

The
Billionaire's Vinegar

THE MYSTERY OF THE WORLD'S
MOST EXPENSIVE BOTTLE OF WINE



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CHAPTER I



LOT 337

A HUSH HAD COME OVER THE WEST ROOM. PHOTOGRAPHERS' flashes strobed the standing-room-only crowd silently, and the lone sound was the crisp voice of the auctioneer. To the world, Michael Broadbent projected a central-casting British cool, but under the bespoke suit, he was practicing a kind of mind control that calmed him in these situations. The trick was to focus narrowly, almost autistically, on numbers: lot number, number of bidders, paddle numbers, bid steps.

Even after all these years, he still found it bracingly creative to conjure excitement out of a heap of dirty old bottles. No matter how many of them the fifty-eight-year-old Broadbent might see, he retained his boyish sense of marvel at the longevity of wine. Inert antiques were all very well, but there was magic in old wine—a mysterious and wonderful alchemy in something that could live and change for two hundred years and still be *drinkable*.

Auctioneer was Broadbent's most public role, but it was only one of his distinctions in the wine world. In London he cut a familiar figure, pedaling to work each day on his Dutch ladies' bicycle

with basket, legs gunning furiously, a trilby hat perched on his head. Often he was elsewhere, and he kept up a brutal schedule. As founding director of the Christie's wine department, he had spent the last two decades crisscrossing the planet, cataloging the dank and dusty contents of rich men's cellars, tasting tens of thousands of fine wines, and jotting his impressions in slender red hardcover notebooks. Those unassuming scribblings amounted to the most comprehensive diary of wine ever recorded. That diary now consisted of sixty of the Ideal notebooks, and he had collected them in a published tome that was the standard reference on old wines. Under Broadbent's direction, Christie's had largely invented and come to dominate the global market in old and rare wines. While Christie's as a whole was smaller than its great rival, Sotheby's, its wine department was more than twice as big, bringing in £7.3 million the previous season.

Broadbent's peers in the trade acknowledged that his palate was the most experienced in the world. His pocket textbook on wine tasting, the definitive work of its kind, was in its eleventh edition, having sold more than 160,000 copies, and had been translated into eight languages. Any collector hosting an event that aspired to any seriousness made sure to invite Broadbent and his famously sensitive nose. When he arrived at a wine gathering, if so much as a trace of woodsmoke or the merest whiff of cigarette ash besmirched the air, Broadbent would scrunch up his nose, and everything would come to a halt while windows and doors were flung open.

A lean six feet tall, Broadbent had a fringy sweep of whitening hair, and his smile, distinctly hail-fellow-well-met, was tempered by the cocked eyebrow of a worldly man. He looked more aristocratic than many of the dukes and princes alongside whom he sat on Christie's board of directors.

When Broadbent tasted, he would lay his wristwatch next to his little red notebook, so that he could time the wine's changes in the glass. During lulls, if a piano was on hand, he might charm

guests with some Brahms, or he might go off by himself to sketch the local scenery.

He was happy to opine, at these tastings, on the wines under consideration. He had a knack for putting wine into memorable words. Sometimes he borrowed from literature, describing one wine as “black as Egypt’s night.” More often, he minted his own rakish descriptions, seeing a woman in every wine. A ’79 Pétrus reminded him of Sophia Loren: “You can admire them, but you don’t want to go to bed with them.” A double magnum of ’47 Cantenac-Brown evoked chocolate and “schoolgirls’ uniforms.”

THE TASTE OF the wine he was selling right now in London, just past 2:30 p.m. on Thursday, December 5, 1985, was impossible to know. December 5 had special meaning for Broadbent; it was the same date that James Christie, in 1766, had held the auction house’s very first sale. Moments earlier, Broadbent had stepped up to the rostrum in a three-piece suit with a pocket square, and peered out at the room through his eyeglasses.

