

PORTRAIT OF A CELLAR SELLER

by Ester Laushway

Part sleuth, part antique dealer, Lionel Michelin sniffs out the hiding places of France's finest old wines with the natural flair of a grape-loving bloodhound.

Nothing predestined Lionel Michelin to become a leading dealer in rare vintages. Though wine was usually present at family meals, Michelin's parents never kept a cellar or collected rare bottles for special occasions. So Michelin did not taste his first memorable old wine until he was in law school. The pleasure he derived from it quickly became a passion. He joined wine-tasting clubs and was lucky enough, early on, to sample some of the great wine classics of France, such as a Douton-Rothschild from 1945, the most celebrated Bordeaux vintage of the 20th century. Developing his nose and palate on marvels like that one, says Michelin, was like "being taught how to drive using a Porsche or a Ferrari."

In 1992 he decided to leave the telecommunications company in Paris where he had worked for 18 years and turn his love of fine wines from a pleasure into a profession. "I had already spent a lot of time with wine producers, organized tasting dinners at my house and had a lot of excellent contacts in Bordeaux," he explains. "I attended auctions, too, at a time when you could still get great bottles at bargain prices. Back in 1990 I bought a cellar with 2,500 bottles that had some extraordinary wines in it. So a lot of things were already in place when I started [my business]."

When he created his company, De Vinis Illustribus (Of Celebrated Wines), the first bottles he sold were from his own cellar, which boasted a fine collection of wines from his birth year, 1949, as well as some of the best vintages from France's top châteaux in Bordeaux. With



Lionel Michelin

the help of his already extensive address book and his talent for networking, Michelin started tracking down other sources of rare wines. He buys his wines mainly from private cellars, owned by people from all walks of life. There is the heartbroken wine lover whose doctor has

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just forbidden him to carry on drinking the wine collection he has built up over several decades, and the bereaved widow who does not want to drink the wine her late husband left behind. Occasionally, there are restaurant owners and wine

dealers who wish to sell off their stock.

Recently, Michelin was entrusted with the sale of a veritable Ali Baba's cave of wine treasures. "It was the cellar of Jean-Baptiste Besse, the greatest Paris wine merchant of the '60s," explains Michelin. "It had more than 20,000 bottles in it, and I've sold it. All kinds of celebrities bought their wines from him—Ernest Hemingway, for example. Many professionals would have loved to get their hands

on his cellar," Michelin admits gleefully. He snatched the prize from under the noses of his competitors after meeting Besse's son, who decided that Michelin's obvious passion for wine made him the right person to sell his father's lovingly built collection of wine rarities.

The clients who buy these bottles are as varied as the people who sell them: There are those who are looking for a particular vintage to celebrate a birthday or anniversary (such as a 1952 bottle to celebrate a 50th anniversary in 2002), connoisseurs who study the best vintages and even nondrinking collectors, who may want to possess (but not taste) all the vintages of one fabled château. The type of client Michelin prefers is the true wine lover, who not only collects but also consumes. What he likes best of all is advising clients who are not certain what they want, helping them discover a new wine. "Then you feel you've led them to something magical, and that's really the whole point of this profession," he says.

Michelin's wine catalog covers every vintage from 1900 to 2000, with bottles ranging in price from \$9 to \$2,500 (for a

bottle of 1995 Romanée-Conti, from Burgundy's most prestigious estate). Tasting as many of his wines as humanly possible not only helps Michelin make recommendations to clients but is also the biggest perk of his job. Whenever he buys a cellar, he says, "There are always a few bottles not filled to the right level or with the label slightly damaged or the capsule [the foil that covers the cork] a bit dented. And because I choose only bottles that are in excellent condition for my clients, those that aren't in excellent condition, well, I don't make vinegar out of them...I open them and taste them."

Michelin does not deal in old French vintages exclusively, but they do make up the bulk of his stock. As excellent as many younger wines from North America, South America and Australia may be, he believes that the one magic ingredient that sets France's golden oldies apart from other wines is time.



"Vintage wines offer a complexity and an intensity of pleasure that nothing but time can achieve. You can do what you like, but nothing can equal the magical effects of time on wine. On a wine from a good year, well-made from the start and aged properly, time does its work and transforms it into something that can't be created any other way." Clients who make an appointment to visit De Vinis Illustribus's 17th-century cellar often get a chance to taste a bit of that magic for themselves. When Michelin meets a fellow lover of fine wines, there is nothing he enjoys more than pulling the cork and sharing his liquid assets. ■

Ester Laushway is the France correspondent for *EUROPE*, the official magazine of the European Union. Her work also appears in *France, Square Meal* and other publications.

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