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Taste-Testing Wine Seized from Bernie Madoff's Private Collection

On the anniversary of Bernard Madoff's arrest, a selection of wines seized from his estate is presented for a tasting. Which do you choose?

by **Kate Krader**



Tasting Wine Seized From Bernie Madoff's Collection

Drinking a Bordeaux from Bernard Madoff's wine collection is a portentous event.

I'm in the Gramercy Park apartment of noted wine writer and educator Mark Oldman. On the counter in front of us is a selection of premium wines. Among them are a 1970 Chateau Palmer Margaux with an elegant, faded black-and-gold label; an imposing '64 Cheval Blanc Grand Cru; and a pristine

looking '83 Taittinger Champagne. They're pretty remarkable wines in and of themselves, but what grabs your attention are the labels tied around the bottles' necks. From a distance, they look like little gift cards. Look closer, and you see scribbled annotations such as, 'Item 1, downstairs bedroom on right.' Most telling are the initials that appear on each tag: FBI.

These bottles were all property of the federal government, seized from the Palm Beach, Fla., mansion of the notorious Ponzi schemer, Bernard Madoff. Oldman bought them, along with a few other lots, at an online auction conducted by Morrell & Co. in 2011.

"I saw a picture of one bottle with the U.S. Marshall seizure tag, so before bidding, I called the auction house and insisted on getting those tags with the bottles," says Oldman. "The wine wasn't so worthwhile without them. I wanted this kind of artifact of criminal history. It's like the wine version of Capone's

gun.” Oldman picked the eighth anniversary of Madoff’s arrest on Dec. 11, 2008 (and precisely two months after the 2016 publication of his latest book, *How to Drink Like a Billionaire*) to open the historic wines.

To clear up the big question first: All proceeds from the auction, which brought in a total of \$41,530, went to a fund for the victims. Oldman confirmed this before he bid on the wines. “You have very mixed feelings about promoting something from such an evil person; but then again, it’s one of the most significant cases of our time. You want to be a part of it, especially if the money in some way benefits the people he targeted,” he says. Oldman paid \$420 for the ’70 Palmer, a good deal for a wine from a supersonic producer, even if it wasn’t a Bordeaux vintage to write home about. He got the Cheval Blanc for \$550 and the Taittinger for \$450.



Crime scene: wines from Bernard Madoff’s collection, auctioned for charity. Photographer: Brandon

The auction attracted some notice from the public, although not among wine professionals. It was an odd collection of wines and spirits; while some remarkable bottles appeared among the 69 lots, there were also ridiculous items such as Smirnoff Vodka airplane miniatures. “A few sommeliers were interviewed, and they dismissed the collection,” says Oldman. “But I went through the whole catalog and there were some gems in there. So I cherrypicked those.”

Was Madoff a wine connoisseur? Oldman thinks not. “Given the circles he ran in, he had the sorts of trophy wines—great Bordeaux for example—that you’d expect. Almost like great art. But he had a lot of pedestrian wines, too. Looking at it archeologically, he wasn’t a true collector.” Belinda Chang, wine director at Chicago steakhouse Maple & Ash, agrees. She served the disgraced financier at one or two New York restaurants where she worked and saw him as a drinker of blue chip wines. “I judge people by what they order; he ordered old school, classic bottles. Nothing off the reservation.” She continues, “I remember seeing the list of his wines when the auction was announced, and there was some really good stuff. Money will buy you great wine, even if that money was obtained in the most unethical way.”



Was Bernard Madoff a wine connoisseur? Probably not, but he had some great bottles. Photographer:

Adding insult to injury: The New York Post surmised that some bottles from Madoff's collection might have been "thank you" gifts from swindled victims before the truth unfolded, a rumor Oldman has heard. CNN conjectured that some of the prize bottles might have been purchased for the purpose of entertaining and then ensnaring victims in his Ponzi scheme.

The "Felony Room"

While we don't know the origins of most of the bottles, Oldman has always been intrigued by what he calls "the intersection of wine and crime." A notable feature of his spacious apartment is the Felony Room. It's a space off his living room that's dominated by a huge glass display case. Inside is an empty bottle of 1970 Palmer, identical to the one he bought from the Madoff auction, along with a transcript from a trial. It's Oldman's homage to a trip to criminal court he took a few years ago for an open bottle of wine. (To make a long story shorter: Oldman was coming home from a friend's bachelor party, carrying an empty bottle of '70 Palmer as a souvenir. The police pulled him over, the bottle wasn't technically empty because of all the sediment inside, and Oldman got a court summons. There, he ended up giving the judge a de facto lesson in wine tasting and got his case dismissed. He had the transcript trophy-ized; it sits next to the empty bottle in the case.)



On display in Mark Oldman's Felony Room: a bottle of 1970 Palmer that earned him a trip to court. Photographer: Brandon Murphy/Bloomberg

Next to the Felony Room, in his office, Oldman has an antique Parisian bottle drying rack (of the kind familiar to fans of Marcel Duchamp and his readymade art). It's festooned with empty bottles, including more than one 1990 La Tache, as well as a 1990 Romanée-Conti. Some of those bottles are extremely valuable empty, confides Oldman. "Counterfeiters will pay \$1000 for some of those bottles. There's a lot of criminally minded people in the wine world."

Tasting the Wine

Which brings us back to Oldman's kitchen and the Madoff wines in front of us. Oldman reminds me why the Cheval Blanc might be familiar. "Most people know it from the movie Sideways. The prize of Miles's collection is '61 Cheval Blanc. For wine people, that movie is really all

about that wine.” Oldman gives me the choice of opening one of these prized wines. I did like Sideways, but I choose the \$420 Palmer. Morrell’s auction notes are promising; there’s no note of wrinkled labels or depressed corks or something else that might indicate that it’s been damaged in storage or while being hauled around by federal agents. (Oldman says Madoff didn’t have a wine cellar; the U.S. Marshall tags indicate that the booze was seized from all over Madoff’s house. But he did have a wine refrigerator, and the best bottles—such as the Margaux—were kept under temperature control. Phew.)

Oldman uses an old-fashioned corkscrew, the Durand, to extract the cork from the 46-year-old bottle of Chateau Palmer. Comprising a long, threaded screw with long blades on two sides, the device is designed to carefully extract the whole cork. (Conventional corkscrews tend to push part of a disintegrating cork into the bottle). The wine's color was dusky, brickish red in the glass, but it was more vibrant than you’d expect a wine this old to be. Likewise, the nose was cherry, licorice, and a little plum, much brighter than I'd have guessed. (To be fair, I don’t drink many wines from the 1970s.) Additionally, there was a scent of truffles; after a few minutes it changed to what Oldman characterized as "expensive leather." And then I tasted the Madoff wine. It was incredibly fruity, earthy, and smooth, with an unforgettable velvety texture that you could feel on the roof of your mouth. Sometimes a wine this old fades before your eyes after the first few minutes, but this stayed strong. It felt as if I were drinking one of the most remarkable wines I’d ever tasted.

Maybe it was. “Wine is contextual,” says Oldman. “You’ve probably noticed that a wine you had on a great vacation, or in a significant place, always tastes better than it does at home.” He continued: “As deplorable as Madoff was, you’re tasting an artifact of human history here. You’ve registered that, and that makes this great wine even more meaningful.”