

Wine fraud? Not in Canada, eh



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WINES AND SPIRITS

I suspect few tears were shed for victims of a counterfeit-wine conspiracy alleged by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and reported recently in this newspaper. Who, after all, wouldn't enjoy a good chuckle at the expense of filthy-rich wine hobbyists getting duped into spending \$1,000 on a bottle of Chilean malbec dressed up as Château Petrus — and, presumably, not being able to taste the difference?

Wine fraud, if you haven't heard, is surging south of the border. There's a saying in the trade that there are more bottles of 1982 Petrus keenly consumed in Las Vegas every year than the famed Bordeaux estate ever produced.

For the record, wine fraud is a non-issue in Canada. For this we can thank the almighty liquor boards, which control all commercial imports of alcohol as though they were stamping out international terrorism. This vigilance ensures there's always a mountain of traceable paperwork for every little movement of every case of wine between vineyard and point of sale.

The other reason Canada isn't much of a haven for wine fraud is that private auctions — where most trophy bottles change hands — are illegal. The LCBO, for example, is the only sanctioned for-profit auction operator in Ontario. It runs a couple of events each year, and fraud, alleged or otherwise, has never been reported.

But what about all those symphony and opera wine auctions you hear about, you ask? They're non-profit charity events and

merely entitle donors to a receipt for a tax break at the end of the year. No, as you might have guessed, you don't see many tuxedo-clad felons Xeroxing Petrus labels, pasting them onto malbec bottles and donating their handiwork to support the local production of *Rigoletto*.

What's driving the fraud epidemic? For one thing, insane demand for trophy wines. Petrus, for example, now costs \$1,000 for a new vintage, and that's for a so-so year. A hard-to-find bottle of the great 1989, assuming it contains Petrus and not Gallo Hearty Burgundy, can sell for more than \$10,000 in the United States. A well-kept bottle of the storied 1947 is worth about the same.

The other enabler is technology. If today's photocopiers and industrial ink-jet printers can do a competent job of knocking off elaborate banknotes, think of the swift work they can make of comparatively crude Bordeaux wine labels.

But here's a secret every nervous wine collector should know. No matter how flawless the packaging, you can still usually tell a bogus bottle from bona fide Bordeaux, or Burgundy or Barolo or what have you, through chemical analysis. And no, a taste test by you won't satisfy the insurance company or police, no matter how confident you state your verdict.

The LCBO, which claims to have the most sophisticated beverage-alcohol laboratory in the world (FBI included), would be happy to pull the cork from your wine (for free) and subject it to a battery of tests. Is there a chemical profile for a 1947 Petrus? Not exactly. But it's possible to tell roughly how old most wines are by examining pesticide residues. Barry O'Brien, the LCBO's director of corporate affairs, says pesticide formulations change almost annually, and there's no way a new wine in an old bottle would have the same chemical footprint. By the way, we're talking miniscule concentrations. No need for panic.

"We would be happy to arbitrate," O'Brien offers. Of course they would. My advice: Make sure you never let your '47 Petrus out of sight, and make sure the lab technician doesn't greet you at the door with a freshly rinsed drinking glass.

Meanwhile, those of us without a bottle of '47 Petrus to our name might want to take solace in a couple of pretty good, and much more affordable, merlots that go on sale today in Ontario as part of the Vintages fine-wine department's spotlight on the grape. Petrus, after all, is just another word for merlot, don't forget, even if it happens to be the world's most famous interpretation of that grape.

Consider **Concha Y Toro Marques de Casa Concha Merlot 2004** from Chile (\$19.95, product No. 939827). Inky-purple and dense, it's full-bodied and laced with nuances of plum liqueur and black pepper. Penetrating and long. It could use five to eight years in the cellar.

Also good for the money, and also from **Chile, is Montes Alpha Merlot 2004** (\$23.95, No. 022228). Full-bodied and brimming with super-ripe, almost-sweet fruit flavours of plum and blackberry, with accents of dark chocolate, substantial creamy oak and vanilla.

From Tuscany there's **Silvio Nardi Merlot 2005** (\$24.95, No. 022806), medium full-bodied and extremely dry, with ripe dark fruits and firm tannins.

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