

Comments on the Rodenstock affair

7 Sep 2006 by JR

Raid Report: Old Wines (nothing prior to 1976), FL:

Please find below the commented text concerning a 1427 conviction in London for "Sophisticating" wines (adulterating in today's terms). You have more knowledge in these things than I - I believe La Rochelle refers to wine shipped from Bordeaux - port of La Rochelle, and Romney to Burgundy - but I'll look forward to more from your sources. Interesting in light of HR (and nothing yet in the Wine Spectator site).

The Pleas and Memorials Made - City of London - records on 07 sep 1427 the following:

An inquest of office before the mayor and aldermen by oath of Geoffrey Bekeler and others on the panel who said that Gerard Galignot, alien, on 10 July 1427 in the parish of St Margaret's mixed 6 casks of old wine of La Rochelle, pale in colour and defective in taste, with new Spanish wine, and coloured, composed, and sophisticated them with wine cooked and coloured to give them a pleasant appearance and delicious taste, and put the wine thus mixed into 12 butts, which had been entered and tried with divers gurnes and reeds (port divers garnets of Reas - uncles at Bells) as so to give it the taste and likeness of good Romney wine, and offered it for sale as such, in despite of the King's people and in contempt of the good ordinances of the city. And further the jurors said that the said Gerard was a common sophisticated, counterfeiter and seller of such wines.

They also presented the same Gerard for having on 20 July sophisticated 10 casks of around La Rochelle wine, which he placed in one butt and 20 hogheads, and a certain Dominique de Verins, alien, for having on 10 March at the quay of Ralph Grenville packed, sophisticated 8 casks of old, sour-wine (pordubben) Spanish wine, defective in taste and colour and around which he placed in 16 casks and exposed for sale as good Romney.

Danny Fortson, NC:

So, Jancis, do you think Hardy R is a fake? And, if he is, doesn't that make the wine trade look awfully foolish for buying that set of these years?

...

It would presumably be legally dangerous to answer your first question directly. But it was proved that he knowingly sold and served fake wines that would reflect badly on all of us. However, while temporarily destabilising the fine wine market, the episode may prove to be useful catharsis. Already the producers of wines such as Pinot and ChC which are commonly targeted by counterfeiters have taken measures to make it much more difficult to make copies of their bottles and labels but we all probably need to be much more aware of the possibility of fakes. Let us hope this affair serves to make the wine traders and dealers and auctioneers more cautious in authenticating and checking the provenance of the goods they sell.

That said, as I have written several times, the wines that I have been served by Hardy Rodenstock - a supposed 19th century Bohemian Muskatel at Mouton in the mid 1980s, an extraordinary 12-course wine banquet at Ch. d'Yquem in 1986 (both of these described in detail in my memoir 'Tasting Pleasures/Confessions of a Wine Lover' and the 1988 'Epiphany in March' - gave me a huge amount of pleasure. Most of the wines were delicious. If some of them were fakes as I wondered at the time (though they certainly can't all have been fakes), they were extraordinarily good fakes. For a time, Rodenstock moved to a high-end corner of German-speaking wine lovers as if he was cheating, he was cheating his then buddies which seems very odd behaviour to me. Of course I had a proved, the real victims will not be happy on the one but those who paid ten massive sums for fake bottles. I may wonder at the personal motivation but I suppose it is possible that sheer financial greed was at work.

As pointed out in the entry on adulteration and fraud in the *Oxford Companion*, wine has been a popular target for cheats for centuries because it is so difficult to establish authenticity of a liquid that can change over decades.

Howard G Goldberg, NY:

If the Hardy Rodenstock saga fully unfolds in New York federal court, European readers are likely to be struck by a superficial resemblance to Thomas Mann's 1954 novel *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man*.

Mann's story, begun in the Rhineland, focuses on the son of a Sekt producer. Rodenstock's begins in Munich, and winedom is now asking if his specialty has been old claret or new monkey business.

Remember this: while the collector William I Koch's just-filed lawsuit in New York federal court accuses Rodenstock of fabricating so-called Thomas Jefferson bottles, allegation is not proof. Perhaps the trial that Koch requested will answer tantalizing questions that have hovered, almost operatically, since 1985.

The details of Koch's suit claiming that Rodenstock, though 'charming and debonair' is a 'con artist,' conjure up old granddad's hoary advice that if an investment seems too good to be true, it probably is. In faxes to me that led up to my [decanter.com story](#) (with Adam Lechmere) posted on Wednesday, Rodenstock steadfastly denies the accusation.

How many of The Select who have tasted Rodenstock bottles have felt the same scepticism that Alexandre de Lur-Saluces says he felt when tasting a bottle of d'Yquem?

If a court finds that Rodenstock fabricated the famous Th.J. initials, if there was never a walled-in Paris cellar where mysteriously a cache of Jefferson bottles was discovered, if the Lafite and Château Branne-Mouton bottles that cost Koch \$500,000 were plonk with a PhD, what on earth has been in those bottles?

And what are we to make of it all? Especially today, when counterfeiting is rife. Richard Brierley, who runs Christie's wine sales here in America, made that point nicely in a *Wall Street Journal* article about Rodenstock last Friday [see article listed below]. He was quoted as saying, "In 10 years in the business, I have seen more suspicious bottles in the past year or two than ever before."

For 21 years, Rodenstock, also known as Meinhard Goerke (Koch's lawsuit informs us), seduced - no, dazzled - the wine world's most experienced, sagacious palates and minds with his extravagant tastings and with remarkable discoveries of special bottles.

I don't like the position that history has put Michael Broadbent in. Almost certainly he remembers the - I regret to say - merciless two-hour telephone grilling I gave him about the authenticity of Christie's 1787 Th. J. Lafite (or Lafitte, as the bottle says) before breaking the story of the existence of the so-called Jefferson bottles in *The New York Times* on 30 oct 85.

Surely all the background details, as seen by Christie's experts at the time, and since, pointed to a valid provenance of the 1787 bottle, which the house sold to Malcolm Forbes for \$156,450 in 1985, setting a one-bottle record that still remains vertical. Alas, 20-20 vision functions best, as we all know, in hindsight.

From 21 years of on-and-off discussions with Monticello, the Jeffersonian mansion and repository in Virginia, I have felt, at the gut level, that its scholarly scepticism about the provenance has been justified.

Evidently Christie's could not do what Koch, a billionaire, could. He could afford to set loose a spare-no-expense expeditionary force, which included (shades of Ian Fleming) former employees of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and British intelligence agencies, to try to establish if he had been bamboozled.

Koch alleges in his lawsuit (I have a copy of it) that "Rodenstock is also the source of counterfeit bottles of 1921 Pétrus Magnum," one of which he bought from Zachys in New York for \$33,150. This year, his investigators, he said, took the bottle to Château Pétrus, where experts found that it was 'a very impressive fake' that came from 'a master forger of wine.'

If that is not a wake-up call, what is? As the auction and other secondary markets' greed and status values continue to nurture conditions for forgery, which feeds on skyrocketing prices, in the future many more high- and-low rollers will depart salesrooms wondering if a not-rigorous-enough front office is taking them to the cleaners.

