

Introduction

A STORY AS OLD AS WINE ITSELF

THIS IS A FAKE WINE BOOK.

Readers looking to learn about the wine regions of France or the grape varieties of Italy will find slim pickings. Neither will you find a catalogue of every wine fraud committed, but you have not been duped: *Vintage Crime* is an abridged history of wine told through some of the most high-profile wine scams and some of the lesser-known duplicitous behaviors that have plagued wine for as long as it has been traded.

This is a book about people as much as wine, and people generally prove more interesting than fermented grape juice. There would be no wine without man—or woman—and there would be no drinkers to deceive, and thus this is a tale of people's relationships not only with wine, but with each other. At all stages, from the harvesting of the grapes to the last drops in the bottle, the trust of wine drinkers has been violated by grape growers and vintners, wine merchants and collectors. Even the wine cognoscenti have had

the wool pulled over their eyes by men (and it is almost always men) seeking to mislead others for their own financial gain, as well as a boost to their ego and social standing. A splash of narcissism blended with greed makes for a toxic combination.

Yet victims of wine tinkering do not see themselves as losing out if they are unaware of the fraud. The guilty parties throughout history have generally been wine producers or merchants, and “as long as counterfeit wine goes undetected, the victims (excluding the honest wine producers who may lose market share to the false wines) may not really be victimized at all,” suggests Copenhagen University law professor Lars Holmberg. “With the exception of wines adulterated with substances hazardous to the drinker’s health, consumers are not necessarily hurt by wine fraud. As long as they believe the wine in their glass to be of satisfactory quality they may also perceive it to be so.”¹ If a wine fulfills its purpose, does it matter that it is not what it claims to be? Does the deception invalidate the drinking experience? Granted, there is no forgiving those who knowingly adulterate wine and endanger the health of the final consumer, but throughout history, wine amelioration has often been accepted as a means of improving the wine-drinking experience. Instead of incarcerating these mixologists, perhaps we should thank them for saving us from a mouthful of sour, insipid wine.

Most wine misdemeanors can be categorized as amelioration rather than health-endangering adulteration. Ameliorated wines have given pleasure to drinkers for thousands of years, and ultimately, wine is about pleasure—not forgetting its intoxicating effect. Since Roman times, makers and vendors have been adjusting fermented grape juice to make it taste better, often in the hope of achieving a higher price. Whether it was the culturally acceptable addition of herbs and spices to mask the vinegary tendencies of wine in the first century AD, or bolstering weedy wines from northern France with riper, richer reds from Algeria in the early 1900s, ameliorating what nature failed to provide has been commonplace in a bid to make a nice glass of wine within the

customer's budget. Even the wealthy have preferred their wines with a bit of something: a little over a century ago, supposedly purist Burgundy drinkers preferred that wine when it was enriched with a generous splash of rich Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Blending has always been a tool for wine producers and merchants, and the practice continues today in some of the most revered wine regions, including Bordeaux. Indeed, the likes of Châteaux Latour, Mouton Rothschild, or Haut-Brion typically make tens of thousands of bottles a year of their flagship wines, and these are typically composed of three varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc, with the occasional splash of Malbec or Petit Verdot sometimes sneaking into the final blend. Each of the varieties within the classic trio brings qualities and characteristics that the others don't possess, and it could be argued this is amelioration with the law on its side. This form of blending has been legitimized by makers, vendors, and wine experts who corroborate the practices of a place, and appellation laws created in 1936 that cemented and validated the then practices of French wine regions. Their goal? To make wine that provided the greatest pleasure possible.

Why do we drink wine? For Christians, wine has religious symbolism: a sip of red from the communion cup during the Eucharist embodies the blood of Jesus Christ. Throughout history, wine has also been prized for its medicinal purposes, whether it was used for cleaning wounds or easing pain. While its health benefits are a source of heated debate today, it has long been viewed as a healthy and civilizing beverage rather than the route to alcoholic ruin.

Beyond its holy and healthy purposes, we drink wine because it gives us joy. Pleasure is “the end result of drinking a good wine” for most wine drinkers.² Pleasure can be derived from wine in different ways. Primarily, it is sensory pleasure: putting the glass to your lips and drinking in its heady scent and succulent texture before it gently warms your throat. This experience is available to anyone who wishes to

