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Bordeaux? Sediment? Tell It to the Judge

BY STEPHEN HEYMAN

On a recent evening at Colicchio & Sons, in the Meatpacking District, the wine writer Mark Oldman attended an engagement dinner during which several bottles of 1970 Chateau Palmer were drunk. “I still remember the plums-and-truffle perfume and enduringly silky, savory finish,” Oldman said. He was so enamored, in fact, that before leaving, he snuck out an empty bottle with him as a souvenir. (Oenophiles, Oldman noted, refer to empties as “dead soldiers.”)



Natalie Hayes/Wine writer Mark Oldman with the Bordeaux in question.

Once outside, however, merriment gave way to a sobering surprise. “I heard the squawk of a police siren, followed by a stern, amplified directive to move to the sidewalk,” Oldman said. The cops had spotted a bit of liquid in the bottom of the bottle. “My friends — good friends that they are — scattered like confetti.” Oldman tried in vain to explain that this was only sediment: “It’s what is left after you decant a mature bottle!” But the police issued him a court summons anyway.

This weekend, Oldman will appear in two sold-out events at the New York City Wine & Food Festival. Neither of them is about how to get out of an open container violation. Nevertheless, the writer was kind enough to share with T the following court transcript which recorded his defense before a somewhat incredulous New York City judge.

Court Officer: Mark Oldman, Docket ending 9818, open alcohol container.

Jed Philwin, the court-appointed lawyer: Move to dismiss, facially insufficient.

Judge: What was this? [referring to the bottle in question.]

Oldman: It was an empty bottle of 40-year-old Bordeaux I was taking as a souvenir. I’m a wine writer. The officer thought there was something in the bottle. He started writing up the ticket. I’m a well-known wine writer.

Judge: A well-known what?

Oldman: Wine writer. I was taking the bottle as a souvenir. It was a 40-year-old bottle. I have it downstairs. They wouldn’t let me bring it up.

Judge: Let me get this straight. Your job is to go around drinking wine all day?

Oldman: Yes, it is. And writing about it.

Judge: Before or after you drink it?

Oldman: A little of each.

Judge: What’s your record in one day of consuming wine?

Oldman: It’s quality, not quantity. It’s not about drinking as much as you can.

Judge: Have you ever seen Night Train Express?

Oldman: I love it. Does a body good.

Judge: Who pays you to drink wine? I know of a lot of guys that would like that job.

Oldman: My publisher. They do a lot of books. [Oldman then offers the judge to look at one of his books. The bailiff brings it to him, and the judge pages through it approvingly.]

Judge: That's a good picture of you.

Oldman: You can have it. [At this point, Oldman said, the court-assigned lawyer standing beside him warned that such an offer could be construed as bribing the judge.]

Judge: No, thank you. So the publisher pays you to go around drinking wine?

Oldman: Absolutely, they do. They trust my judgment.

Judge: If you endorse a certain wine, what happens to that wine? Do people buy it?

Oldman: Exactly.

Judge: How did you get to be an expert in drinking wine? I'm looking for another career. I'm going to retire.

Oldman: Well, you know, practice makes perfect, and some people have a nose for it. I have a good size nose. You've got to smell and taste different things.

Judge: You're not French?

Oldman: Thankfully not. I have books published in French, though, which is funny. An American publishing books in French is like –

Judge: If you are going to buy wine and stick it in a warehouse, what kind of wine would you buy?

Oldman: Special stuff, you mean? Like the kind that my bottle was, old Bordeaux. Only two percent of the world's wine gets better with age. People think any wine improves, but only two percent does, so red Bordeaux is a good bet.

Judge: There's your book back, for the record. And I'll dismiss the case.

Oldman: Thank you, Judge.