

Editor's note:

Jonathan Levine, in addition to being an enthusiastic member of The Wolfe Pack, is a member of the Wine Media Guild and writes on wine for several publications. "The Wines of Nero Wolfe" was delivered at the third annual Black Orchid Banquet on December 6, 1980. Minor changes have been made in the text as printed here.

THE WINES OF NERO WOLFE

by Jonathan Levine

We all know that Nero Wolfe was a great beer drinker. As someone interested in wine, I wondered if he ever drank wine. If so, what wines did he drink? What wines did he serve to company? Where did he buy his wines?

We can unqualifiedly say, "Yes, Nero Wolfe did drink wine." Archie tells us that he drank only beer and wine, but he also drank wine and brandy with bites of Fritz's apple pie.

If we are to accept the report written by J. G. O'Boyle in the Spring of 1979 Gazette, it's obvious that Wolfe learned to drink wine from his mother when he was living in Belgrade after she became, as Mr. O'Boyle says, a 'grass widow' and raised him in the life of a Hungarian gentleman. This might explain his talking about the time he had a Hungarian vin de pays. He says it came from the cellar of a vineyard, as these wines were certainly not being imported at this time. It might have been produced by a relative or maybe Carla Lovchen brought it with her to the United States.

The first reported experience of Wolfe drinking wine was when he told Jerome Berin in [COOK] that he was in Spain on a mission for the Austrian government and he stopped at a country inn where the only thing

the host had was sausage, bread, and house wine. And so he drank the house wine.

As part of my research, I talked to the owner of Sherry- Lehman's, probably New York's most prestigious wine shop. He, by the way, used to sell Rex Stout his wine and tells me that Rex Stout bought lots of a Spanish Rioja, Marquis de Murrieta. Therefore, I would assume that the wine Wolfe drank with his sausage was Marquis de Murietta but that's only a guess.

We know that in [BLCK] he drank wine when he was in Italy. He advises Archie not to drink the water and they drink wine instead. In [COOK] he tells Archie, "We will have wine with dinner." This is the first night, and they drank burgundies. The second night they drank clarets with Wolfe's meal.

When he served wine to Dazy Perett's daughter, he served the best wines in the cellar (of course he would do anything for meat). He served a claret to the women in [BAND] and in [BASE]. He had "a good meal with wines to match," which knowing Fritz's cooking had to be an excellent wine.

What other wines did he drink? The evidence suggests that he liked dry red Bordeaux and dry white Burgundy. There is a report that he served an Erbacher Marcobrunner, a wonderful Rhine wine from Germany at lunch. The rest of the wines that he served, except for the one occasion, were dry wines.

The one anomaly that I found was the one time an American wine was mentioned and then Archie disguised the name. He called it a Pasti Grey Reisling which Nero was very happy to serve to the women in [BOOK] because he didn't like it and it was "good enough for women."

After speaking with several wine merchants 'who were in business in the thirties, forties, and fifties, the only wine that fits is the Wente Brothers Grey Riesling from California, which is neither grey nor a riesling; it was really a Sultana grape. By the way, this is the only time he mentions an American wine. He sings wonderful paeans to American cooking in [COOKS] but he chooses to drink European wines exclusively. The one American wine he tried, he didn't like. I find this to be somewhat of a contradiction, particularly in the Seventies when the boutique wineries in California began turning out wonderful wines. Though I do feel Wolfe would be very upset with the Inglenook served tonight and would have said "Pfui."

An interesting thing about this American wine though is that Rex Stout did drink a lot of American wine. Sam Aarons, the proprietor of Sherry-Lehman, who is a Rex Stout fan, told me that Stout used to buy wines from him by the case and that his wine advisor was Harold Taubman, the theatre critic. Rex Stout drank American wine but Nero didn't, one of the contradictions in his life.