Lot 337 was the first item of the afternoon session and had been carefully removed from its green felt berth in a glass case nearby. Lucy Godsall, a secretary in Broadbent’s office, held the bottle aloft for the room to see. She looked very Christie’s—blond, headband, pearl necklace—and Broadbent liked her; she was smart, hard-working, and pretty.

Broadbent had never sold anything quite like this before. A Château Lafite from 1787, it was the oldest authenticated vintage red wine ever to come up for auction at Christie’s. And that was the least of its merits. The bottle was engraved with the initials “Th.J.” As Broadbent had described it in the auction catalog, “Th.J. are the initials of Thomas Jefferson.” Almost miraculously, the bottle was full of wine and appeared to have survived two centuries intact. The container itself was beautiful and distinctive. “This is one time,”

Broadbent quipped to the crowd, “when the buyer will get something back on the bottle.”

The admittedly fragmentary tale of how the bottle had been found only added to its mystique. According to Hardy Rodenstock, the German collector who had consigned the bottle to Christie's, in the spring of 1985 workers tearing down a house in Paris had broken through a false wall in the basement and happened upon a hidden cache of extremely old wines. The Lafite, inscribed with the initials of the Founding Father, who had lived in Paris from 1784 to 1789 and was the foremost American wine connoisseur of his day, had been among them.

The integrity of the seals, and the high fill levels, Rodenstock had told Broadbent, were remarkable for their age. The cellar had been almost hermetically preserved, its steady temperature in the sweet spot of 50 to 57 degrees Fahrenheit. Rodenstock theorized that the bottles had been walled up to protect them during the chaos of the French Revolution, and had lain undisturbed for two hundred years.

Not surprisingly, Rodenstock refused to divulge the precise location, the exact number of bottles, or anything else about the discovery, despite Broadbent's entreaties. Rodenstock was the leading private collector in Europe, and he had already made a name for himself in rare-wine circles as an unusually skilled bottle hunter. Though he was a longtime customer of Christie's, Rodenstock was a competitor when it came to obtaining private cellars. Private-cellar purchases were often cash deals that went unreported to tax authorities. A certain reticence about his sources was to be expected.

Broadbent felt there were a couple of possibilities. One was that the bottle had indeed been discovered during the excavations of the old Marais district in Paris, much of which had recently been torn up and redeveloped. A rumor less credited by Broadbent, and which he had no intention of putting in the catalog copy, was that the bottle had been part of some sort of Nazi cellar.

Broadbent knew Rodenstock well, trusted him, and would not normally be too concerned with how he had obtained the bottle. But to Broadbent's annoyance, a historical researcher in America had recently been making noises in the press, questioning whether the bottle was in fact Jefferson's. Broadbent had conducted his own research and was satisfied that the circumstantial evidence argued overwhelmingly in favor of the attribution. He couldn't prove it, but on balance, the inducements to proceed outweighed any risk of embarrassment.

The auctioneer's delight in an object that would sell itself accounted for only half of Broadbent's excitement. There was also the oenophile's anticipation, for Lafite was Broadbent's favorite wine. He loved the way it developed in the glass, revealing new depths and facets as it breathed. He thought Lafite the acme of elegance, a racehorse beside the snow horse of Mouton and the cart horse of Latour. But to open a bottle as old as this was to play roulette; Broadbent couldn't help wondering what it might taste like. And how to price such an object? When cataloging it for auction, Broadbent gave the estimate as "inestimable." He was rather pleased with his pun.

A number of commission bids—those placed in advance by bidders who could not, or didn't want to, attend—had come in. Château Lafite-Rothschild, modern successor to the eighteenth-century vineyard, had placed a £5,000 bid; this had been so eclipsed by other advance bids that the Château was out of the running before the session even began. Broadbent could feel confident that a new single-bottle price record was about to be set.

In the West Room, he opened the bidding at £10,000. At first the bids came slowly, moving in £2,000 increments. A paddle would rise here. Another would bob up there. But things quickly heated up, and soon several people were raising paddles at every step.

