



Pssst... fancy a claret?

Wine expert **Susie Barrie** says a vintage red can sell for £13,000 – no wonder the fakers are moving in

The Wine Detectives
Monday 8.00pm **Radio 4**



IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT that you've treated yourself to an exceptional bottle of fine wine. Maybe it's a special occasion, so you've pushed the boat out and popped the cork on the most expensive bottle of your life. Or perhaps it's an investment – a nest egg with a difference, but a pricey one all the same.

What if you're then told your wine is a fake? It's a clever, decent copy – but a fake all the same. How do you feel? What do you do?

To the average wine drinker, the domain of fine wine holds an almost mythical fascination. The image is of a sophisticated world underpinned by traditional values and good old-fashioned decency. But all may not be as it seems: some estimates suggest that anything up to 20 per cent of all fine wine currently circulating in world markets (including the UK) is fake. That amounts to over \$1 billion of wine globally.

Although counterfeits in all their various forms have existed as long as wine has been made, it is only since the turn of the 20th century that the issue became a serious problem.

It was in the early 2000s that fine wine prices really began to rocket, fuelled in large part by young, inexperienced, but extremely wealthy US collectors. Fine wine became a highly investable commodity and the pickings were rich for skilled counterfeiters prepared to take a risk.

None did so more famously than the Indonesian-born Rudy Kurniawan, who was

arrested by the FBI in 2012 for wine fraud, convicted in 2014 and is currently serving a ten-year sentence in California.

The issue of counterfeit fine wine is, however, by no means confined to the US. Before his arrest, Kurniawan consigned a number of suspicious bottles, purportedly from the world-renowned Domaine de la Romanée-Conti estate in Burgundy, to an auction in London. In this instance the wines were withdrawn prior to the sale, but across the US, Asia, Europe and the UK, counterfeits are still being created, or recycled, and slipped onto the market.

So much so that there are people whose sole job it is to act as authenticators. One of the highest-profile and most experienced of these "wine detectives" is the American Maureen Downey, founder of winefraud.com.

ACCORDING TO DOWNEY, there are essentially three ways to create a counterfeit bottle of fine wine. Firstly you can refill an empty original bottle with a lesser wine – and those bottles are far easier to come by than you might imagine. Following a quick search on eBay, for instance, I found an empty bottle of 1984 Romanée-Conti, with the original cork, selling for £280. Considering the going price for a full bottle of this wine at one of the UK's leading fine wine merchants is currently almost £13,000, it's easy to see how tempting this form of fakery is to seasoned, wine-savvy criminals.

The forger may have to pay a fair whack for a bottle of lesser burgundy that is decent (and old) enough to fool unsuspecting buyers – but

nothing like the amount they could make from successfully selling a counterfeit.

The second way to make a fake is to re-create an existing wine. With enough knowledge about the fine wine in question, including the label, bottle shape and glass type, plus the taste of the wine in the given vintage, it's perfectly possible to create a very credible copy.

The final option is to make what Downey calls a "unicorn", a wine that never actually existed. Her favourite example of such a wine is the 1945 Romanée-Conti, which is bottled in magnums or

'Up to 20 per cent of fine wine currently circulating is fake'

bigger. According to Downey, only two barrels (608 bottles) of this vintage were ever made, and none of it was bottled in large format. However, she claims to have handled "more large format 1945 Romanée-Conti than the quantity of [75cl] bottles ever made", and that "there's a man in France making them every year".

Authenticators such as Downey use jeweller's loupes (magnifying eyeglasses), blue-light torches and digital microscopes to help identify and weed out fakes. But hundreds of these bottles are still being bought and sold, often unwittingly, every month.

In an attempt to protect their wines from the counterfeiters, producers of big-name estates around the world are adopting ever more sophisticated technologies: from micro-printing on the labels to radio frequency identification (RFID) chips, bank-card technology and tamper-proof seals.

One way for a buyer to ensure authenticity is to buy directly from an official agent. In the UK, fine wine merchants represent some of the world's most expensive and sought-after wines and you can be sure that you're being sold the genuine article. Some will also offer an authentication service based on extensive cataloguing of the various bottles and labels used by the châteaux going back several decades.



In spite of all this, there is still reluctance on the part of many producers, auction houses, vendors and collectors to speak out about the extent of the problem of counterfeiting. People don't like admitting being taken for a ride – and they are also fearful of the effect that speaking out might have on the reputation of their business, or of a particular producer or the fine wine market in general. But shining a light on this issue is

the only way to find the extent of the problem – and to start to counter it effectively. While most of us don't buy super-expensive bottles of wine, there are also examples of more everyday wines being faked. None of us would like to think we're wasting our hard-earned cash on dodgy plonk, however pricey or cheap the bottle may be. Time to address the issue head on – and give the wine detectives the chance to start fighting back.

Susie Barrie is a Master of Wine and broadcaster who runs Wine Festival Winchester



JANE ANDERSON'S PICK OF THE WEEK

Woman's Hour
Monday–Friday 10.00am **Radio 4**

Angelina Jolie has done one on refugee women's health and sexual violence in conflict. Mary Berry has held court on gardening as therapy and the benefit of good manners. JK Rowling has shone a light on orphanages and asked why so many children continue to be cared for in institutions. And Kim Cattrall has railed against prejudice directed at ageing women – especially those who chose not to have children.

The *Woman's Hour* takeover week is back and, as always, it is taking no prisoners. Five days and five remarkable women: children's book writer and illustrator Shirley Hughes (Monday); five-time Paralympic champion Ellie Simmonds (below, Tuesday); Dame Ann Dowling, the first female Cambridge professor of engineering (Wednesday); actress, writer, producer and director Zawe Ashton (Thursday); and Karen Blackett, UK chair of Mediacom, one of the world's leading media agencies (Friday).

As guest editors they have chosen subjects for enquiry that include: a masterclass for aspiring picture-book writers and illustrators; keeping stylish at 90; the importance of both ocean conservation and volunteering with the Brownies; why girls make the decisions they do at GCSE; the joy of flying a plane; why empathy is the key to making diversity work; and whether brands really can make the world a better place.

Something for everyone, in other words, regardless of age, gender, race or politics.

The takeover is back with a vengeance.



AMBRIDGE DIARY

The Archers this week...

The Bridge Farm land deal is finally signed, but there's still plenty of tension between Pat and Justin, while Tom and Helen are squabbling over how to spend the money. Looks as if we can expect family relations to remain at an all-time low for a while yet.

Over at the crease, Rex defends Anisha in the face of Will's attitude to women on the cricket team. Such gallantry leads to a burying of the hatchet between Rex and Anisha, but they look to be keeping their relationship casual. For now.

Eddie, meanwhile, reassures Clarrie about his over-the-top advertising methods. But when Lynda finds out, she's far from impressed and comes up with a plan. **DAVID BROWN**