

Wine Counterfeiting

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Until recently, the contents of a wine glass have only been scrutinized for their specific oenological merits. The rise in wine counterfeiting, however, is causing wine collectors, sommeliers, auction houses, and law enforcement to take a second look at their pinot noirs. This article investigates the growing problem of wine counterfeiting and discusses the high-tech tools employed by wine makers to maintain the authenticity and provenance of their most prized vintages.



The "Dirty Little Secret" of Wine Counterfeiting

In a 2002 Wine Business Monthly article, wine counterfeiting was described as the "dirty little secret" of the wine trade. According to Wine Spectator, it is estimated that approximately 5% of the wine sold in auctions and other secondary markets is counterfeit. The industry has successfully kept this growing crisis relatively quiet. More recently, however, a spate of highly publicized incidents has brought this crisis to public attention. In 1998, bottles of 1990 Penfold's Grange were revealed to be counterfeit, exhibiting typographical errors and inconsistent printing. Approximately 16,000 bottles of Sassicaia, retailed at \$100 to \$125 a bottle, were identified as fake and seized in Italy in 2000.

Perhaps the most renowned and shocking counterfeiting scandal came to light in 2007, when a lawsuit brought by billionaire wine collector William Koch sparked a widespread federal investigation of several notable auction houses, wine collectors, and importers. Koch sued Hardy Rodenstock, a German wine merchant who consigned several bottles, purported to be from Thomas Jefferson's wine collection, to Christie's for auction. Koch purchased four bottles, all exhibiting engraved initials "Th. J.," for \$500,000 in 1988. Years later, after checking Thomas Jefferson's own diligent records, and hiring a team of investigators, Koch discovered the bottles were counterfeit, and promptly filed suit against Rodenstock. The investigation also revealed 500 more counterfeit bottles in Koch's extensive wine collection, many purchased from notable American auction houses and wine dealers.

The negative publicity and federal scrutiny resulting from these counterfeit cases prompted the industry to acknowledge this issue, and encouraged the development of a wide array of highly advanced technological and scientific counterfeiting deterrents.

007 Wines: The Wine Industry Goes High-Tech to Fight Counterfeiting

To combat the practice of counterfeit labels, winemakers are using some of the same techniques used by the federal government to deter money counterfeiting and forgery. Microprinting is a successful anti-counterfeiting tool used for money printing, because only very high-quality printers have the capacity to print extremely small, making the reproduction of microprinted labels and money too expensive for most counterfeiters. Hewlett-Packard has developed a microprinting procedure that prints tiny codes into labels that can then be scanned for verification. Latent imaging and holograms, which have been used for authenticating passports, driver's licenses, and credit cards, are being printed onto wine bottles, creating eye catching, and unique identifiers.

Printing inks themselves are being developed as counter-counterfeiting measures. UV inks are being employed as counterfeiting deterrents: a portion of the wine label is printed with UV ink, only becoming visible under ultraviolet light. Thermochromatic inks, that change color or disappear when heated, are another popular ink innovation. Kodak, too, is working on anti-counterfeiting printing developments, placing distinctive markers that they describe capily "as forensically undetectable material" into printing inks, and other labeling materials that can be scanned and authenticated.

Technology has also moved beyond the wine label to address counterfeiting issues. Some vintners are embedding microchips into the corks of their most prized vintages to ensure their authenticity. Other companies are touting unexpected counter measures: **Applied DNA Sciences offers wineries the chance to genotype their wines so that their DNA can be recorded for absolute authentication. This technique of BioMaterial Genotyping has the potential to genetically identify individual wine profiles, wineries, and wine regions, giving customers the certitude of science.** In a similar, though decidedly more "low-tech" approach, Ann Colgin, of Colgin Cellars, introduces a personalized genetic marker to many of her bottles, puckering up and planting a lipsticked kiss on her labels to distinguish her wines from the rest.

Wine Counterfeiting: A Cause for Concern?

For the majority of imbibers, wine counterfeiting does not pose much of a threat. Wine counterfeiters only target high end wines, which protects many wine enthusiasts from being taken advantage of. Unless you regularly spend between \$100 and \$20,000 on a bottle of wine, you need not be skeptical of the contents of your wine glass.

For high end collectors, auction houses, and wineries, however, wine counterfeiting has shaken the industry. While it takes years of experience and first-hand knowledge to be truly adept at distinguishing counterfeits, there are some tell-tale features that identify the genuine vintages from the fakes. Pay attention to:

The Bottle:

Glass making techniques have changed significantly over time, becoming increasingly standardized as bottle making became more heavily industrialized. The bottles of vintages prior to 1982 should look markedly different from those made after this date. Specifically look for a seam in the construction of the bottle, indicating industrial production, and compare it to the purported vintage.

The Cork:

The corks for older vintages are often marked with certain identifiers. The vintage and brand of chateau bottled wines are always stamped on the cork, while older wines might bear the mark of specific wine merchants, since prior to 1970, wine was typically shipped in casks and then bottled by sellers themselves.

The Label:

Even without a forensic kit or UV light, the label can reveal the true identity of a wine. Some counterfeit wines were revealed simply by noticing typographic errors in the label. Spelling mistakes, missing accent marks, and font discrepancies are a strong indication of counterfeit. The label itself should reflect the wine's age: a pristine label on a very old vintage is cause for suspicion.

Provenance:

While the recent counterfeiting scandals have shown that provenance is not always the safest indication of vintage, it is still an important indication of authenticity. Wines that have the most extensively documented provenances are a pretty safe bet. If a wine's ownership history is questionable and not very well documented, its authenticity is suspect.