



# THE WEAKEST LINK

The way in which a wine is stored and transported drastically affects its worth. **ANTHONY ROSE** explains the importance of provenance, while **RICHARD WOODARD** provides a global guide to wine storage facilities

**P**rofessor Emile Peynaud of Bordeaux University used to say that once a bottle of wine is opened, it starts to go downhill. You could argue that the deterioration begins from the moment the bottle leaves the cellar. What is certain is that the provenance of fine wine is moving centre stage, not least thanks to the growth in trading activity and the knock-on effect of price rises. Snap up a Lafite 1982 or four cases of 2009 *en primeur* and your wine is worth as much as a new Audi. But if you're buying a new Audi, it's easy to ascertain its fitness for purpose. Buying wine? Like buying a new car, the paper trail from château to delivery should (I say *should*) be just as simple. But is it?

If you're buying from a reputable wine merchant, you can check whether the relevant guarantees are in place. And if you're going to keep your wine in storage, you can easily check conditions such as humidity, temperature and security. You can get confirmation that the case is identified as your own, and can even inspect your wine if necessary at the warehouse and online. It's not just your own best guarantee of provenance and condition, but a one-careful-owner guarantee to anyone to whom you might end up selling that wine. As Stephen Williams, managing director of the Antique Wine Company, notes: 'A key point about provenance is the price premium that it brings to truly great bottles.'

Buying secondhand is another matter. It's one thing to check a car's ownership history (not always available with wine), but quite another to ensure that it hasn't suffered any mishaps that might have a bearing on the asking price. So it is with wine. What if you bought your case 10 years ago and now want to take delivery? Can you be sure that the wine has been lying undisturbed in your merchant's cellars? Or if you buy a 1995 claret from, say, Berry Bros, what details can you expect as to its provenance/former owners? Or a 1978 Burgundy at auction? Could it have been bought more recently from a US merchant, who themselves bought it from a merchant in Hong Kong, meaning it's travelled halfway around the world?

The business of checking a wine's MOT is not just an issue in the trade but a growing concern among consumers. According to Max Lalondrelle, fine wine purchasing manager for Berry Bros & Rudd, 'customers never used to ask such questions, but over the past few years, it has become apparent that customers, particularly those in Asia, care more and more about sourcing and storage.' The same is true of auctions. 'Collectors are becoming more sophisticated and starting to understand the importance of provenance,' says Sotheby's Robert Sleigh in New York. 'A wine's value can vary as much as five or six times, depending on its provenance.'

While acknowledging that fake wine can be a problem, what concerns Stephen Williams most is the condition of fine wine: 'Poor storage and transportation have wreaked far more havoc on collectors' pockets and palates than a few dodgy fraudsters,' he says. The greatest hidden enemies of bottled wine are inadequate transportation and poor storage. While light, vibration and lack of humidity are all potentially harmful, the single biggest contributor to wrecking a bottle is heat, whether it's baking on a sunny dockside or being stored too close to the central heating. As Robert Parker says: 'It is a frightening thought, but I have no doubt that a sizeable percentage – 10%–25% – of wine sold in America has been damaged by exposure to extremes of heat.'

## Clues to condition

One of the most obvious signs of a poorly stored bottle is its ullage level. An auction house catalogue will typically describe a wine with a poor level as varying from *n.* (within neck, the normal level of young wines), through *bn.* (bottom neck), *vs.* (very top shoulder), *ts.* (top shoulder), *hs.* (high shoulder), all the way down to the thoroughly suspect *ms.* (mid-shoulder). But if it's 50 years old with no ullage at all, that could raise an issue of authenticity. Seepage suggests oxidation, while faded labels are also not a good sign. Soiled or tatty labels, on the other hand, may not look so good, but are not an indication of poor condition – sometimes the opposite. And even if a wine looks the part, you have to rely on more than physical appearance to tell if it's been damaged (or ruined) by poor transport or storage.

