

PETER HELLMAN: *In Vino Duplicitas: The Rise and Fall of a Wine Forger Extraordinaire*. The Experiment, New York, 2017, 246 pp., ISBN 978-1-61519-392-9 (hardcover), \$25.95.

If I were reviewing a conventional mystery novel, I would be careful not to reveal the ending (like “the butler did it”) or particular and exciting turns of the plot. But this book is different: any reader of the press already knows how it ends, although few people remember all the details of the story. It is the story of Rudy Kurniawan, a young Chinese Indonesian who succeeded in fooling a large number of sophisticated wine drinkers. He arrived in the United States around 1993 and soon thereafter had his epiphany: he tasted a bottle of Opus One in a restaurant. He started to buy expensive wines (real ones) in quantity, and it is obvious that he had a fine palate, honed by consuming prodigious quantities of great wine; it is said that he could identify ten out of twelve Burgundies in a blind tasting. By 2006, the auction house Acker Merrall & Condit had sold seventeen thousand bottles of “Rudy wine” for some \$35 million. Where did Kurniawan acquire his wines? Well, he bought a lot of wine at auctions, he bought some private cellars, and, most importantly, he claimed to have acquired the cellar of a French firm, Nicolas, which had bought wine at the source. Nicolas had the practice of periodically recorking bottles, which explained why many of Kurniawan’s wines had unbranded corks, and the pristine condition of his labels was explained by the claim that American cellars are drier than French cellars—hence, less mold. But the provenance of many of his wines was left unclear, and Kurniawan himself was less than forthcoming in revealing his sources.

The first four chapters set the stage for what is to follow. We find a tremendous amount of information about the actors on this stage: the collectors, the sellers, the auctioneers, the experts of one sort or another. The descriptions of the meals and the tastings, and particularly the costs of the wines, are astonishing and verge on the obscene. Kurniawan himself bought unbelievable quantities of wine out of a family allowance he claimed to be \$1 million per month, and it is no surprise that at parties he would show up carrying as gifts as many as a dozen first-class bottles. No wonder that he rapidly became the darling of the California and New York wine-tasting circles.

Kurniawan was an engaging, charming young man who made friends easily, at least in part because he was extremely generous and provided genuinely great, expensive wines at many of the parties he attended. He showered his largesse on his friends at parties typically held at restaurants, where he often picked up the tab and left extremely generous tips. Many of his rich friends were initially incredulous when it began to appear that things were not all they seemed to be. But the accounts in the book of his various rich friends, the parties, and the amounts that were spent are all fascinating, and the author does a great service to all of us who do not move in those rarified circles.

In the April 25, 2007, Acker et al. auction, twenty-one Burgundies by the house of Ponsot made an appearance, many of them true rarities. Douglas Barzelay, a

New York lawyer, seems to have been the first to notice the implausibility that Acker would have Clos St. Denis going back to 1945, when, according to the Ponsot website, the first Clos St. Denis was produced in 1982. Barzelay promptly called Ponsot in France. Laurent Ponsot made a hurried personal appearance in New York, and the Ponsot lots were withdrawn from the auction. The details of the story that unfolded immediately and also later are fascinating. Concerned about the provenance of the wines allegedly made by him, Ponsot demanded information about the provenance from Kurniawan, but the latter failed to provide any useful clues. The internal and external evidence continued to mount: in various subsequent auctions, wines with huge amounts of deposit in them turned out to have pristine labels, other dubious wines were found in various contexts, more vintages were discovered predating the first actual production of the wines, and wines that are so rare that nobody gets more than a tiny allocation were sold by Kurniawan by the case (e.g., a case of 1959 Roumier Musigny). A huge lot of wines sold directly by Kurniawan to Michael Fascitelli was examined by a wine expert who declared that 691 out of 812 bottles were fakes. Some of his wines offered for sale were withdrawn from auctions at the initiative of the auction houses, particularly as the tell-tale signs of fraud continued to increase (e.g., when a word on the label was misspelled). In the meantime, Kurniawan seemed to go ever deeper into debt. To satisfy his creditors, he had to collateralize some of his wines, but in this endeavor, too, he could not resist straying from the straight path: he collateralized the same batch of wines more than once. Some of his buyers became obsessed with unmasking him. Billionaire Bill Koch belatedly discovered that he had some four hundred fake bottles from Kurniawan and became so passionate about this matter that he sank substantial moneys into gamma-ray detectors to check for the presence of Caesium-137 in the wines, which was not present in the atmosphere before the nuclear explosions in 1945. Koch himself was involved in a number of lawsuits and collected damages. By 2012, Jason Hernandez, an assistant district attorney, and James Wynne, an FBI agent, had teamed up and built a pretty good case against Kurniawan. After many turns, the end of the story is that he was indicted, tried, found guilty, and sentenced to ten years in prison.

The details of this saga are explained and documented extensively. So is the trial itself, including the testimonies of key witnesses, including Laurent Ponsot, Christophe Roumier, and Aubert de Villaine of the fabled *Domaine de la Romanée Conti* (Kurniawan had consigned for sale so many fake bottles of *Romanée Conti* that he was colloquially referred to by some of his friends as “Dr. Conti”). The judge declined to throw out the evidence seized from his premises on the grounds of a questionable search by FBI agents, but Kurniawan might have gotten a shorter sentence if he had plea-bargained, which he declined to do.