indulge. For example, my mother doesn't know much about wine, but she can discern an outstanding wine from a bottle of plonk. That's why there is an empty magnum of 1986 Château Palmer holding open her kitchen door. It is a reminder of a wonderful birthday dinner in 2009, enhanced by a silken, sumptuous red wine that she can still conjure the taste of to this day. Did she enjoy it less than a Bordeaux aficionado who knows the soil types in the village of Margaux, home to Château Palmer, or the grape varieties that created the blend, or the season's weather conditions? You don't need to be a Master of Wine to be able to take pleasure from a great wine. However, to wine lovers, the beverage is much more than just a glass of alcohol—it is the people, the places, and the history that seize them and lead to an expensive habit. A trained palate helps identify components within the wine, the origin of flavors and textures, and such stimulation may bring greater joy; it may also detract from the pure, hedonistic pleasure of drinking wine. What's more, experience can also create a sense of expectation and lead to disappointment when a wine is compared with bottles or vintages that have been enjoyed previously. Ultimately, knowledge may improve your experience of what's in the glass, but it won't change the taste, as a former professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University explains: "Most wine knowledge does not directly enhance the pleasures to be had in wine, but rather, enhances one's ability to discover such pleasures. But the pleasures it gives you are not sensory but cognitive."³

This book should also leave you asking: What is an authentic wine? It's a slippery question. The notion of authenticity has morphed throughout time as cultural norms have evolved; it continues to mean different things to different people. As far back as imperial Rome, authenticity was desired by those who could afford it: the wealthy enjoyed rare wines from specific origins that reflected their wealth and good taste. Wine, as well as food, became a status symbol rather than simply fuel. Two thousand years later, many individuals still use wine

as a means to gain kudos in their social circles. Ego is surely one of the driving forces behind the slew of pictures of the rarest and oldest bottles that a small bunch of elite wine drinkers post on their social media feeds, leaving the humbler drinker with a severe case of missing out. As the demand for fine wine from finite vineyards has grown globally, the world's wealthiest have seen price as no barrier to having these bottles in their cellars. The rewards for selling fake fine wines labeled as Burgundy and Bordeaux's best have become greater, while the risks of being caught in the rather chummy world of wine collecting have until recently been relatively low.

In this context of high reward and low risk, it is unsurprising that enterprising albeit dishonest individuals have been a driving force in a growing counterfeit culture. Wine shares similarities with the art world: talented artists-turned-forgers have embarrassed many dealers and galleries by convincing these so-called experts that their fake masterpieces are genuine. One of the problems that fine art shares with wine is that "the art world still relies, to a great extent, on the word of individual experts, connoisseurs whose personal opinion can change an artwork's value by millions."⁴ It is the same with wine. "If the world believes that a work is authentic, then its value is that of an authentic work, whatever the truth may be."⁵ In the most high-profile wine fraud cases in the past forty years, expert individuals have mistakenly given dubious bottles the thumbs-up, lending the fraudsters and their wine collections an aura of authenticity.

While fine-wine collectors are concerned that the contents of their bottle match the label, the notion of authentic wine has become more loaded in recent years. Head into a hip wine bar in a cosmopolitan city and the word *authenticity* often relates to the way in which a wine is made, rather than whether the wine is verifiably from vineyard A or château B. The natural-wine movement, which attracts some evangelical supporters, has positioned natural wine as the most authentic form of the beverage. The movement started in the 1980s as a backlash

against chemical farming and mass-produced wines. Most producers of natural wine farm their vineyards organically, shunning synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers, while others go a step further, adopting biodynamic farming methods based on the tenets of Austrian philosopher, spiritualist, and writer Rudolf Steiner. Followers work according to the lunar calendar and create esoteric concoctions to put in their compost, such as oak bark fermented in an animal's skull. Natural winemaking is a case of intervening as little as possible in the cellar, which means allowing natural yeasts to get the fermentation process going, rather than adding purchased yeast, and making no adjustments to the grape juice with commercially bought additives, other than perhaps a dash of sulfur dioxide, a naturally occurring antimicrobial and antioxidant, at bottling. While the French introduced a certification system for natural wine in 2020, there is no universal definition of it, which leads to wide interpretations. Unfortunately, positioning natural wine as authentic or "real" wine suggests that other wines are less natural or less genuine, which inevitably aggravates the non-naturalist majority. There is also the matter of different palates—one drinker might consider wine that is cloudy and smells like a farmyard to be faulty, while another might claim the same liquid is truly authentic to its roots.

Wine, at least, has a definition, making it easier to define what is and what isn't real wine in the eyes of the law. But it was a long time coming. In 1889, the French finally came up with a definition, one prompted by financial concerns: beverages that purported to be wine were undercutting the real thing. This was a time of shortage for the nation's winemakers, who were battling the vine louse *phylloxera*, which was laying waste to vineyards and wine communities. In a bid to quench the country's thirst, many drinks marketed as wine were created using rehydrated raisins or secondhand grape skins mixed with sugar, water, and coloring, rather than fresh grapes; wine producers trying to eke out a living in the midst of the continent's most devastating vine

pandemic needed to differentiate themselves from these cheaper look-alikes. The *loi Griffé*, or Griffé law, stated that “no one may ship, sell or put up for sale under the name of wine a product other than that coming from the fermentation of fresh grapes or fresh grape juice.”⁶ For the grape growers of late nineteenth-century France and the politicians trying to protect the livelihoods of the people in their local regions, the Griffé law was a partial victory: artificial wines could still be sold, but they could no longer be marketed as “natural” wine after 1889.

