

Newsletter Blog

'Wine honors the soul, so honor it with yours'

Chef's Vinegar - Trotter Gave Wine the Boot?

Not unheard of, but another case of a wine being dressed up as something it is not. Reminiscent of Billionaire's Vinegar, this case involves a top-notch chef and a collectors firm - Bekim and Ilir Frrokaj. The motive was obviously to sell something for higher than what it was worth but the mistake in this 'fake' bottle tale is as glaring as it is stupid.

Charlie Trotter is a big name in the restaurant world. Among various prestigious accolades fallen upon Charlie Trotter's namesake restaurant, the Chef himself is the author of 14 cookbooks, three management books, and is the host of the nationally aired, award winning PBS cooking series, 'The Kitchen Sessions with Charlie Trotter.' With regards to his wine cellar, list and service he has been awarded the Wine Spectator's coveted Grand Award and the James Beard Foundation's Outstanding Wine Service Award. Filled with wine jewels, his cellar boasts 1 of only 5 Imperial of 1990 Penfolds "Grange" ever made, a vertical of Mouton-Rothschild from 1943 to 2003 as well as a practical availability of world wines including labels from Portugal, Germany and South Africa. Theoretically, then, it would be assumed the Charlie Trotter team know their wines.

But when they sold an alleged magnum of 1945 Romanee-Conti from the Domaine de la Romanee-Conti vineyard in June 2012 to Bekim and Ilir Frrokaj wine collectors for \$46,000 they made a big mistake. After trying to insure the bottle they realized that it had no value - it was not 1945 Romanee-Conti. Somewhat of a disappointment after being reassured by Trotter that it was one of the 'rarest and most valuable in the world.'

And how did they find out? The counterfeit assessment was confirmed by wine aficionado Maureen Downey, who traveled to the Domaine de la Romanee-Conti and spoke with the estate's co-owner Aubert de Vellain. De Vellain said: 'The DRC magnum was counterfeit because Domaine de la Romanee-Conti only produced small yields in 1945 and as a result did not produce any large format magnum-size bottles in that vintage.' So definitely a mistaken case of identity, to say the least, but one that has cost Trotter \$76,000 in damages.

The point is to know what you are buying, whether it is in an auction house or in a restaurant. Trotter's big mistake was to assume that Domaine de Romanie-Conti (DRC) would have made magnum bottles in 1945 possibly because Champagne's Moet et Chandon did, Burgundy's Musigny Vieilles Vignes Vogue did and Bordeaux's La Mission Haut Brion did. However, DRC was the last vineyard to uproot its pre-phyllloxeric vines in replacement for grafted ones. Hence the declining vigour of the vines meant that in 1945 only 600 bottles of red were produced - hardly enough to trade and drink the thousands of bottles that have been over the years, let alone magnum bottles (1.5 litres). Also, a little bit of research would have revealed that this vintage is a common counterfeit bottle as one of the few remaining vintages made from grapes grown on Europe's traditional, pre- phylloxeric vines.

Maybe a little greedy and maybe a little stupid, Trotter is not the only one to have been caught counterfeiting bottles. But we learn from the misfortunate so remember to go through the steps at a restaurant; check the bottle, check the cork and try the wine. Sometimes, like Bekim and Ilir Frrokaj, you may not even have the opportunity.

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