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ILL BLAKE'S complicated relationship with wine began in an unremarkable way, with his picking up the occasional bottle

at the local supermarket. He didn't go to wine auctions, and he never imagined building a temperature- and humidity-controlled cellar to preserve his bottles. "I liked drinking it, mostly," says the West Coast businessman.

But drinking it led to a serious preference for the good stuff. "Certain wines, once you drink them, it's like a revelation," he says. And at the same time, in the early 2000s, the fine wines that Blake began to favor were rising in value, making them a good investment as well as a palate pleaser. And so the casual drinker became not only a connoisseur, but a collector.

In May 2012, with a decade of collecting under his belt, Blake (who requested that his real name not be used) went shopping online for some wines from France's vaunted Bordeaux and Burgundy regions. He contacted a high-end Manhattan retailer, and began receiving emails from the owner about choice wines for sale. "He had all kinds of stuff that was really rare, old, and hard to find," Blake recalls. "He claimed he got everything from restaurants he'd known for 25 years or from friends at the wineries. He told me great stories about where the wine came from."

Blake was impressed. "I asked around New York, and it seemed like a legit operation," he says. "I knew wealthy people in New York, and he'd helped

# CONS AND THE

*When the label on a 1928 Chateau Petrus looks a little funny, who you gonna call?*

BY PATRICK L. KENNEDY

A 1950 Chateau Petrus, which sold for \$3,416, was revealed as fraudulent by a "healthy" cork, glue spray under the label, and a suspicious "fill."



# *Connoisseur*

Rare and fine wine expert Maureen Downey has grown accustomed to giving collectors bad news.



them find wines and seemed like a good guy.”

He selected three bottles of 1928 Chateau Petrus, each priced at \$3,000, one bottle of 1964 Henri Jay that set him back \$6,500, and dozens more. In a series of purchases that month, Blake spent nearly \$300,000, plus shipping costs, on Bordeaux wines alone.

The cases arrived and Blake tore them open. But once his excitement died down, he had some doubts. One of the bottles struck him as odd-looking, but he couldn't put his finger on why. He turned to rare and fine wine expert Maureen Downey, who, among other things, distinguishes truly fine wines from imposters.

It took Downey (SHA'94) almost four months

## OUT OF 52 BOTTLES OF VERY EXPENSIVE WINE, DOWNEY DEEMED ONE BOTTLE REAL.

to thoroughly examine every one of Blake's bottles. She found that her client had some good reasons to be dubious about the wine. Take the 1928 Petrus. Three bottles supposedly produced in the same year by the same winery were suspiciously dissimilar. Examined closely, they were

different colors, shapes, and heights. Two were handblown, one was molded. The capsules (the thin tin, now aluminum, seal you break to get to the cork) had been glued on. Two sported a generic red crown logo, while the third featured a generic bunch of grapes. And the labels? With a magnifying glass and high-resolution digital photography, Downey could clearly see pixilation indicating that they were printed by a computer.

Similar signs of fakery cropped up throughout Blake's purchases. Labels were scuffed with dirt to look old, but failed to show true fading from oxidation. Corks that were obviously new were stuffed into bottles labeled with vintages decades past. There were older corks with chunks missing—but no corresponding chunks floating in the wine. Downey found dirt under labels, utterly inconsistent with known practices at the wineries they supposedly came from, indicating that a forger had applied the labels without even washing the bottles first. There were bottles allegedly corked 80 years ago that were filled up to the neck—an obvious tell, as some of that sweet nectar would have evaporated over the decades.

At the end of the four months, Downey gave Blake her verdict: out of the 52 bottles he had purchased, one was real.

Blake's experience is unusual, but only in degree. Some experts estimate that as much as 5 percent of rare and fine wine sold on the secondary market is fraudulent, largely because many merchants and auctioneers lack both the expertise and the motivation to authenticate every bottle.

“In the rare-wine world, doubts are endemic,” wrote *New York* magazine last year. “Murkiness is built into a product that is concealed by tinted glass and banded wooden cases and opaque provenance and the fog of history.”

Not so for Downey. The tint of the glass and the look of the packaging are some of the very things she uses to shine a bright lantern through that fog.