Broadbent knew everyone in the London trade, and many of them were here in this room, but he reserved his greatest expectations for

the Americans. The Jefferson connection, the strength of the dollar (it had hit a historic high earlier in the year), recent auction history—all these factors would surely tempt a deep-pocketed Yank to repatriate the bottle. Marvin Shanken, publisher of the magazine *Wine Spectator*, was here today, but Broadbent's highest hopes were aimed at the fellow who sat left of the center aisle from where Broadbent stood: Christopher "Kip" Forbes, the thirty-five-year-old son of publisher Malcolm Forbes.

Broadbent didn't think much of Malcolm Forbes, finding him to be "a mean sort of chap." He knew that the American publisher collected first growths, the top-ranked Bordeaux reds, though only in lousy vintages. But it was undeniable that Forbes had money and would spend it for something he wanted, and Kip soon entered the bidding.

The price volleyed remorselessly to £20,000, then £30,000. At £40,000, it seemed, fleetingly, that a cap might have been reached, but the bidding resurged. Only after Kip Forbes bid £50,000—\$75,000—did all the other paddles stay down. This was a new record for a bottle of wine, by a wide margin. The previous record, set the year before at an auction in Dallas, was \$38,000 for a Jéroboam (equivalent to six bottles) of 1870 Mouton-Rothschild; the record for a normal-size bottle was \$31,000, paid in 1980 for an 1822 Lafite. Today's price now far exceeded Broadbent's most wishful imaginings. He felt vindicated by his decision to go ahead with the sale.

He began the ritual countdown. "Any more?"

He scanned the crowd for takers. "Any more?"

Again Broadbent looked around the room, daring the bidders with his eyes to outdo Forbes. Nothing.

Then, at the rear of the room, he saw a movement.

CHAPTER 2



INCOGNITO

ON FEBRUARY 22, 1788, WRITING FROM PARIS, THOMAS Jefferson placed an order for 250 bottles of Lafite. In the past he would have sent the letter to one of the merchants through whom he had previously made his wine requests. But on this occasion he wrote directly to the owner of the property, having recently become wise to the dangers of doing otherwise.

Now forty-four years old, Jefferson was an especially tall man by eighteenth-century standards, topping six foot two, with an erect posture, a ruddy, freckled face, and fair, reddish hair. He had spent the last four years as American commissioner, and then minister, to France. Faint tremors of class struggle had become the insistent rumblings of the early French Revolution, and Jefferson was torn. The author of the Declaration of Independence sympathized with the poor and oppressed, while the gourmand and the architect of Monticello was drawn to the refinements of salon culture.

He had welcomed the chance to come to Europe. Jefferson's beloved wife, Martha, had died when he was just thirty-nine, leaving him a grieving widower and single father. And Jefferson had

dreamed of coming to France since he was a young man. The diversions of Paris were exactly what he needed to lift him out of his depression. In contrast to his earthier fellow minister, Ben Franklin, who was legendary in the City of Light for wearing a beaver hat and biting the heads off asparagus, Jefferson fit right in.

Though he called himself “a savage of the mountains of America,” in France Jefferson took to wearing a powdered wig and a topaz ring. His mansion on the Champs-Élysées was a place of blue silk damask curtains, crystal decanters, a well-stocked wine cellar, and a household staff that included a *frotteur*, whose sole function was to clean the parquet floors by spinning around with brushes strapped to his feet. Intoxicated with the French high life, Jefferson hosted frequent dinner parties, serving some of the best wines of France.

Jefferson was not the only Founding Father who was fond of wine. Franklin, for one, kept a substantial cellar in Paris and called wine “proof that God loves us and that he likes to see us happy.” But Jefferson, who had been ordering wine for many years, had recently acquired an unmatched breadth and depth of knowledge about the subject.

