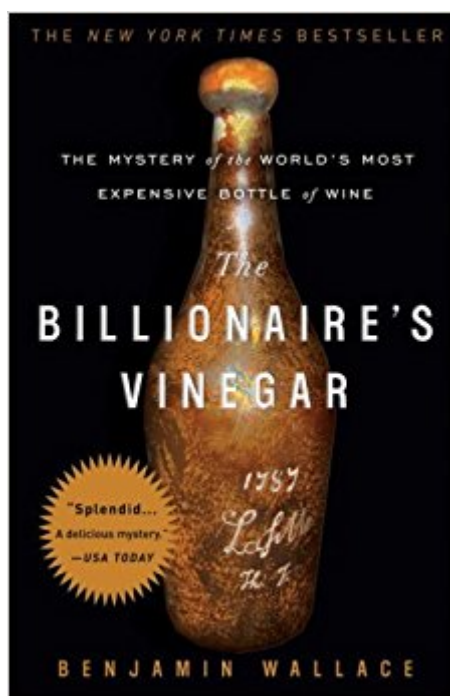


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# The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery Of The World's Most Expensive Bottle Of Wine



## Synopsis

The rivetingly strange story of the world's most expensive bottle of wine, and the even stranger characters whose lives have intersected with it. The New York Times bestseller, updated with a new epilogue, that tells the true story of a 1787 Châteaux Lafite Bordeaux "supposedly owned by Thomas Jefferson" that sold for \$156,000 at auction and of the eccentrics whose lives intersected with it. Was it truly entombed in a Paris cellar for two hundred years? Or did it come from a secret Nazi bunker? Or from the moldy basement of a devilishly brilliant con artist? As Benjamin Wallace unravels the mystery, we meet a gallery of intriguing players "from the bicycle-riding British auctioneer who speaks of wines as if they are women to the obsessive wine collector who discovered the bottle. Suspenseful and thrillingly strange, this is the vintage tale of what could be the most elaborate con since the Hitler diaries. "Part detective story, part wine history, this is one juicy tale, even for those with no interest in the fruit of the vine. . . . As delicious as a true vintage Lafite." "BusinessWeek

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The titular bottle, from a cache of allegedly fine, allegedly French wine, allegedly owned by Thomas Jefferson in the 1780s, set a record price when auctioned in 1985. The subsequent brouhaha over the cache's authenticity takes wine journalist Wallace on a piquant journey into the mirage-like world of rare wines. At its center are Hardy Rodenstock, an enigmatic German collector with a suspicious knack for unearthing implausibly old and drinkable wines, and Michael Broadbent, a Christie's wine

expert, who auctioned Rodenstock's lucrative finds. The argument over the Jefferson bottles and other rarities aged for decades, flummoxed a wine establishment desperate to keep the cork in a controversy that might deflate the market for antique vintages. (In the author's telling, a 2006 lawsuit almost settles the issue.) Wallace sips the story slowly, taking leisurely digressions into techniques for faking wine and detecting same with everything from Monticello scholarship to nuclear physics. He paints a colorful backdrop of eccentric oenophiles, decadent tastings and overripe flavor rhetoric (Broadbent describes one wine as redolent of chocolate and schoolgirls' uniforms). Investigating wines so old and rare they could taste like anything, he playfully questions the very foundations of connoisseurship. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Benjamin Wallace's magazine background helps him keep the many narrative threads in *The Billionaire's Vinegar* tight and engaging. In addition, Wallace exhibits a sharp eye for detail and character: Hardy Rodenstock, in particular, comes across as deliciously deceptive. Exploring what Jefferson's European tour of 1787 must have been like will likely interest even readers without a taste for wine, though connoisseurs will savor the author's descriptions of the clubby (and sometimes comically extravagant) society of high-dollar wine collectors. Wallace raises questions about the wine's authenticity that will linger on the palate, despite a perhaps unsatisfying ending. Or, as collector Ed Lazarus wrote of his experience with the discovered cache, "I had never experienced anything remotely similar in an older Bordeaux, or in fact anywhere else, except perhaps at a Baskin-Robbins." Copyright © 2004 Phillips & Nelson Media, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**Wine Whines** By Bob Gelms *The Billionaire's Vinegar* How many out there like to drink wine? I thought so, me too. Well this book is an entertaining tome about mega rich people behaving over the top about super rare wines that, in the grand scheme of things, shouldn't really be all that important. It's also about super rich people getting ripped off for a mega amount of money and that's always very entertaining. The story in *The Billionaire's Vinegar* dizzyingly revolves around a cache of Bordeaux wine from a superb Chateau circa 1788. That in itself would make this story drink splendidly. The real kicker in all this, and the aspect that had everyone connected to it panting like a thirsty man just in from the desert willing to drink just about anything, is that these bottles were owned by Thomas Jefferson. Wait for it "he also initialed all the bottles. The man who found the Jefferson bottles, Hardy Rodenstock, is a rather mysterious

