

Wine Collecting

(unedited transcript)

Q: So I know you're knowledgeable about wine. Can you tell me a little about that hobby?

A: I don't drink much wine now, but I really delved into that big-time. In business in Chicago, and you know, the wine curve hadn't even started. This was the late '60s, early '70s. Even in Chicago there wasn't a lot of interest in wine. Maybe a little in the big cities. I barely even drank a beer in college, drank a little in grad school. But in Chicago I drank scotch because that's what my dad drank. But in Chicago, early on, I noticed these big events that Rosen and Shane or Foremost would have, these wine tastings. They'd rent a big ballroom at a hotel, it'd be ten bucks to get in, and they'd give you samples of everything. 150 wines. Great big room. And I was a single guy in Chicago, it was an event, and so I went.

I went to a few, and I thought, you know, this is really interesting. These wines come from all over the world, and they taste different. So I started reading an article here and there, investigating more, and it really sparked my curiosity. And you know, there's obviously a chemical part of the thing. They still don't quite understand how yeast turns sugar to alcohol.

Anyway, I went to more tastings and things. And it was the first time I lived in a major metropolitan area, and I was a young kid. There was an allure, a sophistication. It was exciting to explore these new horizons. And there was Playboy then too, Hefner lived in Chicago, that was hip and stuff. I never subscribed, but I've seen a few. (Laughter.) And Hefner was always in the headlines, and the whole Playboy thing was that mission of that enterprise was sophistication, erudition. They used to say kiddingly, but it was true, that the articles in Playboy were, you know, Hemingway wrote for them and stuff. So allure and sophistication.

And my curiosity about wine was piqued, too, by the chemistry – there's a geology component – there's history, which I love – so I really got involved. And the more tastings I went to, the more I realized which wines I liked best. By the time Cathy and I got married and bought a home, I started buying wine. They would sell by the case. These big liquor chains would have promotions just to expose product by eventing. And then the next generation of that, as successful as that was, we'll take our inventory and we'll auction it, give you a book of the inventory, and an

auction placard, and the starting price was their wholesale price, and the highest price was their retail price. So it was a win-win. And there was this automatic 10% discount. And then you'd get into this auction situation where you might buy a case of wine for \$40 more than it cost the store. And that might be half the price that the retail was.

Q: Did you ever buy wine as an investment?

A: No, it was always to drink and serve to guests. So anyway, in this house I built a little cellar, and I started buying these wines and tasting more, studying more. It's interesting, the geology side of things. The grapevine above ground is about 6 feet, but the root might be 20 or 30 feet, down through all those layers of soil and rock. So that accounts for all the different tastes.

So California wines were out there, but they weren't dominant then. It was still French and Italian wines, a little bit in Spain. And the white area, the Rieslings, in Germany. European wine was the top of the market. And Australia was creeping in a little bit. There was no Chile. They were making wine, but it didn't come to the States. And then studying the grapes – the classic grapes that make great wine are the Cab, the Pinot Noir, the Chardonnay. Those are the kings, the best wine grapes there are. Then all the other – Malbec, Sauvignon Blanc, and all those. So I started collecting these things, and I gravitated right away to the red Burgundies. And the red Bordeaux, which were a little more expensive, but nowhere near where they are now. And I liked Riesling, so I got into the German wines, particularly the Moselle wines as opposed to the Rhine wines. The middle Moselle area. And then some Californians, early on. So I got to know a lot about this.

And as it permeated into the business world and people got interested in wine, I'd always get the wine list at the dinner, and I'd say, "There's a feather. That has a good offshoot." Kind of following that sophistication motif. It was just attractive to me. So you know, what do sophisticated people do? What are their interests? I started to try to mimic that, as a 28-year-old. They drink wine, listen to classical music, they read, they know a lot of history. I mean, it was probably subconsciously, but as I look back on it now, in that time and place, it was a formative thing.

So anyway, I collected those wines, and I'd host tastings. I developed a tasting chart that was a combination of a semantic differential and a numerical ranking, and I had those printed up. I would have friends over, colleagues over. And I'd have a horizontal tasting, which is the same grape across a lot of different

vineyards, or I'd have a vertical tasting, which is the same vintage old-to-young. I bought these ordinary wineglasses, small ones, and I might have eight of them to a setting. I'd have eight or ten place settings, eight little glasses each, and give everyone a tasting chart.

I remember when we were in Cincinnati, I cordoned off a quarter of the basement and built a cellar there. The one in Chicago was kind of a pantry thing. So in Cincinnati, I built these racks, distressed them with a punch to make wormholes and stuff. So I could take people down there and show them around, which was fun.

Q: How many bottles did you have at the peak of your collecting?

A: It was probably about sixty cases, in the Cincinnati days. But I'd sit in there at the tasting, and at the beginning of the thing people would be serious, trying to be conscientious about the thing, and then an hour later the decibel level would have gone up. (Laughter.) And I still enjoy that, but I don't drink as much wine as I used to.

And I'm still fascinated by wine. I showed you that spirits library I've got, and a lot of those books are wine-related. I've got a wine app for my phone, a vintage chart, so if I'm shopping I can narrow it down.

That early cellar that I had, I had quite a few 1970 Burgundies and '71 Bordeaux, which were 10 out of 10 years. I remember giving a big-time buyer, major dollars spent buying, this fascinating woman. She'd married a coffee baron, and he had died or something. She'd occasionally wear a turban. Middle-aged widow in Chicago. Frances Rhodes. And most people hated her, but I found her really interesting. I took her to lunch one time, and I brought her two bottles of wine, French white Burgundies of the Montrachet, which is the name of the family that had the property. One was called the Bâtard-Montrachet, and the other was called the Chevalier-Montrachet. And the story was that when the father had died, he'd divided his best vineyards into Group A and Group B, and his firstborn son he gave the Chevalier, the "cavalier," vineyard, and to the bastard son he gave the Bâtard, or "bastard," vineyard. She loved that story. And I think, you know, a year later I asked if she liked the wine and she said she hadn't tried it yet. She was saving that. And it was, oh, no, you should drink that, it's a white and it won't keep!

Anyway, as we moved from house to house the collection dwindled. Insurers wouldn't cover the moves, and it was a hassle. And now I only keep 10 or 12 bottles around the house, for guests. And when I do have a drink now, I mainly drink bourbon. But I'm still interested in it, I still have the books and everything. I've been thinking about getting back into collecting. That would be fun to do again.