Burgundy's Sherlock Holmes

16 Jul 2009 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

Laurent Ponsot used to be a famous Burgundian wine grower, but now he is an amateur detective too. 'I'm the new Sherlock Holmes', he told me gleefully in London in late May. 'It's very exciting but I have to be careful.'

The story started in April last year, three days before a fine wine sale organised by Acker Merrall & Condit, one of New York's most energetic fine wine auctioneers. A New York lawyer friend of Ponsot's called him to point out that Acker were offering the puzzlingly ancient 1945 vintage of Ponsot's grand cru Clos St Denis. Ponsot knew that the first vintage of this wine was 1982, so he asked John Kapon, head of Acker, to send him photographs of all 107 bottles of Ponsot wines in the forthcoming sale. 'I saw that probably half of these wines must be fake, so I called John Kapon (I didn't know him) and asked him to withdraw the wines from the sale.' Ponsot flew to New York just to make sure he did.

Ponsot's entrance into Cru restaurant, where the auction was held, must have been quite dramatic. At that stage he sported a long pony tail as well as his neat goatee. Soon after he entered, Kapon announced that 'at the request of Domaine Ponsot, and with the agreement of the vendor', the Ponsot wines, with an estimated value of between $700,000 and $1.3 million, would be withdrawn. There was much aggrieved muttering in the room from the assembled buyers. (This was at a time when the New York market was burning with new wine collectors eager to blow their bonuses on trophy bottles.)

All of the contentious Ponsot bottles had been consigned by Rudy Kurniawan, the young Los Angeles wine collector of Indonesian extraction who had already been responsible for two extraordinary single-owner sales under Kapon's direction (see That crazy, single-owner Acker sale). The day after the Cru sale, Kurniawan flew to New York and had lunch with Ponsot, Ponsot's lawyer friend and John Kapon. It must have been a rather strange encounter, and little progress was made in establishing exactly where the bottles came from.

'Then I said, what can I do?' Ponsot told me.'I asked Rudy to keep the wines unopened, if possible in New York City - and they are still there today. Then I decided I should start a crusade. I decided to take another American lawyer to see if I could sue someone. I wasn't quite sure who. I tried to follow the tracks and set out to try to find the guy who printed the label and put it on the bottle.' He smiled mysteriously, apparently more intrigued than riled by this saga.

'I don't spend all my time doing it but I found a lot of tracks to follow. Most of them took me to Asia, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia.... but there was always a dead end. These were tracks, I realised, given to put me off the scent. Finally though I had names.' He folded his arms with something like satisfaction. 'These names were taking me to the UK, Sweden, Germany, Italy, and Burgundy. My guess is that the labels are printed in Burgundy. I have no proof yet but I will get some one day. I am very confident.

'For my son's wedding last year in late July I had to go to the US and I decided to go and see Rudy in LA. I invited him to an Italian restaurant for dinner. He brought some bottles and said, "I will give only to Laurent Ponsot the name, address and telephone numbers of the guy who sold me these bottles" (because he claims it was just one guy). At the end of dinner he gave me a tiny piece of paper with one name and two Jakarta telephone numbers on it, saying he bought them all from this guy.

'I came back to France with this tiny document and I tried the numbers. One of them didn't work at all, and on the other there was never any answer after 50 calls. It appeared the name that I'd been given was like John Smith in Indonesia.'

Compare and contrast with American billionaire William Koch, who, on suspecting that he had been sold fake wine, hired a team of detectives, initiated a stream of lawsuits, and spawned not just a New Yorker profile but a successful hardback centred on the chief suspect, a German whom Koch's team uncovered as a Pole by birth, called Hardy Rodenstock.

'In the meantime I found that it was probably someone from Asia who sold the wines to him. Someone who trades around the world. I don't say any more.' Ponsot didn't quite tap his nose at this point, but the implication was clear.

'I saw Rudy again 10 days ago, and invited him to a dinner at XIV [a smart new restaurant] in LA. Rudy again brought bottles. I said to him, face to face, you have to tell me the truth now. He agreed, but I'm still waiting for the email.' (Rudy

was unavailable for comment on Ponsot's claims. He did not return my calls and he has not replied to my emails.)