Not only had he learned which were the best wines, but he had also become savvy about the mischief to which an unwary consumer might fall prey. In his 1788 letter to the owner of Lafite, Jefferson spelled out his concern directly: “If it would be possible to have them bottled and packed at your estate, it would doubtless be a guarantee that the wine was genuine, and the drawing-off and so forth well done.” Jefferson owed his newfound wine sophistication to a life-changing trip he had made the year before.

THE TIME WAS ripe for an escape from Paris. He had become infatuated with a married English-Italian woman, Maria Cosway, but by early 1787 the romance seemed to have fizzled. In February, with

his daughter Patsy safely cloistered in a convent school and his official duties in the hands of William Short, his trusted personal secretary, Jefferson embarked on a tour of France and northern Italy. He had dislocated his right wrist in a mysterious accident—historians have speculated that he was trying to jump over a fence to impress Cosway—and he justified the trip as being curative.

His itinerary also happened to take him through all of the country's major wine regions. In view of Jefferson's personal debts, which were already substantial, and the momentous challenges facing the struggling young country that was paying his way in Europe, the decision to take a three-and-a-half-month vacation could be seen as almost comically self-indulgent. Patsy Jefferson noted rather freshly, in a letter to her father a week after he left Paris, that she was "inclined to think that your voyage is rather for your pleasure than for your health."

Jefferson had been keen on wine for a long time. When he began building Monticello in 1769, at the age of twenty-six, the first part constructed was the wine cellar. As the second governor of Virginia, Jefferson gained access to an official stock of Bordeaux, Burgundy, German Rieslings, and Champagne. One story, passed down among Jefferson's slaves, held that his Virginia cellar had been emptied three years before he left for France, when British troops, commanded by the reviled Banastre "The Butcher" Tarleton, destroyed Jefferson's casks and smashed his bottles with their swords, flooding the dirt floor.

It wasn't just drinking wine that interested Jefferson. True independence, he was sure, meant agricultural self-sufficiency. Americans would have to make their own wine if they didn't want to rely on imports. Jefferson had first planted vines at Monticello in 1771, and a few years before his trip to Europe, he had encouraged an Italian immigrant named Filippo Mazzei to grow European wine-grape varieties by giving him 193 acres in Monticello's backyard. Both efforts failed, but Jefferson remained hopeful for American wine.

Now, as his horse-drawn carriage clattered along the post roads of France, he at last had a chance to see the most fabled vineyards in the world. He traveled light, bringing only a single trunk with him. Wanting to experience the real France, unfiltered by preferential treatment and unburdened by diplomatic obligations, he traveled incognito, the plan being to hire a different valet in each town, so that no one would find out who he was.

Jefferson drank France in with guzzling intemperance. Aesthete and classicist, he basked in the scattered ruins of the Roman Empire. Social observer, he talked his way into people's homes to see how they lived, ate their bread, and lay on their beds as if to rest but really to feel their softness. Farmer and wine aficionado, he moved from Burgundy to the Rhône Valley to Bordeaux; in each of these wine-growing areas, he closely studied the grapes grown, the composition of the soil, and the techniques of winemaking. He scrutinized the training of vines and the disparate blending methods. He obsessed over the production capacities of each château and the prices charged for each wine.

Jefferson was compulsively inquisitive, and he spoke French well enough to grill laborers and cellarmasters alike. How many years before a vine started to yield good fruit? Twenty-five. Did the winemakers dung their soil? A little. Did the vineyard overseer's pay include board? No, just room and drink. Jefferson's interest was more than pedantic; he was devouring all information that might help his young country to make its own wine.

