purpose, as I later learned, was to validate the numerous bottles, of what was supposedly the same wine, that would appear in the sale the next day. Indeed, at the time, John Kapon was giving voice to the proposition that the only way to tell for sure whether or not a bottle was real, was to open and taste it. If you believe that an experienced

taster can develop sufficient proficiency to distinguish real from fake among wines he or she is familiar with—something I definitely do believe—then John’s proposition seems true enough, as far as it goes. The problem, though, is that tasting one real bottle doesn’t assure that the rest of the bottles, despite identical labels/corks/capsules, are also authentic. And as we were to learn from the Roumier tasting, Rudy had developed an interesting twist on this as well.

However, if there certainly were several real bottles that we tasted that night, there were also several that seemed highly questionable. Among the latter was a ’59 Ponsot Clos de la Roche Vieilles Vignes, which had a remarkable level of acidity for a ’59—a polite way of saying it was very unlikely to have been from that vintage. Similarly, a ’59 Roumier Musigny, a super-rare bottle of which there were perhaps a little over 200 produced under the Roumier label (yet there were 12 on sale in the Cellar II auction in addition to the 6 that had already been sold in the Cellar I auction), seemed quite dubious, as did several of the other wines. Nonetheless, as I later learned, the group gathered downstairs, primed with plenty of Champagne, drinking not spitting, and in the presence of their ever-generous host, did not find reasons to be skeptical.

At that point, though I had developed serious concerns about the number of questionable wines coming via Rudy, I still was not fully ready to believe that he was participating in a fraudulent scheme. In this, I was still influenced, no doubt, by Rudy’s disorganized, slacker dude demeanor, reinforced by the story I had heard from John Kapon about how he and a team had had to go out to LA to pick out and pack up the wines from Rudy’s cellar at the last minute, because Rudy could never get around to it himself. It also still did not seem implausible that, with his voracious buying, Rudy—despite his self-proclaimed ability to spot fakes—had picked up a significant number of them that had gone into his cellar sight unseen. And for every questionable bottle I’d had from him, there were several—like that ’62 Rousseau Bèze—that were unforgettably great.

Three months later, in January 2007, the long-planned Roumier tasting finally took place, and the delay allowed us to include some additional bottles that Don Stott had purchased in the Cellar II auction. Christophe Roumier participated in the tasting, as did Allen Meadows, Tim Kopec and other tasters with long experience of Roumier wines. In all, we tasted 15 bottles of Roumier (6 Musigny, 8 Bonnes Mares and 1 Amoureuses), of which 11 had been purchased from the two “Cellar” auctions and 4 from other sources. Other than with respect to one bottle, there was no difference whatsoever in the conclusions of the tasters. Of the bottles sourced from the two “Cellar” auctions, 3 were clearly authentic—and superb—6 were clearly fraudulent, one was corked, and one was probably but not clearly fraudulent. Among the wines deemed fraudulent was a bottle of the ’59 Musigny, which had aroused our skepticism the prior October, as well as the ’55 Musigny (two bottles were tasted), clearly a wine from grapes grown well south of Burgundy, and the ’45 and ’29 Bonnes Mares (the latter also not a Pinot Noir).

The high number of fraudulent wines was clearly disturbing, but what was in a way more disturbing was the apparent randomness of the bottles deemed authentic. The labels on the fraudulent bottles were surprisingly pristine for wines that were ostensibly 50-85 years old, and there were other label and capsule issues; however, the authentic bottles looked much the same (in other words, in this case it wasn’t that the fakes looked real; rather, the real bottles looked fake). Also, most of the bottles we drank, fraudulent and genuine, had been pulled at random from a larger quantity of the same wine that had been purchased. What to make of this? Our supposition was that in order to remove whatever doubt the new and questionable labels might have engendered, the authentic bottles Rudy had served at tastings were given the new labels as well. For example, a bottle of ’62 Roumier Musigny with a pristine-looking label would naturally raise some questions. But if you serve a real bottle onto which you’ve applied the same pristine label, then you can overcome many of the suspicions that such a label would otherwise raise. All that needs to be added is a story about why the labels are so new-looking (one version I heard was that the bottles had been stored in the Nicolas cellar outside Paris since release and that because the original labels had deteriorated, they had all been re-labeled prior to sale.) Yet there must have been some way for the forger to tell which bottles were authentic, and could be served, though we were in our

examination unable to discern what that was. Also, assuming there was indeed some inconspicuous way of telling good from bad, then Rudy would have been able to reach into a case and, seemingly at random, pull out a bottle that could be opened and “prove” the authenticity of the remaining inauthentic bottles.