I am leaving out many fascinating details of the story, but at least four questions remain: (1) How did he do it? (2) Why did he do it? (3) How come it took so long for someone to notice that something was amiss with the wines? (4) Why do we care? In other words, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, isn't it a duck?

First, the methods he employed varied. Sometimes he would take genuine bottles with significant amounts of ullage and fill them with lesser wines of broadly similar characteristics. Sometimes he would just change the vintage year stamped on a case or on the label. His definitely ran a “home operation,” storing vast amounts of wine paraphernalia in his house. When FBI agents ultimately entered his house, they discovered

bags containing wine labels, bags of wine cork, wax used to seal corks, rubber stamps used to stamp the year of a wine vintage on a label or brand a cork, empty bottles of wine (including large format bottles), wooden wine crates, bottles submerged in water to aid removing the labels, computer equipment (including prints, and stacks of preprinted wine labels, printed on high quality paper).

In progress counterfeiting operations were also evident in the kitchen, living room, and family room. Bottles were soaking in the kitchen sink to remove their labels prior to being transformed into other wines. ... Numerous bottles in wine racks had no capsules. Four bottles of 1985 Henri Mayer Richebourg were lined up on a shelf. ... Less than six hours before his arrest, Rudy had offered these Richebourgs to a Swedish dealer. (p. 144)

It was obviously a large operation, and as might be expected in anything this large and complex, Kurniawan made errors that ultimately contributed to his downfall. In addition to attending wine tastings, buying wine, dealing with auction houses, and juggling his increasingly shaky finances, Kurniawan had to have time to carry out the various operations to make his wines look plausibly like the real thing, which raises an additional question: did he have any help? No uncovered evidence suggests that he had cohorts in this enterprise, although *ex post* experts disagree regarding how much of his time it took to carry out the fakery by himself.

We don't have a good answer for the second question of “why.” He clearly grossed large amounts of money from his phony sales, but he does not seem to have netted substantial profits from his nefarious activities. In fact, it is quite likely that he lost on balance large portions of his family's money (the source of which also continues to be a mystery, although several members of his Indonesian family have been convicted or suspected of fraud). He was clearly a man who loved wine and loved to drink it, he was happy to move in the circles of the elite wine drinkers who collect superexpensive bottles, and his buying and selling activities undoubtedly contributed to cementing his connection to this group—but there had to be less risky and less work-intensive ways of accomplishing the same goals. He might have derived some perverse satisfaction from putting one over on people, but such a nasty streak seems hardly compatible with what has been otherwise described as an charming and engaging personality.

Concerning the third question, the initial clues that he was faking it came not so much from the physical evidence in the wines themselves but from internal inconsistencies (e.g., he was peddling a Ponsot wine prior to the date at which that wine was first made by Ponsot). Of course, once suspicions arose, purchasers started to find anomalies (such as misspellings on labels), but buyers did not immediately start to say to themselves, “Oh gee, this does not really taste like Richebourg or like any wine made by the *Domaine de la Romanée Conti*.” It is difficult to escape the

conclusion that wine drinkers' much vaunted taste buds are not all they are cracked up to be, even in the rarified circles in which Kurniawan moved. Of course, even if somebody had suspicions, it would take some nerve to accuse a well-known owner/dealer/wine expert of chicanery, but the situation is curious nevertheless.

The last question of "why we care" is perhaps the most interesting, for it is the same question that arises in the case of fake art. Imagine an art forger who is so good that his fakery is totally undetectable. Or, better yet, imagine a combination of software and hardware that can reproduce a painting with real, authentic paint on a pixel level. (That technique presumably could be used to reproduce an existing painting by a painter but not to produce a new painting "in the style of" a particular painter.) Certainly the average art lover would not be able to distinguish the fake painting from the real one, and possibly not even experts could do so. But what the fake painting would miss is *authenticity*. Whether we buy art or wine, we are paying, among other things, for authenticity. You get bragging rights if you have cases of Voguë's Musigny or a Romanée Conti in your cellar, but you get no bragging rights from having fake bottles of those wines. And although the real thing is clearly delicious, the bragging-rights aspect of ownership may be at least as important if you are a serious collector.

This is a wonderful book, well written and carefully researched, and it paints an illuminating picture of a segment of wine drinkers among whom most of us do not belong. Peter Hellman has done a superb job, and the fact that we know from the beginning "who done it" does not diminish one bit the enjoyment one gets from the tale. The only thing I would have done differently is to include an index, but that is my hobby-horse: I think that all nonfiction books should have one.

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 doi:10.1017/jwe.2017.35

PETER M. F. SICHEL: *The Secrets of My Life, Vintner, Prisoner, Soldier, Spy*. Archway Publishing, Bloomington, IN, 2017, 418 pp., ISBN 978-1-4808-2406-5 (paperback), \$23.99.

In the eighties and nineties, when there were no bike lanes, Peter Sichel could be seen, alone in full business attire, pedaling from an Upper West Side apartment to his offices in midtown Manhattan. Before he braved the city's hazardous traffic, Sichel wore an army uniform in World War II, serving later as an OSS (Office of Strategic Services) and CIA agent in Europe and the Far East. In civilian life, he reorganized the family's wine business in Mainz, Germany, which had been overrun by the Nazis. He became a successful American wine merchant and Bordeaux entrepreneur and attained certain renown as the man who gave the world *Blue Nun*.