

That Old Burgundy May Be a New Fraud

By ERIC ASIMOV

A few months ago a wealthy wine collector held a dinner to taste some rare old Burgundies that he had purchased at a recent auction. The wines poured that night, ranging from 45 to 85 years old and worth tens of thousands of dollars, represented just a small cross-section of the purchase.

The collector's primary reason for the dinner was simply to enjoy great wines with like-minded friends. But the dinner had another purpose.

"It was an authentication tasting," said Allen Meadows of *burg-hound.com*, a leading Burgundy critic who attended the dinner. "Off the top of my head we had 17 wines, three of which I personally felt were outright fakes."

Today, the price of coveted old wines has shot upward, with individual bottles primarily of aged Burgundy and Bordeaux wines sometimes selling for tens of thousands dollars each. Naturally, this small but lucrative market has become a target in the last five years for counterfeiters.

The United States government is now investigating whether auction houses, collectors or importers knowingly sold wines that were not from the vintages listed on the labels.

Wine collecting is now a worldwide phenomenon, with buyers from Russia and Asia, along with wealthy new collectors, leaping into the game with seemingly bottomless pools of cash.

"If a 25-year-old Wall Street exec says to me he's selling wines, and he's made all his money in the last three years and he's got \$5 million worth of wines, I feel suspect," said Tim Kopec, the wine director of Veritas restaurant in New York, who sometimes acts as a consultant for collectors. "The problem is when you see older bottles, you're never positive."

The rise of Internet sales and wine auctions has given all collectors the opportunity to bid against each other for what ought to be very few bottles. Wine auctions were not even legal in New York until 1993.

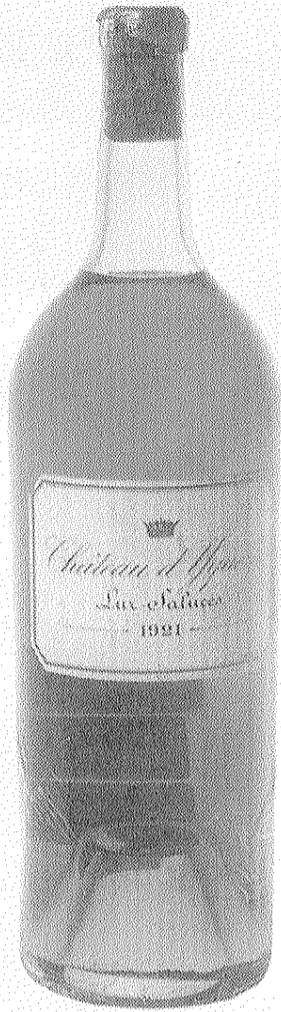
In New York, which is now a center for auctions, \$131 million worth of wine sold in 2006, up 66 percent from 2005, according to *Wine Spectator* magazine. Worldwide, auction sales of wine were more than \$240 million last year, up 45 percent from 2005. Last fall, a six-magnum case of 1945 Château Mouton Rothschild was auctioned off in Los Angeles for \$345,000, or \$57,000 a magnum.

"Ten years ago nobody was even thinking about counterfeit wines," said John Kapon, the president and auction director of Acker Merrall & Condit, a New York wine merchant.

Back in October, Mr. Kapon presided over an auction in New York that sold almost \$24.7 million worth of wine. But this auction, from the private holdings of Rudy Kurniawan, a wealthy young collector from Los Angeles, came with a guarantee. If buyers weren't satisfied with any part of their purchase within 90 days, Acker Merrall would buy back that part.

That 90-day timeframe led to what Mr. Meadows called the authentication dinner.

One bottle served at the dinner, a 1923 Bonnes Mares from Georges Roumier, was suspicious simply because the domaine was not established until 1924. "But it was possible," Mr. Meadows said.



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

A wine consultant said awareness of counterfeit wines is increasing. Above, a suspect Château d'Yquem.

"When they took the domaine over, it could have come with stocks of wine."

Nonetheless, Mr. Meadows felt that wine was a fake because the color seemed far too youthful for a bottle more than 80 years old.

"Could you have a wine that does not conform to the average still be real?" he asked. "Yeah, it's possible. But is it likely? No."

As to who is producing the bogus bottles, the answers amount to little more than guesswork.

"It's a small group of select people, not hundreds of counterfeiters all over the place," Mr. Kapon said.

Wine producers themselves have made tracking counterfeit wines far more difficult because of their

With wines selling for big money, fake bottles are now found.

own haphazard business practices, particularly before World War II when few records were kept.

And then you have devious practices of the wine producers themselves. In the 19th century Burgundy producers were known to beef up a bad vintage with a little wine from the Rhone or even from Algeria. Today, some wine producers may take older bottles, which have lost wine to evaporation, and top them off with a more recent vintage of the same wine, effectively freshening up the bottle.

"A 1915, topped off with some 1985, is that a sin?" Mr. Meadows asked. "Well, it raises the question of why you have a vintage. I'm personally offended by that."