Browse the security measures from the various companies at the end of this feature (p46–47) and you could be forgiven for believing that all fine wines are stored in Fort Knox-like conditions with no light or vibration, where the humidity is 70% all year round and the

ambient temperature is maintained at an optimal 13°C–14°C. Some are. Horse Ridge Cellars in the US was built to withstand a nuclear attack, via 0.6m-thick walls and a 12-ton bank-vault door. Au Bonheur du Vin in Geneva is a vault which used to store gold for a Swiss bank behind 1m-thick walls, built to survive both nuclear attack and earthquake.

Subterranean cellars such as those used by Octavian and Locke-King Vaults in the UK and Crown Cellars in Hong Kong were originally wartime shelters. Such facilities are ideal for wine storage, but

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that's not to say that technologically advanced warehouses above ground, such as those offered by Smith & Taylor, The Wine Society, Berry Bros or Bordeaux City Bond, aren't equally suitable.

What's far more difficult to ascertain is the percentage of fine wine stored in such optimal conditions and how much of this is moved around, despite remaining ostensibly undisturbed. 'There are still too many American wine merchants, importers, wholesalers and distributors who are indifferent to the way wine is stored,' says Robert Parker. 'This attitude persists, although things have improved dramatically over the past decade.'

It's true they've improved. Christopher Klingenstein, managing partner of Domaine Wine Storage & Appreciation in Chicago and St Louis, points out: 'In more markets worldwide there are well-designed, technologically proper facilities.' But? 'It's still incumbent on the consumer to find those providers that excel.'

## Uncertainty

No storage facility can do more than certify that the condition of a wine is tip-top from the moment it enters the door. What it can't do is give you a guarantee that until that moment, the wine has been transported and maintained in the best possible condition. Sharron Foong of Taste of Tradition in Singapore says it can certify the condition of wine stored in and transported from the winery, but not the provenance of a wine coming from a third party. Even if a wine's been ostensibly in satisfactory storage all its life, there may be no way of telling whether, or to what extent it's been moved around. Klingenstein says that 'in-bond is not a guarantee. It has happened where lots purchased in the US are shipped to London, in bond, and made to appear as though they never left the UK. Importer labels and box conditions can all be hints that a wine has moved around.'

Transport is an increasingly important issue, but while the wine trade talks the talk, it doesn't always walk the walk. According to Parker, 'many importers claim to ship in reefers (temperature-controlled containers), but only a handful actually do. America's largest importer of top-end Bordeaux wine rarely, if ever, uses reefers and claims to have had no problems

**Below: storage companies can guarantee that wine will be stored correctly in their care. What they cannot tell you is how wine has been transported and maintained until then**



with its shipments.' Based on thousands of measurements by eProvenance sensors (see sidebar, right), preliminary results suggest that more than 6% of wines shipped from Europe to the US experience temperatures above 30°C. However, Mathieu Chadronnier, managing director of négociant CVBG Grands Crus, believes that shipping in reefers to air-conditioned warehouses 'is increasingly the norm'.

In the case of sourcing older wines from wine merchants, practice varies widely. If Berry Bros, for instance, doesn't have any 1995 Lafite, it will aim to source the wines from customers who bought from and stored with it, or go to the château. 'We believe so much in the sourcing of the wines that we are making every effort to move closer and closer to 100% château or BBR stock sourcing,' says Max Lalondrelle. But James Miles of British online fine wine exchange Liv-Ex says that in general, the supply chain is not geared towards fine wine, and too much wine is moved about. 'Every time there's a transaction, a man with overalls goes in, picks out a box, moves it from one location to another and puts another sticker on. And a sealed original wooden case could have anything in it. We've had cases come in of bottles with no corks and seals.'