(One curious phenomenon I have not been able to sort out is the substantial difference in the quality of the fakes that Rudy produced during his career—as noted for example in the Roumier tasting, a number of bottles were not even Pinot Noir—yet in other cases Rudy clearly was also substituting lesser or younger vintages (perhaps with some clever mixing) for older and rarer, which is much less easy to detect unless one is fairly familiar with the vintage in question (and which may have been the case with some of the Romanée-Contis at the Top 100 All-Stars tasting), and eventually he started substituting relatively inexpensive negociant Burgundy of the same vintage and appellation for top-producer wines few had ever tasted before, which made the frauds even harder to detect.)

Nevertheless, the results of the Roumier tasting, reflecting that more than 60% of our sample of some of the most desirable wines in the “Cellar” auctions were fraudulent, made it abundantly clear that one could no longer credit the possibility that the number of fraudulent wines was incidental and to be expected given how much Rudy was buying and how little control he was exercising over his purchases. At this level of fakes, the only realistic explanation was that he was a witting medium for the distribution of a significant amount of fraudulent wines. At this point, though, the extent and purpose of the fraud were still unclear, as despite the significant number of fakes among the trophy wines, a number of the other wines tasted from the two Cellar sales, especially but not exclusively the non-trophy wines, had not been fraudulent. Among the questions we left the tasting with were where were the fakes coming from, who was manufacturing them, what proportion of his wines were fake and what genuine, and how—other than by opening and drinking them—could one reliably tell which was which?

And for me personally, the results of this tasting raised another serious issue. By early 2007 when the Roumier tasting took place, preparations were nearly complete for a major tasting of Romanée-Conti that I had, along with Michael Rockefeller and Allen Meadows, been planning for over two years. This tasting, which eventually became the most comprehensive tasting of Romanée-Conti ever held, with 74 vintages represented going back to 1870, had already been postponed more than once—first because we did not have all the wines we wanted and later in order to accommodate Aubert de Villaine’s schedule. As a major collector of Romanée-Conti, Rudy had been invited when the planning was initially underway back in 2005—well before the first Cellar sale took place—and as with everyone else coming to the tasting, he was expected to provide some of the wines. What if some of the wines he had already sent a year in advance, at my insistence, were fraudulent? The thought chilled me.

The first step was to examine all the bottles Rudy had provided. Fortunately, most were from the hardest-to-find vintages, which were not, as one might think, the great vintages, but rather the off vintages that few had kept, but that no one would bother to fake (and indeed, it appears that Rudy became an avid collector of those off-vintages of Romanée-Conti, presumably because something such as the ’63 or ’65 could be readily “upgraded,” with a little assistance, to a far more expensive vintage). Nonetheless, I took pains to examine the labels, capsules and corks carefully. Second, we had already made sure to have back-up bottles from separate sources of most vintages, so that in case a particular bottle was “off” for some reason, it could readily be replaced with a bottle from an entirely different source. Third, Rudy still had a track record of producing real bottles for important public occasions, and the presence at our tasting of Aubert de Villaine seemed likely to dissuade him from trying to slip through any fake bottles. But one issue could not be avoided: the 1945, the holy grail of Burgundy, of which only 608 bottles were ever produced. Years of searching had turned up only one bottle, belonging to Rudy. Nor did it help my frame of mind that I had already tasted two bottles of this wine provided by him (at the Top 100 All-Stars tasting described above), neither of which seemed real. Nonetheless, I was at least partly relieved to see that the label, capsule and bottle all appeared authentic and that the bottle for our tasting did not have the same questionable import strip labels that were on several of the bottles

he had brought to that Acker tasting.

