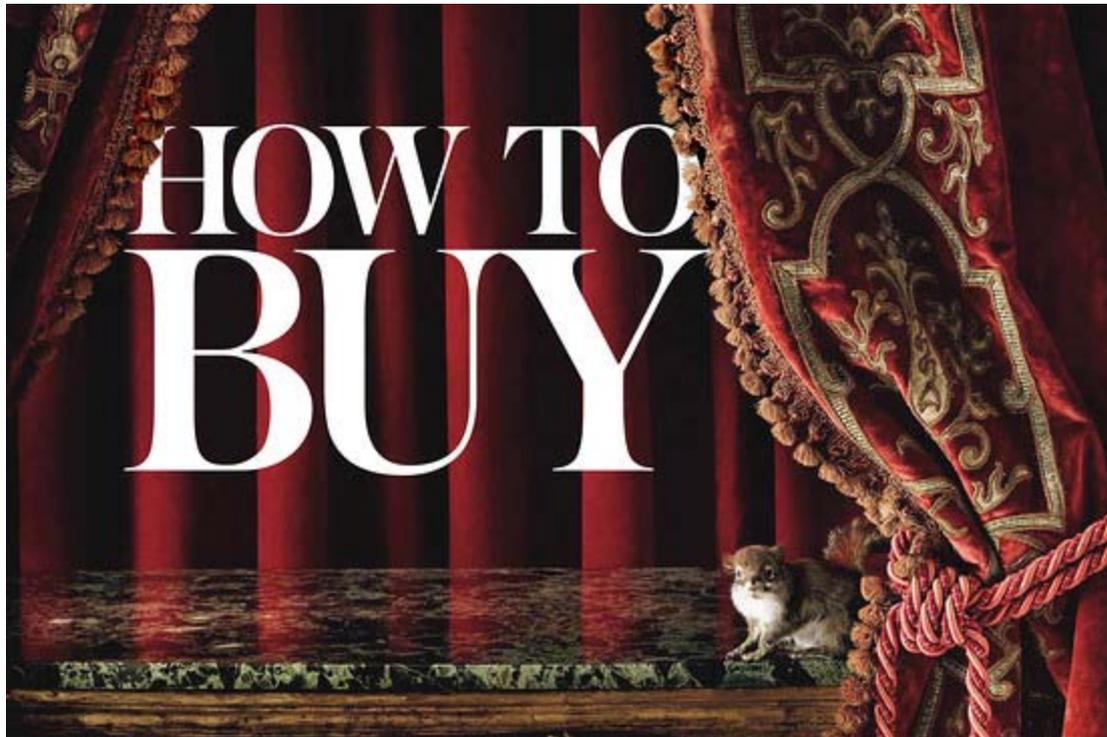


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How to Buy: A Luxury Guide



How to Buy: Rare Wines

By Alice Feiring

A status wine certainly runs you less than a De Kooning, but unlike priceless art, a coveted vintage once enjoyed is gone forever. Unearthing these endangered jewels can be tricky, but a few choice experts light the way

As one of this country's top wine consultants, Robert Bohr often has to drop everything in order to schlep off to Alaska to serve as the personal sommelier on one of his clients' fishing trips, or helicopter off to the Hamptons to decant an extravagant host's dinner-party choices. There's also the more serious stuff of prospecting for special bottles; husbanding his clients' collections; selling off their wines at the right time; and dealing with the increasing challenge of snapping up older vintages for them. Such was the time when the phone rang and it was the restaurateur Joe Bastianich on the other end.

"Joe had a good friend with a multibillion-dollar Las Vegas casino business and a bad situation," Bohr says. "On premise was a wine whale"—a phrase adapted from the casino-industry term for a high roller, used for a certain kind of status-wine drinker—"from China who would only drink 1985 Romanée-Conti. The casino owner was in a pickle and needed

two magnums. Now, Romanée-Conti with age is not exactly something that you go to the grocery store for, and it's even difficult to find them at auction. But I never say no to Joe, because he always treats me right." Fortunately, Bohr had obtained some for another client and persuaded that client to relinquish the magnums as a favor. Within 24 hours, FedEx delivered the Romanée-Conti to the whale.

A more common and typically less complicated request is to source a birth-year wine. A client appealed to Paul Wasserman, head of the wine shop The Wine Hotel in Los Angeles, to find a bottle for chef Thomas Keller. "We had to dig up a birth-year wine for Keller as a gift upon the opening of Bouchon Beverly Hills. The gift giver couldn't spend a fortune." In the end Keller received a 1955 Certan de May, a wine that currently runs about \$800 for a bottle in good condition.

For wine buyers, a consultant can be more important than cash. Anyone with enough money can buy a case of 2009 Cheval Blanc (about \$12,000 for one of 6,000 cases produced) and wait for delivery in 2012. Buyers looking for stellar wines that are ready to drink now might need to enlist the help of some well-placed contacts as well.

