

Is That Case of Petrus Authentic?

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Bordeaux Winebank

This Petrus case from Bordeaux Winebank carries the 'Five Star Provenance' trademark seal, which ensures buyers the wine has been properly stored and comes directly from the chateau, among other things.

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As Hong Kong kicks off the new year with a slew of wine auctions this weekend, two questions loom large among Asian buyers: Where exactly have all the bottles come from? And how have they been stored?

"There's so much wine traveling around auction houses, and retailers don't always tell you the history," says Henning Thoresen, chairman of Bordeaux Winebank. "The risk is you spend 10,000 Hong Kong dollars (US\$1,286) on a bottle that is spoilt."

As bottles are moved to Asia, stored by successive owners, subjected to different temperatures and sometimes even shaken by inexperienced handlers, the fragile wine inside can easily be damaged. Plus there's the growing worry of fakes as cheats seek to capitalize on the rising prices of fine wines.

After decades in the wine trade, Mr. Thoresen, a native of Norway, has patented and trademarked a proprietary system that he says can guarantee quality and authenticity. He is bringing it to Hong

Kong on Jan. 23 and will showcase it at a Sotheby's sale of wines from Bordeaux Winebank's collection. The company specializes in selling wine that has passed his "Five Star Provenance" system: They are sourced directly from the châteaux, have remained in professional storage in Bordeaux since bottling, and arrive in their original wooden cases with tamper-proof seals and accompanied by extensive documentation.

The Sotheby's Hong Kong sale on Sunday will offer 128 cases of top wines from the 2000 Bordeaux vintage, including stars like Château Lafite Rothschild and Château Petrus, purchased directly from the properties. Sotheby's puts the total value at up to HK\$12.6 million.

Hong Kong is packed with other sales this weekend. Acker Merrall & Condit kicks off the weekend on Friday evening, Jan. 21, with the first part of its two-day sale of wines from multiple owners that the auctioneer thinks can fetch up to HK\$70 million. The second session will start Saturday morning, which is when Sotheby's will hold its [sale of Andrew Lloyd Webber's collection](#), estimated to be worth up to HK\$32 million.

But wine with a guaranteed provenance can carry a premium in Asia, as seen at a Sotheby's Hong Kong sale last year: Three rare bottles of Lafite 1869, sourced from the chateau, sold for a record HK\$1.8 million each, many times the top estimate.

Sellers and wine producers are joining the move to ensure authenticity and traceability of bottles for wealthy buyers. Château Margaux, which holds the top Bordeaux ranking of Premier Cru, recently outlined in Hong Kong its many built-in security devices, including unique numbers etched on each bottle, special ink in foil capsules and anticopy devices on labels.

As for the "Five Star Provenance" system, Robert Sleigh, head of wine in Asia for Sotheby's, says it may drive demand for the Bordeaux Winebank wines in Asia.

Asia "is more of a novice market, so buyers want to be more careful and make sure they get it right," he says. "Whatever they're buying, whether it's shoes, clothes or anything else, they want to make sure it's the real thing."

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