In the event, our tasting (which is described at length in Allen Meadows's book, *Pearl of the Côte*,) was thankfully not marred by fraudulent bottles (as confirmed by Aubert de Villaine—and given the total immersion of tasting 74 vintages of Romanée-Conti over three days, each vintage in the context of comparable vintages of the era, even a well-crafted fake would have stood out in bold relief). When it came to the '45, I quietly held my breath, but fortunately I had guessed right, and Rudy had sacrificed a real bottle for the occasion (we all signed the label afterwards, so it could not have been reused). It was, and remains, the best bottle of wine I have ever had, fully deserving of the accolades that Allen accords it in *Pearl*. Indeed Aubert, as always, had the last word, calling this '45 "the lost voice of Romanée-Conti" (it was the last vintage of this wine from pre-phylloxera rootstock, which imparts a special texture to the wine that is recognizably different from more modern examples). Having now had the real thing, it also made me more certain than ever that the two bottles Rudy had supplied to the Top 100 All-Stars had been concocted. (As was another bottle, tasted two years later, that had been purchased from Rudy; as with the Top 100 All-Stars bottles, it seemed a reasonably well-crafted fake, but a fake nonetheless.)

As a coda to the tasting, we asked the participants if they would like to take home any bottles as souvenirs of the occasion. While some people did take home bottles, much to my surprise Rudy (who, I had assumed, would have no interest in empty bottles) asked to take back all the bottles he had brought. Though he claimed he wanted them to decorate a store he was going to open (with Paul Wasserman), it seemed odd, but I figured that, slacker that he seemed to be, he would forget about it. Not so; after about a month, he got in touch to ask if I'd sent them. At that point, I sent back a few full bottles of his that we hadn't used in the tasting, but not the empties. But he did not let go, continuing to pester me, and finally I concluded that, since they were his bottles, and since at that point I had nothing other than vague discomfort to go on, I did not have a reasonable basis for treating him differently from the other participants. Only much later was I to learn that this was a pattern of behavior with Cru and probably others, and that he was refilling and reselling the bottles that were returned.

Subsequent to that tasting, I recall little interaction with Rudy until the following year. The story of the April 2008 Acker auction has been told a number of times, including in the Steinberger and Wallace articles, but as I was fated to play a significant role in those events, it may be worth recounting them from my perspective. It began when I started thumbing through Acker's catalog, which though it was advertised as Rob Rosania's sale also contained several sections, separately identified though not with his name, that were clearly Rudy's wines. Many of the fraudulent or questionable Roumier and Rousseau bottles from the same vintages and appellations as in prior sales were back for yet another outing (three more '59 Roumier Musigny, for example). When I reached the Ponsot section, with its pictures of 50+-year old bottles of Clos de la Roche with pristine labels and "Vieilles Vignes" designations where they shouldn't have been, it was even more disturbing. However, what particularly caught my attention was the older Ponsot Clos St. Denis. My first reaction was surprise, in that I had never seen any Ponsot Clos St. Denis of this age, or indeed any older than 1985. My next reaction was curiosity, as to when Ponsot started producing Clos St. Denis, and a quick check of the website revealed that their agreement to produce this wine, from land belonging to the Mercier family (Domaine des Chézeaux), only started in the early '80s. Was it possible, though, that the Ponsot family had had some agreement, years earlier and since terminated—whether with the Merciers or someone else—to buy or make this wine? I asked another knowledgeable friend, who had also never seen any pre-1985 bottles before, and then got in touch with Allen Meadows. Coincidentally, he told me he had been served this wine at a pre-auction dinner in Los Angeles a day or two before and had also been suspicious about whether such a wine had actually been made by Ponsot. The three of us then decided we needed to get in touch with Laurent Ponsot, whom all of us knew well. Laurent was startled to hear that Acker was about to auction wines his family had, he assured us, never made.

We agreed I would call John Kapon to tell him that the wines he was about to auction did not exist, and that he had to pull them from the sale—along with the rest

of the Ponsot wines in the auction, as Laurent had by then reviewed the catalog, and believed the other Ponsot wines to be fraudulent as well. John was clearly not happy about this, though he agreed to do it. He did not, however, want to make any announcement ahead of the sale. In discussing this with Laurent, he decided that he should change the itinerary for his forthcoming trip to the US, and attend the auction, to make sure John carried through and the wines were in fact withdrawn.

The day of the auction, Rudy spent the morning at Sotheby's, outbidding a few of us for some very old, and very real, Faiveley bottling—which before that auction had not commanded high prices. I strongly suspect that had his world not begun to unravel that evening, large quantities of counterfeit old Faiveleys would soon have begun appearing on the market alongside the Roumiers, Rousseaus and Ponsots, and at the newly elevated market prices. In any event, that evening, John Kapon did announce during the sale that the Ponsot wines had been withdrawn at the request of the domaine, without further elaboration. I will never forget the chorus of boos that greeted this announcement, apparently from bidders keen to purchase these never-before-seen rarities.

