

Over two weekends in June I tasted wines that sold for between \$300,000 and \$350,000. Do I have your attention? I was a guest of Dave Dunlap and Mark O'Connell of Kansas City and Eddie Milstein of New York. And when wine is that expensive it is better to drink other people's wine. So when wines are going for \$20,000 to \$30,000 a bottle there is a huge motivation to produce fraudulent wines.

Recently the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and all major wine publications have done stories on this trend to sell fraudulent wines of great value. Since I drink so much of the wines that people are counterfeiting, I thought I would wade in. (The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and Wine Spectator have all interviewed me on this topic.)

Now the first question is what makes a counterfeit wine? If the wine is recorked at the Chateau or Domaine or by someone else is it a fraud? If it is old and topped up with a different wine and then recorked is it a fraud? If the date on the label and the date on the cork do not agree is it a fraud? If it is a really, really great wine but not what is on the label is it a fraud? I have a very pure standard. If the cork has ever been removed then the wine is not as it was released and there is a lack of authenticity. Do I only want to drink authentic wines? No. However, I prefer to drink only authentic wines and enjoy learning about the unadulterated and uninterfered with evolution of the wine.

Second, it is not only the most expensive wines that get counterfeited. Mass produced wine has been passed off for better stuff that may only cost one hundred dollars per bottle. However, the real crime is in the more expensive stuff. Any wine that sells for over \$1,000 a bottle runs a risk of being a fraud. When you are talking about twenty to thirty thousand dollars a bottle then the potential really goes up.

There are several ways to detect fraudulent wine. First, the label. Old rare wines have labels that are old. I have seen 100-year-old wine with pristine labels. Impossible. Yet people accept it and pay for it. No one would believe that a piece of furniture or art that was 100-years-old would not have wear. Antique art, furniture and rugs all get dirty with age. So do wine labels.

Also, most wine in the U.S. was brought in by an importer. They put their label on the wine as well. These labels are hard to duplicate. No importer label and I am suspicious.

Second, the bottle itself. Every wine bottle has a punt. That is the indentation in the bottom of the bottle. Old wine bottles have different punts than new ones. The punts are deeper, less uniform and sometimes the glass is rougher. If the old wine has a new type punt I am suspicious. Many old glass bottles have flaws in the glass and in the shape and those are a tip off to authenticity too.

Third, ullage. That is the level of fill the wine has in the bottle. Does the wine come up all the way in the neck or is it at shoulder level? Evaporation is natural, it happens and is part of the aging process. Counterfeits have not figured out that a lower fill is a sign of authenticity. Wine all the way up in the neck of a 100-year-old wine or even a 50-year-old wine is hard to imagine. Remember temperature controlled cellaring is a recent phenomenon (last 30 years). More money is paid for the perfect bottle (just like art, furniture and rugs), but the perfect bottle and 50 years of age without temperature controlled cellars is pretty much an oxymoron.

Fourth, the cork. So the wine has passed visual inspection. It looks old, the bottle is old, the label is old and there is an old importer label on the wine. Next we remove the capsule. That is the lead foil that covers the cork. It was originally lead because rats would eat the cork and destroy the wine. So lead stopped the rats and killed those who ate it. The foil should be old too. Beautiful long, bright-colored foil is a modern phenomenon. Short, dull-colored foil is a sign of age. When you remove the foil is there crud? Crud naturally forms between the foil and the cork. It is a good sign of authenticity. No crud and I am suspicious. Now you pull the cork. First, what does the cork say? If the cork is pristine and you can read it clearly you probably have a fraud. The cork should be old, wet almost all the way through and on very old wine a little shriveled. If you cannot read the cork because of wine stains that is a good sign. Deep wine stains on a cork do not happen overnight. It does not bother me if the cork says nothing. Many now rare and famous wines did not print on the cork or they just used their house names. For me the cork says everything, it seems to be the hardest to fake. Of course once you have pulled the cork it probably means you have already paid for the wine. Good companies will stand behind what they sell you, but it is difficult to prove fraud. One billionaire, Bill Koch, is suing a wine salesman for several million dollars for selling fraudulent wine.

Last, you taste the wine. Did you get what you paid for? Well, old wine shows age in the color. Red wine turns brown. If it is not brown, it is not old. Old wine does not smell like fresh grapes and oak. Unless they are totally oxidized or the volatile acidity has taken over, the smell is complex. By the way, most old wines will have some of the qualities of volatile acidity and oxidation. It is natural. A 50 to 100-year-old man has wrinkles on his face.

Recently I had 47 Petrus in a 750 format. A man I respect very much thought it was a fraud. I did not say anything, but my wine mentor bought the bottle on release and it passed from my hands to his. The wine was oxidized and faded very quickly. This was not unexpected. It had a mid-shoulder fill. The cork was small and fully soaked and coated with wine. That is where the wine in the bottle went (duh). The cork was covered with crud. It was not the best bottle of 47 Petrus I had ever tasted, but it was 47 Petrus.

The guys defrauding collectors fill the bottles to the neck. They do that because it brings more money and they don't usually use cruddy corks.

So finally the ultimate question: was it worth it? Well, was the super bowl ticket worth \$3,000? Were the front row tickets to the concert worth a grand each? Everyone has their own answer, but for me I am making memories and these old great wines with friends are about as good as it gets for me. And if the wine is counterfeit it is part of the memory!

So now you know briefly how to recognize fraudulent wine and what all the press on this subject has been about. As I said in the New York Times, "I'd rather take a calculated risk based on my research than miss the opportunity to taste a legendary wine."