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Food & Wine Classic: If I had a trillion dollars, I'd drink ...

Lauren Glendenning

It's Saturday morning at the 2015 Food & Wine Classic in Aspen. Six very expensive glasses of wine — generously poured — are set before each attendee at the “Wines for IPO Billionaires” seminar.

Some folks are hung over (including this journalist), but we'd be damned if we did not enjoy these high-quality sips, even if the smell of wine after last night's tequila could send some of us over the edge. Charismatic wine author and seminar host Mark Oldman struts onto the stage sporting a purple smoking jacket, puffing on a tobacco pipe. He's gloriously smug, in full character for the occasion.



Oldman regales his audience with stories of his private jet trip into Aspen from New York City. He flew in with a number of celebrity chefs, and they drank a ridiculously expensive vintage of Dom Perignon — several bottles of it, in fact. It was the perfect beginning to a seminar meant to poke a little fun at the pretense of wine drinkers.

But that was last year. And in true Oldman form, he's elevating his game for this year's Food & Wine Classic. (Billionaires are so last year.) At 10 a.m. on both Friday and Saturday, Oldman will present what he claims will be the most expensive consumer wine tasting ever in his “Wines for IPO Trillionaires” seminar.

In the wine world, “expensive” typically equates to “rare.” For example, the Jordan Winery in Alexander Valley, California, is bottling a special 18-liter of cabernet — the equivalent of 24 bottles — just for “Wines for IPO Trillionaires.”

“I've never had wine from a vessel that big,” Oldman says. “It's not like they had one of these lying around — they had to special order it. A special mold has to be made for the bottle.”

This is Oldman's 11th year presenting at the Food & Wine Classic, and pouring outrageous wines is his way of extending his gratitude to the folks who attend the seminars year after year. And, of course, the title of the seminar itself obligates him to go over the top. There are some wine seminars, especially these in Aspen, that have become so established in the industry that wineries jockey to provide their products for them.

To get just the right mix, Oldman shares that he and his wine-tasting group opened and considered more than 350 submissions to figure out the very best, and rarest, wines for his “IPO Trillionaires” seminar.

Wines for IPO Trillionaires

Here's what Mark Oldman is pouring for the

Friday and Saturday seminars (Oldman estimates the value of these wines at around \$10,000):

- 1) Henriot Champagne "Cuve 38" La Réserve Perpétuelle NV (in 1.5-liter magnum)
- 2) Chateau La Fleur-Petrus 2012
- 3) Jordan Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley 2012 (in 18-liter Melchior)
- 4) Nicolas Feuillatte "Palme d'Or" Brut Champagne NV (in 3-liter Jeroboam)
- 5) Guigal Côte Rôtie Château D'Ampuis 2011
- 6) Schrader Cabernet Sauvignon "Old Sparky" Beckstoffer To-Kalon Vineyard 2012 (in 1.5-liter magnum)
- 7) Kopke Colheita Port 1966

"It sounds really decadent," he admits. "These are going to be some of the most expensive wines out there, but it's not just about the expense; it's about the experience. Part of this seminar is to show that if you are going to splurge on wine, which ones you should splurge on."

As self-assured as he may appear, and perhaps deservedly so given his pedigree as an author and connoisseur, Oldman somehow manages to take the snobbery out of wine and puts drinkers at ease. While he says there's a tendency to put wine up on a pedestal in America, he wants people to feel more comfortable about drinking great wine — more like Europeans, who consider it as important to a meal as, say, salt and pepper.

Drinking like a billionaire — or trillionaire — doesn't necessarily mean drinking expensively, Oldman says. It's also about knowing when to be assertive. "Wine's so complicated, or at least it seems so complicated, that even really smart, confident people get sheepish around it," he says.

To a casual drinker, a younger and fresher \$60 bottle of wine might work better with their palate and the experience than a \$400 bottle that hasn't been aged to reach its full potential. Many expensive wines are built for longevity and can taste tannic and bitter when young.

"Sometimes the more expensive choice is less delicious to the casual drinker," Oldman says.

He also notes that restaurants and hotels that lack integrity occasionally try to take advantage of customers. At a recent dinner in a fine-dining restaurant in New York, Oldman's friend ordered a bottle of wine that was on the list for \$120. The server said that the bottle was sold out. When the friend deferred to Oldman for a selection, the server tried to sneakily upsell the table to a \$300 bottle.

"They're like ninja assassins — you have to be on the defense," Oldman says. Obviously, in this case the assassins picked the wrong mark.

In addition to the "Trillionaires" extravaganza, Oldman will host another seminar at the Classic called "Breaking the Rules of Wine." That's where he'll pour wines that drink "above" what their price levels would indicate. Think white wines from Greece that are great bargains or reds from Washington that may be undervalued. For example, he recently recommended a Columbia Crest H3 Cabernet Sauvignon from Washington's Horse Heaven Hills (\$13), which he believes drinks like a wine that is three times more expensive.

His wine-purchasing philosophy is simple: "I think the happiest consumer is the one who knows how to economize and doesn't feel embarrassed about economizing with wine but also allows herself or himself a special-occasion wine."

Puff-puff.