At Aix-en-Provence, he luxuriated in the southern sun and soaked his aching wrist ten times a day in the spa town's mineral-rich waters. At Agen, he ate the tiny thrushes called ortolans. For nine days, Jefferson left the road altogether, barging two hundred miles from the Mediterranean coast up the canal of Languedoc to Toulouse, serenaded by trees full of nightingales. He loved traveling this way, and divided his time between walking on the bank alongside the slow-moving boat and sitting in his coach, which

rested wheelless atop the barge. Away from the crush of duty and unknown to those around him, he was able to relax and reflect—and perhaps get Maria Cosway out of his mind. During the entire 3,000-mile trip, he wouldn't write a single letter to her.

Back on the road, he made the remaining journey to Bordeaux in three days. Along the way, he passed through rich farmland planted with corn, rye, and beans. As soon as he ferried west across the Garonne, just south of Bordeaux proper, the picture changed. On May 24, as he rolled through the district of Sauternes and entered Bordeaux, he looked out through the glass windows of his carriage and saw nothing but grapevines. An ocean away, the next day, the Constitutional Convention opened in Philadelphia.

In Bordeaux, Jefferson lingered. Though Burgundy's reputation as a wine region was older, a combination of circumstances had led to Bordeaux's greater fame abroad. Burgundy, being farther inland, had less access to export channels, and the complex ownership structure of the vineyards made the region hard to understand. The wine itself was unreliable; the region's northern position meant more underripe vintages, and the fickleness of the thin-skinned pinot noir, the grape used to make Burgundy's reds, only aggravated the problem.

Jefferson had told a colleague that he wanted to visit Bordeaux because it was one "of those seaports with which we trade." The most important port in France, it served as the main staging area for trade with its West Indian colonies, a funnel for the bounty of southern France. But its role as a commercial hub was probably the least of the city's attractions for Jefferson. Wine accounted for a full third of the cargo leaving Bordeaux, and some two-thirds of the region's inhabitants were involved in some way in the business. Although in the course of his life Jefferson was a serial monogamist when it came to his favorite wines, regularly announcing some new one as supreme in his affections, his high esteem for Bordeaux would remain constant.

The place was booming. White stone mansions for the ascendant class of lawyers and merchants were going up in the commercial core; along its fringe the city was sprouting fresh streets. Bordeaux was now among the loveliest and most prosperous of European cities—with none of the wretched hunger and social turmoil rampant in other parts of France. Seven years before Jefferson arrived, Europe's grandest new theater had been erected here, a neoclassical edifice fronted by a majestic portico with twelve soaring Corinthian columns.

Jefferson checked into the Hôtel de Richelieu in the city center and, over the next four days, divided his time between attending to business and being a tourist. A packet of letters and books, forwarded from Paris, awaited him here. Keeping up with correspondence was not, for Jefferson, simply a matter of putting pen to paper. He carried with him a portable copying press, and made duplicates of every letter he sent. In a separate journal he kept a record of every letter written and received. Now, writing with the special ink required to make copies, Jefferson spent a morning replying to correspondence. He also came to the aid of Thomas Barclay, the former American consul, who had recently traveled to North Africa to negotiate a peace with the Barbary pirates. Barclay had been released from debtor's prison in Bordeaux a few days before, and Jefferson lent him 1,000 livres, fudging the expense to the United States as being “on acct. of [Mr. Barclay's] Marocco [*sic*] mission.” Barclay was about to return to Paris, and Jefferson bet him a bottle of Burgundy that he would beat him there.

Not one to let nation-building get in the way of a little sight-seeing, Jefferson visited the ruins of a third-century Roman arena and, given as he was to making constant comparisons, measured the height, width, and thickness of the bricks. He made a day trip southwest to Château Haut-Brion, in Graves, where the vines were just beginning their annual flowering. Haut-Brion was likely the only leading Bordeaux château Jefferson had time to visit.

On his third night in the city, Jefferson saw a play at the Grand Théâtre, which was only a few minutes' walk from his hotel. The girls who danced and sang there, according to the city's "scandalous chronicle," were kept, at lofty salaries, by Bordeaux merchants. Jefferson enjoyed meals featuring the season's produce of peas, cherries, and strawberries, and he admired the procession of elms along the Quai des Chartrons, an arcing strand that followed the curve of the Garonne River as it cut through the middle of the city.