Had it not been for those bottles of Ponsot Clos St. Denis that never existed, Rudy might not be sitting in jail today. Wine fraud is extremely difficult to prove, and often a matter of expert opinion in an arcane field, hardly the stuff a prosecutor likes to take to court (it was only after Rudy was arrested that the search of his home turned up “smoking gun” evidence that showed he was actively manufacturing fake bottles). What brought him to make these particular bottles? His imprecise knowledge of Burgundian history had come close to tripping him up at least once before, when he offered for sale bottles of '23 Roumier Bonnes Mares—the domaine was founded in 1924—but he, or someone, dreamed up the undisprovable story that because the domaine's plot of Bonnes Mares had come as a dowry from Georges Roumier's wife in 1924, it was also possible that her dowry included a yet-untasted cask or more of the prior vintage's wine as well. Unlikely, but given that the domaine had no records from that era, and the principals were long dead, not disprovable. Indeed, several things have made counterfeiting Burgundies easier than Bordeaux. Many now-revered producers did not use branded corks until relatively recent decades, generic capsules were often the norm, and labeling practices were seldom uniform or precise. Because a vintage (even one deemed great) was often not sold out on release, bottles might be kept in the cellar at the domaine for years, always without labels, and released whenever a buyer could be found. If by the time they were sold the label design had changed, the new label might be used, or older, blank labels onto which the vintage date might be stamped rather than printed. Other inconsistencies, depending on particular markets, were also not uncommon. No thought was given to preventing counterfeiting; the producers could barely sell the wines themselves, what incentive would someone else have to counterfeit them?

Also, in the period leading up to production of the fake Ponsots, Rudy apparently had begun to purchase vast quantities of negociant Burgundies from the '60s and earlier, much of it from Patriarche, a mediocre negociant with huge stocks of old wines that were selling for, at most, a few hundred dollars a bottle (I am told he similarly bought inexpensive old magnums of Pomerols and Medocs in great quantities). Thus, for example, a bottle of 1959 Patriarche Clos de la Roche, which an expert might well identify by taste as both '59 and Clos de la Roche, could be rebaptised with a Ponsot label, resold for fifty times the price, and (unlike the bottle of purported '59 Clos de la Roche that Allen and I had tasted in October 2006, which was clearly not from the '59 vintage), the forgery would be much harder to detect.

The older Ponsot Clos St. Denis, however, had never existed. After the auction, at John Kapon's request, Laurent, John, Rudy and I had lunch, John's idea being that Rudy could explain to Laurent where he had gotten these wines. At the luncheon, despite Laurent's polite but insistent questioning, Rudy remained vague and evasive, claiming he needed to check to see where he got these wines (this from someone who remembered virtually every bottle he ever drank or bought!), telling Laurent he would give him the information but putting him off as long as he could, before ultimately (some months later) handing him a fake name and phone numbers. However, before we left, Rudy pulled me aside, and asked me a question

that gave the game away: didn't I remember, he asked, a particular bottle that he had purchased a couple of years earlier, after outbidding Don Stott? It was a '47 Ponsot Clos St. Denis. Didn't that show that Ponsot must have been making Clos St. Denis at least as far back as '47? I confess I smirked a bit as I informed him that in fact I did remember the bottle, and because I was interested I had looked into it; while it was only catalogued as "Ponsot", in fact the producer of that bottle was "Christine Ponsot," no relation to Laurent or the Domaine, but rather a label used by a negociant (Emile Chandesais, Christine Ponsot's husband) with a stock of older Burgundies to sell.

After the story of his attempt to sell the fake Ponsots became the subject of several press reports, Rudy seemed to go underground, and there were rumors he had for a time left the country. Meanwhile, Laurent Ponsot pursued his quest to discover the source of the fake wines, developing evidence that, he believes, will ultimately show that Rudy did not act alone. Laurent has throughout been tenacious, principled, and, sadly, often alone—for reasons I do not understand, his fellow producers seemed to take the attitude that counterfeiting of their wines was not something they needed to concern themselves with. Some of this may reflect the fact that many producers who have become celebrities of the wine world are uncomfortable in that role, and with the new world of trophy drinking in general, still viewing themselves as farmers whose job is to produce the best wine possible, and to sell it to support their families; anything else they see as a distraction that, given all the pressures on their time, they can ill-afford. Only recently has that mind-set begun to change and the threat to their reputations from fraud begun to be taken more seriously.