## Buyer be wary

Buying at auction, older stocks in particular, is *caveat emptor* territory, however much the auction house claims to do its best to set the highest standards. With the explosion in fine wine trading, stock now comes from all over the world, so provenance is more difficult to pin down than ever. Sotheby's Robert Sleight is clear about the standard required by his own auction house. 'The test,' says Sleight, 'is that we have to be able to prove it's right and not that we can't prove it's wrong.' When Sotheby's recently shipped 50 cases, including 1961 Pétrus and 1966 Lafite, from California in a temperature-controlled truck, it turned the shipment down because the condition of the wine was inadequate.

Both Sotheby's and Christie's claim that they give buyers the opportunity to return a wine in certain circumstances, yet the terms are generally narrowly drawn, with disclaimers designed to let them off the hook if they do get it wrong. As a buyer, I wouldn't take great comfort from Sotheby's disclaimer: 'All property is sold "AS IS" without any representations or warranties, express or implied, by Aulden Cellars, Sotheby's or the Consignor as to merchantability, fitness for a particular purpose, the correctness of the catalogue or other description of the physical condition, size, quality, rarity, importance,



**Above: Crown Wine Cellars in Hong Kong. The region is now the fine wine hub of Asia**

*medium, provenance.* Reputation and trust are the cement between the auction house bricks, and without those, no auction house worth its salt could survive.

Given the frequent difficulty of tracking back older stock, many in the trade are backing their concerns about provenance with action. The Hong Kong government paved the way for making Hong Kong a fine wine hub by dropping taxes – and is putting together an international industry standard for storage. Facilities in Bordeaux are getting better, too, as temperature-controlled warehouses spring up around the city in response to liberalising changes in the tax laws. At Bordeaux City Bond and Grand Cru Storage, the trade, and (in certain circumstances) private individuals, can store wines in good condition in bond and only remove it or sell it when they want to.

The growth of improved warehousing and transport brings a need for better tracking and identification. 'Part of the current problem is that the way the supply chain is set up, you need to take physical delivery to prove you own it', says Liv-ex's James Miles. 'But why should you need to take possession of top Bordeaux until you need to drink it?'

New technology is now available to support not just better wine authentication but the processing of information, allowing you to check your wine's temperature history. Given the number of technologies coming on stream, one of the main problems is not so much technical as human: the motivation to do it and the need for an international standard to make it all work. Then, and only then, will we be able to raise a glass of ISO tracked and identified wine to a revolution in provenance.

Find out more about wine storage and investment – and wine fraud – at [decanter.com/provenance](http://decanter.com/provenance)

## RADIO MAKING WAVES



### Radio-frequency identification (RFID)

is causing waves of excitement in the tech world. RFID uses a tag for storing and processing information, and an antenna for receiving and transmitting a signal. In the case of wine, an RFID identification and tracking device can measure and record temperature to give you a wine's temperature history.

eProvenance, a company started by Bostonian entrepreneur Eric Vogt, has created a process (the Fine Wine Cold Chain) for monitoring the safe storage and transport of wine using an RFID sensor. The size of a credit card, this is a tag which contains an RFID antenna, an RFID chip where the temperature information is stored, an electronic thermometer and a battery.

Vogt developed the process following a conversation with Château Margaux owner Corinne Mentzelopoulos, and a bad experience shipping wine to the US. Today, he works with a number of Bordeaux châteaux, including Margaux, Palmer, Beychevelle, Giscours, La Mondotte and Domaine de Chevalier.

As well as providing the tags for cases of wine, the service includes checking the status of the distribution chain with a view to making recommendations to improve it.

eProvenance is now looking at the possibility of providing a service to the consumer for 2009 Bordeaux *en primeur*. The idea is to work with UK and US wine merchants who would be able to offer their customers a guarantee of provenance by way of the RFID sensor card. The cost of such a service would be about 1% of the value of the case of wine.

Vogt believes it would be a point of difference for wine merchants and that it would make the wine more valuable for consumers. He has already made an arrangement with an insurance carrier who will ensure provenance where the wine shipment has the RFID sensor.