The quay—ugly, muddy, stone-pocked, and only sporadically paved—was alive with the stir of commerce. It was the center of Bordeaux's wine trade. Wagons drawn by cream-colored oxen wheeled past, and ocean-bound schooners heaped with barrels plied the broad waterway. The merchants had their offices here, and at the shore, barges took on and put off their quietly sloshing freight. Increasingly the wine was going to England, which had recently concluded a low-tariff trade pact with France, and where the upper and middle classes were developing a taste for better wines.

The first modern wine brands, with special status accorded to particular estates and vintages, were just then coming to prominence. The recent reinvention of the cork and the glass bottle, pioneered by the ancient Romans but long forgotten, had renewed the idea of deliberately aging wine. And the idea was now made practicable by the development of cylindrical bottles, which could be laid down horizontally, efficiently stacked en masse, and left to mature in the damp and darkness of a personal wine cellar. It was the finest wines, those with the greatest capacity to improve with age, that were set aside rather than consumed immediately. And the French wines that turned out to be best suited for aging were the reds of Bordeaux.

If the building boom in the city center was fairly recent, for nearly a century a "fury of planting" had been transforming the marshy terrain in the surrounding countryside, traditionally sown

with grain, into a sprawling quality-wine district. Wine had been made here in smaller quantities for much longer. The climate, tempered by breezes off the Atlantic and its estuaries, was hospitable to the grape, and through centuries of trial and error, the Bordelais had learned much about vine-growing and vinification. They had found and demarcated the best sites—with the optimal exposure to sun, drainage, and gravelly soil—and had begun to identify the grapes most suited to the area: cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot, and malbec.

Claret, as the English called the light, blended style of red wine particular to Bordeaux, was well established by now, as were the top vineyards; a specific hierarchy had been generally acknowledged since at least 1730, when Bordeaux brokers divided the vineyards into three classes. The ranking mirrored the prices different wines fetched on the market and had been consistent for more than fifty years.

Until now, when Jefferson had ordered wine from Bordeaux, he had done so through an agent, and his requests had been generic. Just a year earlier he had asked John Bondfield, America's consul in Bordeaux who had supplied Ben Franklin with wine, to arrange a shipment of twelve dozen bottles of red Bordeaux and twelve dozen of white, "of fine quality," in either bottles or casks, as Bondfield saw fit. For these bottles, Jefferson paid two livres each. Now that he was in Bordeaux, Jefferson could see the quality pyramid for himself. He learned that the best white Bordeaux came from the Sautes district, and that the best of these was a sweet wine called Yquem, which sold the equivalent of 150,000 bottles annually. And he learned that four red wines, from vineyards planted in the seventeenth century, fetched the highest prices of all.

Haut-Brion, variously spelled by English writers as Ho Bryan, Oberon, and Obrian, had been the first of the Bordeaux wines to be specifically sought after in England. In 1663 the diarist Samuel Pepys noted that he drank "a sort of French wine called Ho Bryan

that hath a good and most particular taste that I ever met with,” and fourteen years later the political philosopher John Locke visited the estate. By around 1700, the *London Gazette* was announcing coffee-house auctions of “Lafitte, Margouze and La Tour,” all located on the tongue of land northwest of the city known as the Médoc. The Duc de Richelieu, a libertine exiled to Bordeaux in the middle of the century, held all-night orgies and developed a taste for the wines of the region, in particular Lafite. Upon his return to the Versailles court of Louis XV, the duke spread the Lafite gospel, telling the king it was “the secret of eternal youth,” and it became a fashionable wine. By the time of Jefferson’s visit in 1787, the privileged quartet that would subsequently be known as the *premiers crus*, or first growths, sold for up to two and a half times the price of the next-best wines. Haut-Brion sold the equivalent of 75,000 bottles a year, Latour 125,000, Margaux 150,000, and Lafite 175,000.