Rudy's wines again resurfaced in the fall of 2009 when Christie's brought a significant amount of them to market. (According to the initial Complaint filed by the Government in arresting him, Rudy had previously sold a number of these wines to a California collector, identified elsewhere as Andy Gordon, who tried to put them back to Rudy after becoming suspicious, but ultimately agreed to be repaid out of the proceeds of a sale by Rudy of these wines at Christie's, where Rudy was never identified as the source of the wines.) However, a number of people, including Don Cornwell and Geoffrey Troy, recognized the wines as being from Rudy, and raised with Christie's the issue of how they could sell these wines at auction, especially without disclosing the source. I also spoke with several people at Christie's about this. It seemed then, as it does now, pure folly to risk tainting their reputation on an insubstantial aspect of their overall business, but Christies' management decided otherwise, and went on to offer these wines at several sales in the US and abroad.

Because I had assumed that the Christie's bottles were bottles Rudy or Mr. Gordon had been holding when the music stopped in April 2008, it did not occur to me that Rudy was still in the business of manufacturing and selling rare wines, until someone asked me if I had seen the catalog for the Spectrum London auction scheduled for early February of this year. One look at the on-line catalog was enough to convince me that these were yet more of the same Rudy bottlings (after a while, they got to have a recognizable look). I discussed this with Geoffrey Troy and Don Cornwell, and Don threw himself into this, eventually producing an amazing compendium of flaws in the purported DRCs on sale at Spectrum, which he then published as a vinous "J'Accuse" on the Wineberserkers bulletin board. (As an aside, the wine world owes Don Cornwell an enormous debt of gratitude for his incredible commitment to bringing this story to light, and for his continuing efforts to root out the many tentacles of Rudy's fraud.) Don also collected evidence that the wines were being sold by Rudy through an intermediary, and that he had been using this route to sell wines through Spectrum for quite some time. Much has now been said on this subject, which can be followed at length on Wineberserkers and elsewhere. Unfortunately, Spectrum (which issued a series of wholly implausible denials), its London auction partner Vanquish, and their "experts" who authenticated these bottles, have yet to suffer fully the richly deserved consequences of their own arrogance and stupidity—or in this case, perhaps cupidity is the more appropriate word. Nonetheless, the uproar surrounding that sale galvanized action on the part of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, its UK and US agents, and the Domaine Comte de Vogüé, to have numerous questionable wines removed from the sale, finally overcoming the stonewalling that had initially greeted Cornwell's revelations. Perhaps more importantly, the revelation that Rudy was continuing, with seeming

impunity, to manufacture and sell millions of dollars of counterfeit wine in the marketplace, may have played a significant role in the government's decision to arrest him.

What to make of this sorry history? Is it just another story about some gullible rich guys with more money than taste getting ripped off by a clever con artist? Partly, perhaps, but also I think you have to be part of the wine culture to understand the strong spirit of generosity among collectors. Wine, unlike many collectibles, cannot simply be fondled and then put back on the shelf; to be enjoyed, it needs to be opened, and that enjoyment is multiplied by sharing. Of course, there are some who are content to create mausoleums in their basements, where they can show off their treasures but never open any; but those are bottle collectors, not wine lovers. Among true wine aficionados, sharing bottles is a way of life (and if showing off sometimes vies with true generosity as a motive, well, that's part of human nature too). What Rudy did, however, was to pervert that generous spirit into nothing more than another con game, and among its after-effects is a climate of suspicion that will last a long time, as each old bottle is held under a microscope and its flaws, real or imagined, debated. Even more unfortunately, thousands of fake bottles have made their way into collections world-wide and they will continue to surface, slowly, for many years to come. On the positive side, one can hope that exposing this fraud will galvanize action by the producers, both to play a more active role in helping to identify fraudulent older bottles, and to employ technologies that already exist to protect the legitimacy of the wines being produced today. If that occurs, then perhaps this long sad tale will not have a completely unhappy ending.

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