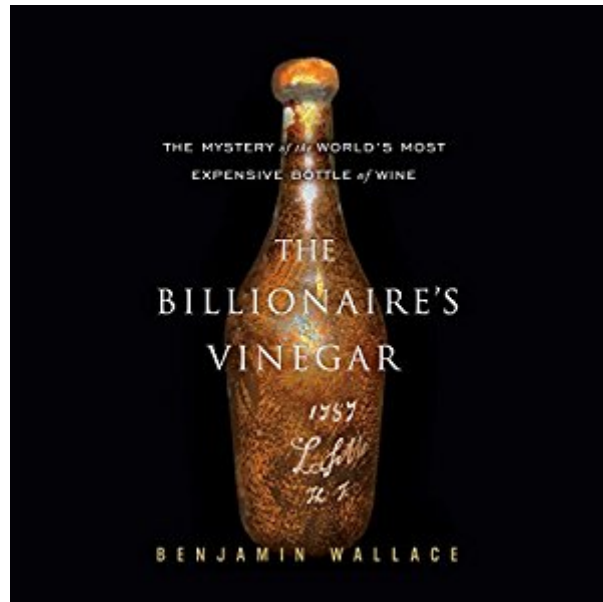


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# The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery Of The World's Most Expensive Bottle Of Wine



## Synopsis

It was the most expensive bottle of wine ever sold. In 1985, at a heated auction by Christie's of London, a 1787 bottle of Chateau Lafite Bordeaux "one of a cache of bottles unearthed in a bricked-up Paris cellar and supposedly owned by Thomas Jefferson" went for \$156,000 to a member of the Forbes family. The discoverer of the bottle was pop-band manager turned wine collector Hardy Rodenstock, who had a knack for finding extremely old and exquisite wines. But rumors about the bottle soon arose. Why wouldn't Rodenstock reveal the exact location where it had been found? Was it part of a smuggled Nazi hoard? Or did his reticence conceal an even darker secret? It would take more than two decades for those questions to be answered and involve a gallery of intriguing players among them Michael Broadbent, the bicycle-riding British auctioneer who speaks of wines as if they are women and staked his reputation on the record-setting sale; Serena Sutcliffe, Broadbent's elegant archrival, whose palate is covered by a hefty insurance policy; and Bill Koch, the extravagant Florida tycoon bent on exposing the truth about Rodenstock. Pursuing the story from Monticello to London to Zurich to Munich and beyond, Benjamin Wallace also offers a mesmerizing history of wine, complete with vivid accounts of subterranean European laboratories where old vintages are dated and of Jefferson's colorful, wine-soaked days in France, where he literally drank up the culture. Suspenseful, witty, and thrillingly strange, *The Billionaire's Vinegar* is the vintage tale of what could be the most elaborate con since the Hitler diaries. It is also the debut of an exceptionally powerful new voice in narrative non-fiction. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As another reviewer noted, I thought that this book suffered from being published before the story was actually resolved. The first couple hundred pages are true page turners. The author has a nice writing style, and has obviously done his research on the subject of wine and the players in the story. But about two thirds of the way through the book, it starts to unravel. What had been solid focus on the story started to waver, and when the end arrives, it's unsatisfying and abrupt. It felt as if the story wasn't finished, but the author couldn't wait for the resolution. As a result, for all the breathless lead up, the story ends on an anticlimatic note. So this is a really good book, except that it feels like an unfinished story, probably with several more chapters to go before it's played out. This is the problem with writing about true current events. The facts are still unfolding; it's hard to know where a tale "ends." Sometimes, that's not even clear with events that are clearly put into the historical bucket.

It's not right to fool people, especially to make money from them. It's still fun, however, to learn about how suckers have gotten swindled, if the suckers aren't you or someone close to you. It's especially fun if the suckers are successful tycoons who are used to having the world and its denizens bow to their wills. It's fun, too, if the suckers are partaking in some particular form of snobbery, like the prestige that comes from buying hugely expensive bottles of wine. When a bottle went in 1985 for \$156,000, the world swooned at the presumptuousness, and the press went wild calculating just how many hundreds of dollars each little sip would cost. Twenty years later, the fun is that the bottle was a phony, and the buyers of that particular bottle and of who knows how many others had been taken in by a very smart wine expert who eventually got caught. This is a fun story, told with verve and detail in *The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery of the World's Most Expensive Bottle of Wine* (Crown) by Benjamin Wallace. Wallace has researched different facets of wine history, so there is a good deal of science and social history in his book, and he has the eye for detail of a good mystery writer (it isn't surprising that this nonfiction book has recently been optioned to be turned into a movie). You don't have to be interested in wine to find this story of human foibles funny and instructive. The bottle in question was auctioned by Christie's in 1985. It was a 1787 Chateau Lafite Bordeaux, and was presented as having been part of the cellar of the wine enthusiast Thomas Jefferson. It was engraved "1787 Lafitte" (the way they spelled it then) and had the initials "Th.J." Christie's was the most prestigious of auctioneers in the department of fine and historic wines, and it vouched for the authenticity of the bottle. The wine had been found and placed on the market by a German wine dealer named Hardy Rodenstock, who had previously been a