Jefferson recorded all this, as well as the names of several second- and third-tier wines, among the latter a wine called Mouton. He also learned about Bordeaux vintages. The rule of vintage variation was ancient: If a crop’s quality fluctuates with annual weather, so must anything made from that crop. The most famous wine in ancient Rome was called Falernian, and its 121 BC vintage was legendary. AD 1540 was a storied vintage for Steinwein, a white wine favored by King Ludwig II of Bavaria.

In Bordeaux’s off years, vintage purity fell by the wayside, and vintages would be blended; in good years, the wines were made separately. When Jefferson visited the region, the finest available year was 1784, “the best vintage which has happened in nine years,” as Jefferson wrote to a friend. “I may safely assure you therefore that, according to the taste of this country and of England there cannot be a bottle of better Bordeaux produced in France.”

Before sailing north from the Quai on May 29, five days after his arrival, Jefferson put his new knowledge to use, ordering 252 bottles of 1784 Haut-Brion from a local merchant, including

seventy-two bottles to be sent directly to his brother-in-law Francis Eppes in Virginia. "I cannot deny myself the pleasure of asking you to participate of a small parcel of wine I have been chusing for myself," he wrote to Eppes. "I do it the rather as it will furnish you a specimen of what is the very best Bourdeaux wine." Instead of Haut-Brion, however, the merchant filled the order with 1784 Margaux.

Jefferson got back to Paris on June 10, 1787, refreshed and perhaps ready for another romantic attachment. The next month his younger daughter, Polly, arrived from America, attended by a light-skinned, fourteen-year-old slave girl named Sally Hemings.

Despite his three-and-a-half-month trip, Jefferson's connoisseurship was in one respect still a blunt instrument. His personal taxonomy of wine was divided into a mere five categories: sweet, acid, dry, silky, and astringent. The characteristics he was most concerned about were rudimentary things like hardness, since the wine needed to survive long, bumpy journeys. In his letters he would enthuse about a particular wine's "strength" or "flavor," or speak of "the best vintage" of a wine or of "the most celebrated" producers. That was about as precise as he got.

But in a number of important ways, Jefferson's 1787 trip had made him the greatest wine connoisseur writing in any language at the time. Learning the best vineyards and vintages was part of it, but two shifts in Jefferson's behavior hinted at a deeper, more hard-won sophistication. He was no longer asking someone else which wines to buy, instead deciding for himself. And he was becoming skeptical about the integrity of the wines, an issue seemingly as old as wine itself. He now resolved to make it his standard practice to order wine straight from the châteaux. That September he told a friend that, when it came to buying direct, he could "assure you that it is from them alone that genuine wine is to be got, and not from any wine merchant whatever."

There were all sorts of reasons and ways to fiddle with the prod-

uct. Some meddling was customary “improvement,” and some was the work of charlatans. Dutch merchants dosed claret with brandy to help it survive rugged journeys to distant markets, and added sugar and spices to bring it in line with the Low Country taste for sweeter, more resinous wine. The Bordeaux negociants who sold to the English market tailored the wine to that nation’s gin-and-Port-benumbed palates by spiking it with stronger Spanish or French wine as well as distilled spirits. Newer wine might be mixed with old to extend its shelf life; water, or inferior wine, might be mixed with good stuff in order to stretch it; less appealing vintages were worked on to make them taste better.

None of this was new. In the *Canterbury Tales*, the Pardoner warned his listeners to avoid “mysteriously” mixed wines. Much earlier, Pliny bemoaned the problem of doctored wine: “Now not even the greatest can enjoy pure wines anywhere. . . . Trade morality has come to such a pass that only labels and cellar names are sold, and the must is adulterated while it is still in the press. And the result is a strange paradox; the wine of least repute is least sophisticated and most wholesome.” The Romans were so liberal in their manipulations—using smoke, fire, and seawater to accelerate the aging process—that British writer H. Warner Allen would later describe their era as “the Golden Age of Wine Faking.”

