

Wine Collecting

When I started as a young man in business at age twenty-eight, the wine boom hadn't yet started. There might have been a little interest in New York or Los Angeles, but not yet in Chicago. I'd barely even sampled beer in college, and not much more in graduate school. In Chicago I started drinking scotch, because that's what my dad drank, and it seemed like a grown man's drink.

Then I noticed these big wine tasting events that wine merchants like Rosen and Shane or Foremost Wines would have. They'd rent a big ballroom at a hotel, you'd pay ten bucks to get in, and there would be samples of maybe 150 wines. I knew nothing about wine, but I was a single guy in Chicago with time on my hands, so I went, just for something to do and to meet new people.

After a few of these tastings, I started to develop an interest in wine. I read an article here and there, investigating more, and it really sparked my curiosity. It wasn't just about the taste, either. For one thing, the geology of winemaking is fascinating. A grapevine might be six feet tall above ground, but the root will reach 20 or 30 feet down, through many layers of soil and rock. The water the plant draws up has traces of minerals from all those layers, and that's part of what gives wines their subtly different tastes. I was intrigued by the chemistry, too - they still don't really know how yeast causes fruit sugars to turn to alcohol - and even by the history involved. I'd always been a history buff, and the history of winemaking and trade tells you a lot about the history of the world.

Soon I figured out which wines I preferred. I started studying the grape varieties. The classic grapes, the kings, are the Cabernet, the Pinot Noir, and the Chardonnay. Under those are the subtypes, like Malbec and Sauvignon Blanc, and so on.

Californian and Australian wines existed then, of course, but they weren't dominant yet. Chilean wine, which is so popular now, was unheard of in the States. European wine was at the top of the market.

Well, this was the first time I'd lived in a major metropolitan area, and I was a young kid. There was an allure to wine, a sophistication. It was exciting to explore these new horizons. Also, at that time, Playboy Magazine was a very big deal in Chicago; Hugh Hefner lived in Chicago, the Playboy Mansion was there. Hefner was always in the headlines. Yes, there were the centerfolds, but at that time Playboy was really selling itself on this mission of class, erudition. People used to say half-jokingly that they read Playboy for the articles, but you know, they did have some really interesting articles and short stories -- Hemingway wrote for them, Nabokov, Vonnegut. All that idea of sophistication was just so different from the small-town atmosphere of my childhood, and so attractive to me. So I tried to mimic what I thought sophisticated people would do: drink good wine, read, learn about history, listen to classical music. It was subconscious, mostly, but it definitely played a formative part in my life during my twenties.

When Cathy and I were married and bought our first home, I started buying wine. The same liquor chains that hosted those big tastings would have auctions. They'd give you an inventory catalogue and an auction placard, and they'd auction off wine by the case. The starting price would be their wholesale price, and the highest price was the retail price, and there was also an automatic 10% discount, so it was a win-win situation.

When I started collecting, I gravitated right away to the red Burgundies and the red Bordeaux, which were a little more expensive than the average, but nowhere near what they cost today. I also liked Riesling, so I got into the German wines, particularly Moselle wines as opposed to the Rhine wines. And I had a small collection of California wines early on, just as they were starting to catch on.

In our first home, I built some wine racks into our pantry. Then, when we moved to Cincinnati and had a little more room, I cordoned off a quarter of the basement and built a real wine cellar there. I built racks by hand and even distressed them with a punch, to make it look as if they had wormholes. Then I could take people down there and show them around, which was fun.

At the peak of my collecting, I probably had sixty cases. I never bought wine as an investment strategy - it was always to enjoy and to serve to guests.

Knowing about wine also helped me in business. At a business dinner, I'd always get the wine list, and I took pleasure in knowing details about the wines and ordering what I thought my colleagues and clients would enjoy.

I also sometimes gave wine as gifts to clients. Early on, I had quite a few bottles of 1970 Burgundy wines, which were really delicious. I remember one buyer named Frances Rhodes, the widow of a coffee baron. She was this dramatic lady who wore turbans and everything. Many people found her overbearing, but I liked her; she was such a character, and she was fun. I took her to lunch once and brought her two white Burgundies of the Montrachet. One was from a vineyard called the Bâtard-Montrachet, and the other was from one called the Chevalier-Montrachet. The story, as I told Mrs. Rhodes, was that when Monsieur Montrachet had died, he'd divided his best vineyards in two. To his firstborn son and heir he gave the Chevalier or "cavalier" vineyard, and to his illegitimate son he gave the Bâtard, or "bastard," vineyard. Well, she loved that story, and she got a real kick out of the gift because of it. In fact, I had to encourage her to drink the wine – she wanted to save it, but white wines don't improve with age the way that red wines do.

Eventually, once I built a nice collection, Cathy and I started hosting wine tastings. I designed, and had printed up, tasting charts that were a combination of a semantic differential and a numerical ranking. We'd have friends and colleagues over to our house, and I'd have a horizontal tasting, which is the same grape across many different vineyards, or a vertical tasting, which is the same vintage throughout the years. I bought a lot of very small, inexpensive wineglasses, so that at each place setting I could have perhaps eight separate glasses. Those tastings were a great success. At first, the guests would be serious, trying to be conscientious, you know, but by an hour into the tasting, the decibel level would have gone way up.

Eventually, I got so into hosting these tastings that I even started collecting specialty glassware. Most people know there are different shapes of glasses for red or white wine, but there are even different glasses for different types of red wine. And for Rhine wines there are these beautiful, unusual glasses, with tiny bowls and large, ornate stems. The stems actually are made with

different colors of glass, to reflect light up into the wine and enhance its color. Riesling glasses, for example, have dark green stems. There's a pleasure in learning these details and presenting the wine in the best way.

I carted that wine cellar from Chicago to Cincinnati to Kansas City to Georgia, always serving and drinking more than I replaced, so that over the years, it dwindled. Nowadays, I only keep ten or twelve bottles around for guests or for family dinners, and when I drink, I mostly enjoy a good bourbon. But I'm still fascinated by wine. I have a small library of books about spirits, and a lot of those books are wine-related. I've been thinking about starting a new collection. It would be fun to get back into collecting again and see what's new in the winemaking world.