### CULLING YOUR COLLECTION OF CABERNETS

AUTHENTICATING WINE IS JUST A PART OF Downey's work, but it's the part that turned her into a sought-after commentator following last year's indictment of suspected wine counterfeiter Rudy Kurniawan, aka “Dr. Conti.” One of a handful of authentication experts in the rare and fine wine industry, Downey began voicing doubts about Kurniawan's “magic cellar” almost a decade ago. Now vindicated, she's been doing interviews with *Vanity Fair*, *Inside Edition*, Fox Business Network, and CNBC's *Crime Inc.*

Based in San Francisco, Downey runs Chai Consulting. (Chai, pronounced “shay,” is French for wine cellar. “I don't make tea,” Downey says.) With a staff of six, she manages clients' collections



# Questionable Content

## What to look for when you're looking for fakes

### 1945 CHATEAU PETRUS

**GRAPHICS** are missing or wrong. A shrub should be behind St. Peter. The hash marks on eyes and hands are wrong.

**GLUE**, which should never affix a capsule, is found under the capsule. It's probably an attempt to hide a newer cork.

**CORK** is youthful and blank, and not even slightly saturated.

**LABEL** is inconsistent with production standards of the time.

**LABEL** shows no sign of wearing or oxidation, and appears to have been "aged" with applied dirt.

**CAPSULE** is short, wrinkled, and appears to have been reused.

➔ Maureen Downey examines the corks for the correct stamp and appropriate deterioration, the glass for color and weight, the label for content and color, and the glue for expected staining. She also checks the color of the wine.

*Downey says fraud detection has nothing to do with the taste of wine.*

### 1950 CHATEAU PETRUS

**CASE** contains 12 bottles made from different types of glass produced in different time periods.

of high-end wines—usually bottles numbering in the thousands, often worth millions of dollars. She transforms cellars chockablock with haphazard piles of boxes into neatly arranged repositories organized with the help of spreadsheets and labeling systems. She helps clients cull their collections to adapt to their changing tastes or lifestyles, figuring out which bottles to sell and determining the best price for them and finding deals when owners want to restock. She acts as an appraiser, sometimes in sticky situations arising from a divorce or an inheritance. She teaches about wine and testifies about it in court as an expert witness. And it all started at BU's School of Hospitality Administration.

## WINE COLLECTORS HAVE FIERCE SEPARATION ANXIETY WHEN IT'S TIME TO SELL.

"I took a bar management class freshman year," she recalls. "Sophomore year, I went abroad, took a four-unit course on the wines of France, and traveled through the French wine regions." And as a junior, she and three other young women represented BU in the student division of Kevin Zraly's International Wine and Spirits Competition, a male-dominated environment. "We walked in and were laughed at," she says, "and we smoked everybody. We won. That was really when the door opened for me."

Downey was certified as a sommelier shortly after graduation, and was soon hired as manager of Tavern on the Green, the storied restaurant then in New York City's Central Park. By 2000, she had decided she didn't want to work another Christmas. She became a wine specialist for auction houses and earned more wine certificates before striking out on her own in 2005.

Since then, she has made a name for herself as a smart buyer, seller, organizer, and overall manager of the collections of a range of clients—from James Grandison (STH'94), a theology teacher, to physician Harin Padma-Nathan, who was instrumental in developing Viagra. (Downey has nicknamed him "Dr. Stiffy.")

"Once you're in the habit of buying and aging wine," Grandison says, "it's difficult to stop. It presents organizational and storage problems. That's where someone like Maureen comes in—and actually, there are not a lot of people like her."

Downey has to be as much psychologist as wine expert at times. "There is a compulsion to collecting," she says. "They all have fierce separation anxiety when it comes time to sell"—even though they've hired her to help them do

just that. In Grandison's case, she says, "every bottle has a story," a sentimental attachment. "He was like, 'Ohh, Mo, you're killing me.'"

"We've had standoffs," Grandison confirms with a laugh.

### THE MADOFF OF MERLOT

DOWNEY HAS HAD MORE SERIOUS STANDOFFS, in the realm of wine-buying public opinion, over the extent of fraud in the market. "I've been a totally antifraud freak since 2000, and I was laughed at by a lot of the boys in New York," she told SHA students when she visited the school last year. As for Kurniawan, whom Downey calls "the Madoff of Merlot," in 2002 he tried to sell her (at auction house Zachys) 1940s and 1950s bottles of Pomerol wines. When he couldn't produce adequate documentation of their provenance, she refused to buy them. "Everybody thought I was crazy," she says. "Everybody held him up as this great guy, and I always felt there was something wrong."