It remained a problem in Thomas Jefferson’s day. An early-nineteenth-century recipe called for a “very inferior French wine sold to the adulterators” to be “mixed with rough cider, and coloured to resemble claret” by adding cochineal and vegetable dye. Just seven years after Jefferson’s visit to Bordeaux, Paris officials analyzed wine samples from sixty-eight merchants and declared that only eight of them could be legitimately called wine. During his Bordeaux visit, Jefferson spoke with a broker named Desgrands, who said he and his peers never mixed the best wines, but only the lesser ones, and then to improve them.

Upon his return to Paris, Jefferson was duly skeptical. “I would

prefer to receive it directly from your hands,” he wrote from Paris to Monsieur d’Yquem in December of 1787, requesting 250 bottles of 1784 Yquem, “because I would be sure that it is genuine, good and sound.” The following year, he placed his order with the owner of Lafite.

ON SEPTEMBER 17, 1789, Jefferson hosted a dinner party in Paris. Among the guests were Gouverneur Morris—a high-born, peg-legged New York lawyer and politician who kept the same mistress as the bishop of Autun, also known as Talleyrand; the Marquis de Lafayette, the red-haired, thirty-two-year-old aristocrat-revolutionary; the Duc de La Rochefoucauld, with whom Jefferson liked to discuss farming experiments, and who a few years later would be stoned to death and disemboweled by a mob in front of his wife and mother; and the Marquis de Condorcet, the vaunted mathematician and *philosophe* who had a bleached pallor and was given to biting his nails.

It was chilly out, and a fire crackled in the drawing room. The house, at the intersection of the Champs-Élysées and the rue de Berri on the western edge of the city, had a spare, half-empty look; much of the contents had already been crated for shipment to Monticello, since Jefferson was soon to quit Paris for what he thought would be a six-month leave in America. Two months earlier, a mob had overrun the Bastille. Paris was in tumult, and Jefferson had requested that guards be posted outside; his house had been robbed three times recently, the candlesticks taken from his dining table, and he had put bars and bells on the windows.

The group sat down to eat at four-thirty in the afternoon, and they discussed rumors that Louis XVI was plotting an escape from France. Paris was suffering a bread shortage, but the repast was almost certainly accompanied by fine wines. Jefferson’s slave James Hemings had learned French cooking through several apprentice-

ships and now ran Jefferson's Paris kitchen. While recognizing that he had more to learn from Europeans about the pleasures of the table than they from him, Jefferson was not strictly deferential. During his stay in Paris, he pressed pecans on the French, served corn on the cob grown in his Paris garden, and accompanied it with Virginia ham.

Nine days later, Jefferson departed overland for Le Havre, from which he crossed the English Channel and boarded a ship bound for the infant United States. Among the eighty-six packing cases of European finery that he had bought and shipped back to America were hampers full of various wines, including two containers earmarked for John Jay and George Washington.

Jefferson intended to return to Paris, but Gouverneur Morris bet William Short, Jefferson's secretary, a beaver hat that Jefferson would not. As it turned out, Morris won the bet: Jefferson was appointed secretary of state. His majordomo was left to dismantle the Paris household. He sold his master's horses, chariot, cabriolet, and paper press, and packed up the rest of his furniture for shipment to Philadelphia, swaddling each box in oilcloth. Each of Jefferson's books he wrapped in paper.

Amid the growing chaos of Revolutionary France, a silver-plated harness for Jefferson's horses, as well as his coach cushions, was stolen. Some wine, too, remained unaccounted for. One hundred twenty-five bottles of 1784 Haut-Brion that Jefferson had ordered in May 1788 never arrived. And a batch of provisions that arrived at Monticello just before Christmas of 1789 was short one box of assorted wines.