pop-band manager. Rodenstock refused to say who sold the wine to him, nor how many other bottles there were. But he was doing a great business in very rare, very old wines, and customers were in those days eager to buy his finds, whether he would reveal their provenance or not. Neither Christie's nor potential buyers took the simple step of checking with the museum staff at Monticello, Jefferson's home, to see if there were any record of such a purchase by him. Jefferson was meticulous, even obsessive, about documenting his purchases of wine and everything else, so there should have been a record. There was none. Rodenstock's silence on where his fine old wines were coming from should not have taken two decades to foster suspicion in some of those who were buying from him, but such suspicions eventually started up. Wallace is exactly right about how the con game was played: "As with all successful cons, the marks and the grifter had been collaborators. One sold the illusion that the others were desperate to buy." Rodenstock made the mistake of selling Jefferson bottles to a litigious Florida tycoon who spent a fortune on investigators and laboratory tests to demonstrate fraud. Wallace cannot end his book with Rodenstock being convicted and sent to jail, but the arguments included in the book seem conclusive. Readers will be eager to hear about further legal news in the case. There wasn't anything vintners could do in the seventeenth century to make sure that counterfeits didn't show up two centuries later, but Wallace explains that steps are being taken these days to make sure no future Rodenstock can pull the same tricks. Laser-etching of bottles or embossing them with particular marks is one step, as is using watermarked and ultraviolet-tagged labels. Another step is using particularly adhesive glue to affix the label, but this will irritate collectors who like putting labels in their scrapbooks. There will be future wine counterfeiters, but they will have to work harder. And that bottle sold at Christie's in 1985? It was bought by Kip Forbes, under orders from his father Malcolm Forbes. The father was furious that the son had paid so much, but he always had a yen for publicity, and realized that having such a headline-making bottle was just what he needed. He put it on display in a case specially highlighted, and the heat from the light made for just the opposite of a wine cellar. It shrank the cork, which fell in, and even if the wine was fake, it wasn't even wine after that, just the vinegar of this book's title. You couldn't ask for a more fittingly symbolic end to all the selfishness and self-importance that Wallace has illustrated in this fascinating tale.

A volume about collecting rare vintage wine might seem an unusual topic for a real page-turner of a book, but Benjamin Wallace's "The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery of the World's Most Expensive Bottle of Wine" is an enthralling exploration of the hype and mystery surrounding the mania of the 1980s and 1990s about pursuing and buying bottles of rare and expensive (!) vintages

of old wine. The starting point of the book is the 1985 auction in which a single bottle of 1787 Lafite Bordeaux, a bottle supposedly once belonging to Thomas Jefferson, sold for over [...] Wallace leads the reader over decades of intrigue and deception, as it becomes seemingly increasingly evident that much of such rare wine (including that bottle of 1787 Lafite) is fraudulent. The portraits of the people involved -- sellers and buyers and auctioneers and technical experts -- are well-drawn. What is perhaps most remarkable is that Wallace appears to have formed and maintained cordial relationships with almost every major player in the story, including the man widely suspected of being the chief wine faker, giving the author an unmatched view of the whole business. Even if your only connection with wine is an occasional glass of grape with dinner, "The Billionaire's Vinegar" is a book almost guaranteed to hold your interest -- and to teach you more about wine than you have ever known.

As a wine writer for more than 30 years who knows some of the players mentioned in the book, I enjoyed the way Benjamin Wallace cleverly wove together history, the world of wine and France in particular and the hoax so many bought into. Not only does he chronicle an incredible array of details into understandable context with dexterity, he weaves in a steady thread of humor (Harry Waugh, the English wine merchant and writer, was once asked how often he confused Bordeaux with Burgundy. "Not since lunch," he replied."). The confusion and complicity of some of the world's best-known wine critics and auctioneers comes to light as the hoax unfolds. Some reputations are ruined because of seeming complicity. One parallel that might have been pursued further: the brilliance of Bill Koch, the billionaire who exposed the fraud, and Thomas Jefferson, whose name was attached to the most expensive bottle of wine ever sold. Both were meticulous in their work and record-keeping. The fact that no records existed at Monticello of the so-called Jefferson bottles should have put the Rodenstock collection into question immediately. Then, with carbon dating and other modern technology, the Koch team exposed the fraud. A tale well told.

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