German wine dealer with a suspicious past and a knack for discovering tremendously rare bottles of some of the world's best wines. At the time of the Jefferson discovery, an American family with a love for all things Jefferson was supporting an exhibit of Jefferson memorabilia from their vast collection of Jefferson items. The family scion was sent to purchase the bottle at auction. He did and spent \$165,000 for the one bottle of wine. I need to mention right here that we are talking about the Forbes family as in Malcolm Forbes and his son Christopher. They were hoodwinked. There was suspicion from the beginning that Hardy Rodenstock had counterfeited the Jefferson bottles. There wasn't any proof but there was plenty of suspicion. If you have the desire to counterfeit a bottle of wine The Billionaires Vinegar has a chapter or two on how you can do it and probably get away with it. This is an intriguing peek into the highbrow world of rare wines and the super rich and what they like to do in their spare time. I was amazed at how cavalier the bottles were treated by the people who bought them. It was as if paying \$100,000 for a bottle of wine was an everyday thing and once they had it, it wasn't interesting any more. I don't get it but I sure as hell would drink a glass if it was offered to me. Shadows In The Vineyard Maximilian Potter has written a riveting tale about a true-life criminal escapade perpetrated on one of the world's great wineries, Shadows in the Vineyard: The True Story of the Plot to Poison the World's Greatest Wine. Oenophiles have, more or less, treated the wine region of Burgundy as the bastard stepchild of its more famous sister over in Bordeaux. Those in the know, however, say that wines from Burgundy regularly outperform wines from any other region in France. There is one Chateau that sits at the top of the pyramid. It is the Domaine de la Romanee-Conti, simplified to DRC. Wine experts consider wines from this Chateau to be the finest in the world and the most expensive wines from the Burgundy region. The terrior of DRC sits on the best wine growing dirt on planet Earth. It's hard to deny this when you taste their wine. The crime was a simple one. Blackmail. A mysterious villain, Jacques Soltys, living the life of a hermit in the woods, decides to cash in for the big score. He seems, to me, to be part chemist, botanist and vintner. He is a failure at almost everything he has tried including bank robbing, kidnapping and other illegal schemes. Now comes Aubert de Villaine, the aristocratic headman and owner of DRC. He receives a puzzling letter that, at first, he disregards. It is, of course, a ransom note. De Villaine will pay the criminal \$1 million. If not, the vines themselves will be poisoned. This scheme attacks the basic values and principles of what it means to be French. It is a crime so preposterous as to be almost unthinkable. It can be likened to blowing up the Jefferson Memorial unless you were paid \$3 million. This is a real crime that occurred in 2010 and, sad to say, it partially succeeded. There is a confluence of brilliant detectives, chemists and botanists who try to defeat Soltys. The good guys set up a very clever

sting operation to catch Mr. Soltys. A lot happens; a lot. In the annals of true crime books this is right up there. It has a literary quality that is matched with Mr. Potter's exceedingly dramatic pacing that creates tension you can swat at with a grape vine. This is for both lovers of wine and the folks who like true crime. This crime is dastardly and its solving is both clever and timely. I sure enjoyed *Shadows in the Vineyard* and I'm thinking you will as well.