'I think there is a sort of a gang but at the head of the gang is an international figure who is very well known in the wine business. It appeared to me that when all this started, it was just to feed demand of new, rich people from the US and Asia. It was easy. Everywhere the name Rodenstock was appearing. But haven't found any direct links to him. Some people told me I should meet Bill Koch but I said no, I want to be pure. We don't have the same wallet. If really I find a way to sue someone it would cost me a lot of money.'

I asked him if the Acker example was the first time he'd encountered fake bottles of his own wine. He smiled. 'I saw the first fake Ponsot wine (a 1985 Clos de la Roche) in 1990 in Kuala Lumpur. It was obvious that this wine couldn't exist, but at the time I thought it was fun and I was impressed that people were bothering to counterfeit my wine. You don't copy Swatch, you copy only Rolex. My first reaction was to say ok, I don't like the system but it's good for fame. It was a very badly copied label. Then I saw more and more fakes. There are still fake Ponsots in Asia and in private cellars in the UK - though they're mainly in the US.'

This almost incredibly mild mannered Burgundian says he is now even used as an unpaid consultant by auctioneer John Kapon of Acker, who sends him photographs of dubious bottles to check their veracity. 'I found *many* other fakes', he claims.

So what will he do next? I wondered. 'I will try to put everything I have in the hands of the FBI. But I need money to do it. Probably $400,000. I had the idea to create a lottery and sell tickets to raise money. But it's illegal in the US. In France you can do it, but you have to pay 60% tax on it. Maybe', he grinned wolfishly, 'I'll do it in Liechtenstein.'

I asked John Kapon for his explanation for the disputed Ponsot bottles, pointing out that they included wines that even Acker's own sale catalogue admitted did not exist. His emailed response was vague: 'Although the Ponsots we have tasted consistently have been superb, when Laurent called and asked us to withdraw the wines from auction, we honoured his wishes and pulled them. If there are counterfeit Ponsots out there, as Mr Ponsot believes, then it is most unfortunate as this is a truly exceptional vintner, and one we continue to endorse with great enthusiasm.'

Ponsot claims that all this detective work may have taught him how to spot fakes but that his expertise is often wasted. 'I wish there were some central place where people can check authenticity, although of course it would be difficult to exclude the fakers who could learn from it how to create fakes. The way they fake is very easy. They buy old bottles, mainly in Burgundy at négociants such as Patriarche which still have old bottles for a reasonable price. Then they put on a label which makes the wine worth 10-100 times more.

'I've been working on a new, anti-fraud system from the 2007 vintage involving a tag on each bottle which will be impossible to fake. Several Burgundy producers are already using this system [devised by Prooftag, where his daughter works]. Every single person will be able to check online whether a bottle is genuine. I've also worked on secret things that we can check. Labels will become bank notes.

'Most fakes are to be found in Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and the US - everywhere where you have rich people who are not knowledgeable. They may go through the UK but the British are more knowledgeable.'

I asked various American collectors and professionals for their reaction to the Ponsot/Acker affair. One prominent collector based in Napa Valley, who preferred not to be named, admitted, 'it did alter my thinking on buying wines at auction. My confidence, already a little shaky, even became more so.'

According to Bernie Sun, in charge of wine at Jean Georges, where Ponsot had the first of his three meals with Rudy, 'this just goes to prove that auctions are still a buyer-beware type of environment. Everyone has to do their own due diligence. Even then one cannot always be 100% sure, unless the wines were offered directly by the winery.'

A major Chicago wine collector commented, 'I think it has had a cooling effect on the overall market and now a lot more scrutiny is being placed on provenance. Sales are still strong, but prices are down, largely due to the effects on wealth and income in this economy, but I am sure in no small part as a result of what has happened over the last couple of years with respect to the run up in prices and the massive amounts of fraud discovered'.

Fine-wine consultant Maureen Downey of Chai Consulting in San Francisco is incensed. 'That more wealthy collectors have not publicly raised pertinent questions and expressed the sort of outrage about fake wines that Bill Koch has

following this blatantly irresponsible representation, proves that they are more embarrassed to have been duped, or are happier to keep the party going than to be whistleblowers and end the illusion.'

For Ponsot's opinions on other matters as oak, stoppers and the 2008 vintage, see Ponsot opines.