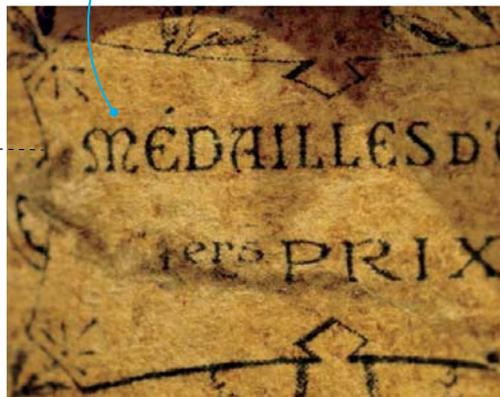
Kurniawan appears to have fooled some of the country's most highly regarded wine connoisseurs, dealers, and bloggers with his tales of rare wines found walled up in cellars in Europe. "Some of these wines were made in such minuscule amounts," Downey says, "and then suddenly this guy shows up and he's got cases and cases and cases of them." Eventually, the number of rare bottles Kurniawan somehow produced strained credulity, the number of empty high-end bottles he collected from restaurants raised questions, and the threads of his alleged deception unraveled. In May 2012, the FBI raided his home and found thousands of top wine labels, hundreds of corks and a corking device, sealing wax and rubber stamps, glue, stencils, instructions for fabricating labels, empty bottles soaking in the sink, and cheap bottles of Napa Valley wine marked with the names of classic Bordeaux brands to be impersonated. Kurniawan's trial on multiple counts of fraud is set to begin this fall.

Those labeling and corking materials were key. Fraud detection has nothing to do with the taste of a wine, according to Downey. "If you've got something that's been in a bottle for 40 or 50 or 100 years, there's going to be bottle variation," she says. Not to mention that some wines were transported in different types of barrels before even being bottled. "Some threads should carry through, but nobody on the planet has so much experience with these incredibly rare wines that they can say with any degree of accuracy, 'Oh, yeah, this is correct.' They made, what, 200 cases of Petrus in 1920. And at the time it was a peasant wine nobody gave a sh--t about. So now for somebody to say, 'This is totally classic 1920

**ASK THE EXPERT**  
Through October, Maureen Downey will answer your questions about wine at [bu.edu/bostonia](http://bu.edu/bostonia).

## What's Wrong With This Label?

A close look at the letters, says rare and fine wine expert Maureen Downey, reveals that the edges are not as sharp as they would have been if they'd been produced by metal and ink on paper, the technique used when the wine was allegedly produced, in 1928. Instead, the uneven edges suggest that the letters were reproduced by more recent printing techniques.



Edges are not sharp.

Petrus'—bullsh--t." If taste told the tale, she points out, Kurniawan never would have pulled off the giant con he's charged with.

Downey's approach, when studying bottles and preparing authentication reports for clients like Blake, is about forensics, not flavor. She scrutinizes paper stock, printing quality, and the oxidation rate of label paper. She contacts the relevant producers (she knows them all and is fluent in French) and brings to bear historical knowledge about tin capsules and what colors of glass were used to bottle what brands when. "If you see a bottle where the label looks like hell but the capsule looks pristine," she says, "that's like a 20-year-old's body with a 90-year-old's face. They should have aged together. These are all errors that counterfeiters make."

### FIGHTING BACK

MANY BURNED BUYERS—OFTEN CAPTAINS of industry who pride themselves on making wise decisions—are reluctant to raise a stink when they learn that a merchant has sold them worthless wine at market prices. Which is why Downey values clients like Blake, who received full restitution from the Manhattan retailer and worked with her and the FBI to uncover the original source of the bogus Bordeaux he had purchased.

"So many others would pass off bad products on other unknowing parties, or eat the loss out of fear of humiliation," she says. "I love it when collectors are confident and stand up for what is right. Because of Blake's willingness to step forward, I have another client with over \$1 million in fakes who is now willing to come forward. He

wouldn't do it alone. So the FBI—not to mention the collecting community—owes Bill a huge debt of gratitude."

Downey feels strongly that shops should do their homework when buying wine wholesale. Of course, she points out, it's not in their interest to ask too many questions.

Blake and other buyers will be a little more cautious now, but they needn't agonize over every purchase, she says. As someone who has managed countless collections and inspected many, many bottles of vino, she is comfortable saying that phony phials "represent such a small fraction of the market."

And a healthy, growing market it is. Total wine sales in the United States jumped 5.3 percent from 2010 to 347 million cases in 2011. The Wine Institute estimates the retail value at \$32.5 billion. "Wine is recession-proof," Downey says.

That's one reason she wants to see hospitality schools bring back the sort of wine education she got as an SHA student, but that has fallen out of favor, she says, because "we live in a prohibitionist society." The fear of teaching undergraduates anything to do with alcohol has "relegated wine education to this backroom, dark, and dirty place, which is tragic because it is actually a skill and a social grace that professionals need. You cannot be taken seriously at a business center if you can't navigate a wine list."

Downey certainly qualifies as an expert at navigating a wine list. But what does someone who works with high-end wine all day drink when she pours a glass for herself?

"Fifteen dollar New Zealand Sauvignon blanc," says Downey. "That's my crack." ■