

Making the grade

RICHARD HEMMING looks at the new area of super-provenance

Super' is a potent prefix in vinous circles: think of its effect on 'Tuscan' and 'Second', for instance. Now, introducing a new phrase to the fine wine lexicon: super-provenance.

No doubt some would denounce such conjunctions as arbitrary. But consider the evidence for this new phenomenon in the world of fine wine... The global market for fine wine continues to grow, especially with the recent emergence of Hong Kong as a serious player. With such growth comes increased competition among the purveyors of fine wine, and so confirming any given wine's precise storage history is becoming ever more vital. Super-provenance provides the answer.

Both Crown Wine Cellars in Hong Kong and Cert Octavian in England have this issue high on their agenda. As market leaders in fine wine storage and logistics, both offer exacting standards to protect the goods in their care. They provide a wide range of services, from bottle photography to personal online inventories. Their facilities combine fearsome climate control technology with natural site benefits, and though they have different systems, they both offer first-class storage conditions for fine wine.

Rather than wrangling over whose system trumps whose, however, their focus is now on certifying their own pedigree: both for the benefit of their company proposition, and of course for the wines in their trust. For auction houses, every such piece of information helps. Daniel Lam of Bonhams in Hong Kong says that supporting documents are 'crucial'. Beyond that, 'the most important stage is final inspection of the bottles' – that is, when the details of level, label and cork are recorded in the catalogues. Despite this, Lam adds, 'there are no guarantees.'

Pristine condition

Gregory De'eb of Crown Wine Cellars goes further, saying 'I have personally noted several auction houses turning down [...] stock that has been "stored in Eurocaves" by the admission of the owners. These are excellent signs that the issue of provenance is being taken seriously.' (The uncertified nature of domestic storage is the main problem here, rather than the Eurocave itself.) He goes on to argue that Asian buyers are driving this meticulous pursuit of perfection: because presentation is so



Some auction houses will now accept wine only if it has been professionally stored

vital to this market, nothing less than pristine condition will suffice.

Anthony Finlayson-Green, MD of Cert Octavian, agrees that 'auction houses recognise the importance of trying to educate purchasers. They would love to be able to define the quality of storage provenance for all auction lots, but this is rarely available'. He estimates that wine

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of uncertain descent might be up to 20% less valuable at auction than one with impeccable records. De'eb puts that figure at 33% or even more.

Clearly, validating a wine's past is still a grey area. Providing definitive clarification is therefore the crux of super-provenance.

Both Crown and Cert Octavian have their own approach. The latter offers a service called Octavian Vaults. This provides comprehensive storage records in the form of a Certificate of Pristine Storage that gives the history of each bottle from the time it enters Octavian's specialist facility. 'Just like when you buy a vintage car or property, a thorough record of its life would be available,' boasts the literature. Essentially, this gives the precise records of every location and movement the bottles undergo during

their tenure. While the wine has ostensibly remained in the same conditions, the extra details are vital to super-provenance, and bestow a saleroom advantage over uncertificated lots. Finlayson-Green adds that the firm is 'looking at how to apply the same focus on the total supply chain.'

Independent view

Crown in Hong Kong envisages an independently monitored grading system. After assessing criteria ranging from security to environmental controls, a service provider's facility would be graded to give consumer and auctioneer alike a failsafe record of provenance.

Thus far, the scheme exists only in theory, though it has tremendous potential. The ratings could be extended to record a wine's entire life from the time it leaves the producer – the 'total supply chain' mentioned by Cert Octavian, covering domestic cellaring equipment such as Eurocaves, or transportation, for example. Freight can also be damaging to a wine and currently there is virtually no way of knowing for sure how a wine has been handled on its travels. Logistics companies that are assessed as providing optimal wine transport would become an integral part of the system.

As De'eb says, 'Many collectors fail to realise that gaps in provenance can never be hidden. They will remain with the wine until it is consumed, and will forever negatively affect the value. As provenance is demanded more and more, I can see many wine stocks being written off as substandard.'

It would be a long time in the making, but if this grading system were to be expanded worldwide while remaining truly independent, the impact would be significant. Once wines started appearing in catalogues with lifelong AAA ratings, the precedent would be set. They would command a massive premium. It would also virtually eliminate the spectre of fakes. Wines without documentation would no longer be trusted. Whether collector, trader or drinker, super-provenance provides the ultimate guarantee for fine wine: a scenario that can best be described as super, in the truest sense of the word. **D**

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