The normal route for snaring rare and coveted items is auction. (Not everyone can link into a Bohr or Wasserman, someone who can make their score on the inside, far away from the gavel.) Some of the auction houses like Christie's are seeing a new crop of young buyers coming in with their friends for older bottles. Meanwhile, many mature collectors are shunning auction for a more intimate route. One Connecticut man, who has 7,000 bottles to his name, explained his aversion to auction: "Between hedge-fund types trying to outdo each other plus auction fees and New York taxes, I find they are bad value." He shops internationally and won't divulge more than one of his most recent scores—a 1961 JJ Prüm Wehlener Sonnenuhr Auslese. The wine had surfaced only once in recent history, in 2005 at wine auctioneer Acker Merrall & Condit, for \$379. He paid significantly less, he said, for a bottle that came from "an English gentleman's cellar." He worked hard for access and he isn't giving over the goods. Nothing short of waterboarding would get a collector to name his contacts, and they're equally reluctant to be identified themselves. "If it becomes known how to get great wines," a prominent source in the New York scene says, "then others will do the same thing and what will be left over for the rest of us?"

Should you choose to enter the obsessive world of wine collecting, you'll need to start schmoozing the right people. One great place to begin is the Bouilland Burgundy Symposia, a wine boot camp held three or four times per year that can cost over \$10,000 to attend. This marvelously intimate indulgence was founded by wine importer Becky Wasserman, the ultimate Burgundy insider, and is led by the likes of wine critics Allen Meadows, Anthony Hanson and Clive Coates. If you're a good guest, and Wasserman and her husband, Russell Hone, take a liking to you, you've found your perfect, priceless mentors.

Another great source is a working sommelier. Find one you have a rapport with and then get him on your side. You might begin with recommendations from his list, buying expensive and rare, and allowing him nice gulps to start. Top restaurants with wine lists thick in older vintages, like The French Laundry in California and Charlie Trotter's in Chicago, are obvious places to find influential sommeliers, but consider the whole wine staff. (Some of Bohr's clients today were his customers when he was a captain at Gramercy Tavern in New York.)

They can invite you to tastings, train your palate better than a wine class, and educate you on new and old releases.

Tim Kopec, who presides over the list at New York City restaurant Veritas, is generous with his suggestions. Even if you don't buy at auction, he recommends going to the pre-auction BYOB dinners. "You meet a lot of people," Kopec says. "A lot of good wine gets passed around." Ask the sommelier working who's the biggest collector in the room and send him a glass of something truly special that you've brought. This is like asking the best tango dancer in the room for a spin, so don't bring a bottle of Bordeaux less than 20 years old or some brand-new California cult wine, because you'll be marked as an ignoramus.

Of course, some missteps are rites of passage for all collectors, but there are safe havens. Specialty shops such as London's Antique-wine.com are good for older vintages, and in Paris, the posh new Bordeauxthèque is getting a lot of traffic. The 2,500-square-foot space tucked into the Galeries Lafayette flagship is the world's largest Bordeaux boutique. A joint venture with the Duclot Group, owned by the Moueix family (of Bordeaux wine estate Pétrus), Bordeauxthèque has become a prime target for vintage-happy tourists from Asia and Russia. The store's heart is a marble and alabaster rotunda, a rainbow of verticals that they promise come directly from the cellars of the château itself. This is a key point: When you're dealing with \$27,000 for a 1945 Mouton Rothschild, a guarantee of authenticity, in this world of faux bottles, is a nice comfort.

Another popular Paris shop is Lionel Michelin's De Vinis Illustribus. Once the spot where Hemingway bought his wines, the boutique is understated and devoted to the charms of older wine. Michelin's current headache is not getting futures for Bordeaux, but finding enough good wine from the lousy vintage of 1960 to make his customers who are turning 50 happy (1960 Château Chalon is one on his radar).

Unlike an exquisite painting or a strand of natural pearls, both of which tend to survive dinner parties intact, top wines are finite and ersatz bottles are rampant. Kopec, the Veritas sommelier, has begun to consult around the world, and one of his duties is keeping his clients' wine purchases authentic. "If all you want is 1982 Pétrus or 1947 Cheval Blanc, two of the most knocked-off bottles out there, you've got to watch out," Kopec says. "If you're new, you're an easy mark for the unscrupulous."

In wine as in the stock market, it makes sense to diversify. One does not live by status wines alone. Yet many clients are resistant. Paul Wasserman, for example, loves Château Chalon and vins jaunes, the oxidized wines from the Jura. "We joke in Los Angeles that it's crack," he says. "The wines are just exciting, but getting a client to buy some—even though a bottle of the Puffeney '02 will be \$80, cheap by most standards—it's a hard sell. But people like what they like."

TOP THREE:

1. **Bartolo Mascarello Barolo 2005, \$100.**
2. **Puffeney Vin Jaune 2000, \$70.**
3. **Clos des Lambrays Grand Cru 2006, \$130.**