Could the bottle of Lafite, with the initials of Thomas Jefferson and dated 1787, awaiting auction at Christie's in London in 1987, possibly have been part of a newly discovered Nazi hoard? As Michael Broadbent, the head of the wine department of Christie's, prepared to auction off this bottle, the oldest authenticated bottle of red wine ever to come up for auction at Christie's, he knew that it would become the most expensive bottle of wine ever sold. Parts of the Old Marais district in Paris had recently been torn down, and some wondered if the bottle was found walled up in a basement. Others suggested that it had a Nazi history. Then again, Thomas Jefferson had sent hundreds of cases of wine home to Monticello when he left his job as Minister to France, and one of these cases may have been lost or stolen. Speculation was rife because of the age and importance of this bottle, not just for its qualities as wine but also because of its historical importance. The bottle had been consigned to Christie's by Hardy Rodenstock, a German wine collector who refused to say exactly where it had come from, revealing only that it was from a hidden cellar in an unidentified 18th century house in Paris. The cellar supposedly contained a hundred bottles, two dozen of which, all from 1784 - 1787, were engraved with the initials "Th.J." After a bidding war, Kip Forbes, son of publisher Malcolm Forbes, was declared the winner with a bid of \$156,000. Questions began to arise about this bottle almost immediately. There was no evidence that Jefferson had ever purchased a 1787 Lafite, and in fact, Jefferson had recorded the purchase of only two of the four wines that Rodenstock had found. The engraving style on the auctioned bottle had never before been used by Jefferson, and all the other Rodenstock wines had exactly the same engraving style. "It seemed odd [too] that whoever first found the bottles would not have shopped them to the highest bidder, instead of automatically selling to Rodenstock." As several more of the Jefferson bottles came up for auction over the next couple of years, each one setting a new record, questions continued to arise about the bottles themselves, the amount of evaporation, and ultimately, even the instruments used to engrave the bottles. Unusually, at every tasting Rodenstock sponsored, his men secured the corks and sealing wax after the bottles were opened, and no one had access to them for testing purposes. In the second half of the book, author Benjamin Wallace takes the reader from 1987 to the present, detailing the new techniques which can now be used (and were later used on the Jefferson

bottles) to date bottles, wine, sediments, engraving, wax, and corks. High tech labs, with experts on everything from tests for germanium, thermoluminescence, carbon, and lead, create a fascinating story of how the wine market has evolved to the present and the safeguards now in place to prevent fraud of this nature. Benjamin Wallace keeps the excitement high as he details the search for information about the Jefferson wines and the eventual outcome regarding their "rightness." Well researched and filled with details about the wine industry, the book bears reading now, in light of recent decisions in the lawsuits brought by William Koch and the auctioneer, Michael Broadbent.

As a non-drinker who couldn't tell a Haute-Brion from Martini and Rossi, I still found myself intrigued by the premise here and so I thought it would be a good, entertaining read. And indeed it is. A crazy-quilt of eccentrics people the world of collectable, rare wine. From the way more money than sense types who pay upwards of 20K for a bottle of something they don't actually have any idea of what it will taste like, to the haughty taste-maker / experts who's nod or frown determine such things, there is no end of curious individuals on display here. But distant as this world may be to you, or at the very least, me, there is much to recognize here in the way of human nature: greed, deceit, wishful thinking, hubris, dissembling, decadence, foolishness, and one-upsmanship on a grand scale. Wallace delves deeply into the mysteries of the "Jefferson" bottles and their fabricated history. The story is compelling, highly-readable and full of twists and turns that lead from dusty, 18th Century cellars to modern physics laboratories. All along the way, Wallace makes the action (or in some cases, inaction) comprehensible and entertaining. Lots of reviews here, and most of them positive. All add my voice to chorus. A fine, engaging read.

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