The Griffé law marked the beginning of greater political involvement in the wine industry, which played a pivotal role in fighting fakes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fraud—in its many guises—was an economic threat to a large section of the rural community, and without laws to protect it, it faced financial ruin. There were no rules preventing a wine merchant from buying white grapes from the Loire or the Languedoc, for example, and turning them into a bottle of sparkling wine labeled Champagne. Legally, the perpetrators of this creative labeling were doing nothing wrong, and some customers didn’t notice the difference in taste—some even preferring what would now be considered a counterfeit. Was a given wine authentic? Few French drinkers cared. But grape growers did: farmers could not attain the prices they needed to pay the bills because the arrival of wines from other parts of France and overseas depressed local grape prices. Out of economic hardship arose mass protests and violent riots. Those who are struggling to protect their livelihood will naturally have a different relationship with wine than those who quaff it without a second thought. That relationship affects our perceptions of what is authentic and whether we are victims of fraud.

In France, decades of pressure from wine producer groups led to the birth of an appellation system, which created borders around regions and villages to ensure that only Champagne could come from Champagne, Châteauneuf-du-Pape from Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and Chablis from Chablis. It was a protectionist move rather than a firm belief in a

winemaker's ability to craft a wine with a sense of place from a set of specific grape varieties with a defined flavor. The concept of creating boundaries to protect local wines against the misuse of their name by rival wine producers and the perils of blend-and-bottle wine merchants hung on the concept of *terroir* (pronounced terr-wah). This French term—which doesn't translate directly into English, so has generally been adopted by English speakers—describes a place where a wine has been grown. This includes the soil and the climate, as well as the human choices involved in tending that piece of dirt. Entire books have been dedicated to discussing the concept of *terroir*, and the wine world has swallowed the term whole. The concept has spread its roots across the globe—a sign of France's revered status in wine circles—and it is the basis of the appellation system, which has been copied many times over.

Wine that comes from somewhere is by its nature finite. *Terroir* implies a specific piece of land that gives a wine a specific taste or texture that cannot be replicated elsewhere on planet Earth. In a world of multinational winemaking corporations, the idea of a small vineyard and artisanal wine taps into modern notions of authentic wine with provenance at its heart. However, the word *terroir* is now applied liberally and haphazardly. It has been appropriated by wine regions, winemakers, and marketing teams to lend gravitas to their places. And yet all wine comes from somewhere, so every wine has a *terroir*—good, bad, or indifferent. It's also subject to change: famous appellations—whether Chablis or Sancerre—have grown far beyond their original size, in no small part due to demand for their dry, crisp white wines rather than the suitability of the land. Similarly, the world's most revered Bordeaux estates are not classified by their land and can acquire vineyards from lesser-ranked producers, incorporating into their more expensive wines grapes that were previously destined for cheaper, less coveted wines. The late Paul Pontallier, managing director of Bordeaux's Château Margaux, tried to explain why this was permitted:

“Terroir is like genetics: you get what you’re given but it takes education and nurturing. It’s nurturing nature.”⁷ Terroir, it seems, is subject to interpretation by the grower, the winemaker, and the drinker; it cannot be measured or quantified, and yet we have imbibed the concept as if it were ancient and holy, which it is not. As social anthropologist Marion Demossier, who has studied the Burgundy wine region for more than twenty-five years, notes, “The concept originated in the codification of the AOC in the Burgundy wine region in France as recently as the early twentieth century yet in the early twenty-first century has come to be considered as a natural law of the quality of wine and some other consumer products.”⁸ What’s more, the taste of a wine and its link to a place is a very modern phenomenon.

The coming chapters will whisk you back to the Roman empire and then lead you, via England, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, and more, to a twenty-first-century courthouse in New York City. This is a chronological history of wine, one told through some of the most well-known cases of fraud in addition to less well-documented incidents that have intrigued me personally. This is not a history of every wine fraud that has taken place—there are far too many to count—but each of the instances chosen takes place within a seminal period of change for the world of wine, allowing us to better understand that period of social and cultural history. Some chapters do not rest on a single instance of fraud but on general wheeling and dealing across an extended period (such as imperial Rome), while a chapter devoted to lead in wine traces its use from the 1600s to the present day. There are dark alleys to navigate and unsavory characters to meet along the way, so buckle up for this juicy journey.