That crazy, single-owner Acker sale

9 Feb 2007 by Syndication - but this is an updated version

'Mr Big' has of course turned out to be Rudy Kurniawan, now being pursued by Bill Koch, as outlined in The strange case of Acker & Rudy.

Last October in New York I witnessed the most extraordinary auction take place. Over two long days John Kapon of Acker Merrall & Condit, a slight, bearded 35 year old, stood at a rostrum in the super-smart Café Gray in the Time Warner building overlooking Central Park working his way through 2,271 lots drawn from a rollcall of such starry wine names that the sale fetched well over $24 million. The previous record for a single-cellar sale, the Sotheby's Millennium Sale total of $14 million, had stood for seven years.

The scene was very different from the arid salerooms of Christie's and Sotheby's in London where the most nearest thing to sustenance is the auctioneer's glass of water. Kapon worked against a backdrop of white coated chefs hunched over stainless steel ranges and surfaces cooking up lunch, steam and lip smacking aromas rising up into the increasingly fevered atmosphere as prices continued to exceed already robust estimates. Groups of bidders lolled against the banquettes around the restaurant leafing through a sale catalogue as big as a photo album while sipping Coche Dury's and Domaine Leroy's finest Meursaults and occasionally waving their paddles. The young man at the table next to us with his girlfriend got through a bottle of Pétrus before ordering one of Musigny.

As 12.30 approached, supposedly the time when the morning session was due to end and the $75 lunch was to be served, there were still 150 lots to sell. Kapon continued, though the increasing culinary din, as waiters discreetly served the porcini, chestnut, salsify and scallop soup and a particularly delicious poached chicken with beautifully dressed beets and the paddles continued to swat the carefully conditioned air.

I learnt later that this Saturday lunch was a mere snackeroo compared with the feasts to which the serious bidders were treated that weekend. In a series that took in Cru, Per Se and Daniel, some of the most glamorously convincing bottles of the wines on offer were sampled. By chance at a friend's dinner party later that week I happened to be flanked by two successful bidders at the sale, both financiers, both thrilled to bits with their purchases, although they looked warily at their wives and talked of them sotto voce.

Magnums of 1911 and 1919 Romanée Conti went for $100,725 each, a dozen bottles of the famous 1947 Château Cheval Blanc for $112,575, six magnums (another of which once held the best wine I have every tasted) for £118,500. Six bottles of Roumier Bonnes Mares 1923 also fetched $112,575. Where on earth did Kapon find all this wine?

The most arresting aspect of this truly unparalleled sale is that all the wine for this two-day sale came from a single owner who turned 30 only this year, that this was the second of his big sales which together, he told me, constituted just one third of his wine collection.

Intrigued? I certainly was, and all the more so after talking to him by phone at his home in Los Angeles just after the sale. For rather obvious reasons he was coy about publicising his name, referring to himself simply as "tannic and square, just like the burgundies of the year of my birth, 1976". I see he has since been lured out of cover however, so I can identify him as Rudy Kerniawan, a participant in many a blowout wine tasting in the US.

He explained his relationship to wine thus: "My family like to drink, but they are not as…." ("obsessive?" I suggested) "yes, not as obsessive as me. I drank wine since I was small in the family but no single thing made me fall in love with it. Then six years ago in San Francisco celebrating my dad's birthday, we went in to some restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf with a great view of the Bay. I don't remember the name of it. The most expensive wine on the list was Opus One, and I thought I should buy it for my dad. I thought it had to be the best. It was a 1995. When the waiter came out with a 1996 I bitched and moaned, although actually I know now it's better. I loved it. My dad loved it. I thought I should learn more - and never looked back.

"I went round all the branches of the high end supermarket Bristol Farms in LA and bought every bottle of Opus One I could get my hands on. The next thing I knew, I had 200 bottles. I started reading about it in the magazines and would open five or six different similar bottles in one night, trying to see the differences between them, educating myself over the same bottles looked at over three or four days. Then I started to do the same thing with other sorts of wine."

I think we can assume then that Rudy was not kept short of pocket money. His family have businesses in Asia. "Yes they're doing well, which means that I can afford to have a very enjoyable life." But how the heck did he come about quite so many thousand bottles of wine in less than six years? People are increasingly worried about provenance nowadays.

"I just kept finding wine at auctions. I bought very aggressively. I never say 'Give me two bottles'. I say, 'How many cases do you have? Twenty? I'll take them.' People started to know I was buying and they would offer me stuff directly before they're offered to auction houses. I've been very lucky. I've also been generous, and fair, with people. I've drunk with lots of older collectors. I've been lucky, They realise that bottles they paid $5 for years ago are now worth thousands of dollars and it's shocking to them. A lot of these older people know me and my palate and they're pretty amazed by it. I'm proud of it. We often taste double blind [not knowing anything about the wine being tasted] and a lot of times I get pretty close, or even spot on.

"But already I've had it all, it's in my memory. If you ask me how 1911 Romanée Conti tastes, I know, I remember it. I'm more of a drinker. I don't want that bottle sitting in my cellar. I pride myself that I drank it, several times. It's a memory. I had it with many, many good friends. When John [Kapon] comes out with notes on my wines, it makes me happy.

"Fifty years down on road when we're grandpas, we can still talk about opening that bottle and that magical memory. That's the value of wine. It's priceless. It's better than keeping a bottle in the cellar. I realise lots of my wines have gone to investors or collectors who may not open them, but they're made to be drunk."

"Part of the reason I'm selling is that by now I really know what I like. Take the 2005 bordeaux futures. I didn't buy a single case of 2005 left bank because I really like the right bank wines, and Graves. Rhône and Italian wine doesn't do that much for me. I like Burgundy, and I know the producers I like: Rousseau, DRC, de Vogüé, Roumier, Ponsot, Dujac. I sort of limit myself now to what I really like. I sold because the wine market's hot at the moment and people are thirsty for

great wine. Like me four years ago, they're all drooling over it."

All of this suggests that London will continue to lose out to the US, and New York in particular, in terms of the most glamorous wine sales. That, after all, is where the money, enthusiasm and sometimes pure craziness seems to be.

9 Mar 2012 *- This paragraph was added later:* Mr Big/Rudy K is quite aware how naturally questions of provenance arise with a collection like this. "When I go to restaurants and drink great wines, I'm very careful to ensure that the empty bottles are trashed or the labels are marked so they can't be re-used. But I don't keep records. I'm quite amazed when I look at auction catalogues which detail house sales that have receipts back to the 1960s. In Asia we don't keep records. I throw away my bank statements next day. I don't like paperwork."

Quite.