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The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery of the World's Most Expensive Bottle of Wine by Benjamin Wallace, Broadway Books, 2009

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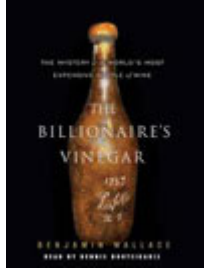
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Recommended Readings



The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery of the World's Most Expensive Bottle of Wine

by Benjamin Wallace

Reviewed by Paul Hanson

In 1985 a bottle of 1787 Château Lafite Bordeaux was put up for auction by Christie's of London and sold for, well, quite a lot-much more than you or I will ever pay for a bottle of wine. What was so special about this bottle? According to the auction catalog, it had first been purchased by Thomas Jefferson, when he lived in France, but never shipped to the United States. Instead it lay at rest in a cellar in the Marais district of Paris, eventually to find its way into the hands of Hardy Rodenstock, one of the great wine collectors of Europe at century's end. Its sale at Christie's launched the career of Michael Broadbent as wine auctioneer, and ushered in a two-decade period in which collecting wine became all the rage among a certain segment of the wealthy elite.

Benjamin Wallace spins a tale in which he explores a number of mysteries. Did the bottle really belong once to Thomas Jefferson? It bore an inscription of his initials, TJ, and we know that Jefferson took an interest in fine wine, but those facts only make the claim plausible. Wallace's quest to solve that mystery takes him to Monticello, to Bordeaux, to London and Paris. Along the way we meet a number of fascinating characters and are ushered into the world of wine, the world of collectors, the world of winetasting, and the world of Jeffersonia, as well as the world of high-end fraud. For even if the bottle itself could be shown to have once belonged to Jefferson, how are we to know that the wine inside was really 1787 Lafite? And if this bottle was legitimate, what about the other Jefferson bottles that appeared on the auction block in the years after 1985? Finally, who buys such wine, and for how much? You'll find answers to all these mysteries in this fascinating and suspenseful read. Be sure to have a glass of wine at your side.

- Paul Hanson is Professor of History at Butler University.