Besides red Bordeaux and white Burgundy, the only other wine that is certainly available in the house is champagne. Not only does he have champagne, but he seems to have nothing but the best. Archie says that when Wolfe has champagne he insists it be good. In [CUE], Saul drank Dam Perignon, and in [RANG], he again served good champagne, particularly to Saul. Archie offered Orrie champagne in [CHAM]. He said, "Come in and drink some champagne."

In [BASE], he had wines to match the meal; he is very familiar with wines, certainly he knew his wine whether from drinking or reading about it. In [COOKS], he told Jerome Berin that the Chateau Latour, 1928 would soothe a tiger. I think Archie, who didn't have a great wine background, made a mistake. I think it was the 1929 and believe me, the '29 Chateau Latour would soothe any tiger.

In [AFAM], Harvey H. Bassett served Chateau Latour with the meat course. Wolfe served white wine to Evelyn Laidlaw in [CHAM]. He said that he would drink beer and Archie would drink milk. In [FINL], Archie says Orrie Cather and Noel Tedder drank wine with lunch in the car. You may remember that Archie stopped and let Saul drive for a while so he could partake of the goodies and wine. He serves wine on several other occasions and it's always the best. The ones that are mentioned by name basically are the white Burgundies.

In [MAMA] he drank a Corton Charlemagne! a wine that is now selling for \$30-45 a bottle; in [FATH], he drank Le Montrachet, which can run up to \$65 or \$70 a bottle. In [DOXY], he also drank Le Montrachet. Nero Wolfe may not pay his people very well, but there are certainly some peripheral advantages to working with him, such as drinking Le Montrachet.

The one slight sidelight in this is that his chef and major domo, Fritz, is Swiss but there's never any Swiss wines served. I would think Fritz occasionally might have become a little perturbed about that. He does not seem to have acclimatized as well as Wolfe did but no Swiss wines are ever served: There are some excellent Swiss wines, which just proves that Fritz probably did not buy the wines. Though Archie's background is rooted in a non-wine drinking section of the country, he too shows that he has acquired a palate - most likely while working for Wolfe. In [GAMB], he drank a red wine with the pasta and says it is better than what he drinks at the Flamingo. Later in the same book, Saul, Orrie, and Archie shared two bottles of champagne. In [WOMN], he drank two bottles of Burgundy with Rosa at Rusterman's, followed by a postprandial brandy. In [CLIE], there was additional evidence that Archie was cognizant of good wines. Finally, in [ANDB], he joined two of the people in the office in drinking white wine because he liked "the way its taste insists on sneaking all over the inside of your head."

How did Nero Wolfe buy his wines? Most likely you and I would walk to the corner wine shop, or get in our car; if we lived outside of Manhattan, we'd drive to the local wine shop. Somehow I cannot picture Wolfe braving the maelstrom of traffic, even with Archie driving, to go buy a bottle or a case of wine. I pity the poor merchant who got his business after he had been sitting in the back of the car holding tightly on the strap so that he would be prepared for sudden stop.

Imagine his reaction if Archie were in a playful mood and hit a couple of potholes; he would probably storm in and out without buying anything. No, I don't think this was the way he purchased his libations.

I also feel that he did not order wine over the phone. He did not like the telephone, did not trust it, or even know how to use it very well, and I do not think anyone else did the purchasing. There was an indication of this in [MIDN]; Archie said that Mr. Wolfe personally checked the supply of liquid once a week.

Given the premise, how did he buy the wine? As mentioned, I talked with Mr. Aarons, who said that even today, but certainly back in the thirties and forties, if certain favored clients would call, he or one of his staff would go to the person's house and display the wine and maybe even pull the cork from a bottle or two and might be invited to lunch. I think this is the way Nero Wolfe purchased his wines. I can envision him inviting Mr. Aarons or some other merchant to join him for lunch, to try and argue the price down. I think he would buy quite extensively, a six months' supply or more at a time. I can just picture him sitting there, sniffing and showing off his knowledge of wines, his knowledge of French or other languages. While he swirls his wine and is discoursing on its merits, Archie is taking notes, looking thoroughly bored and disgusted by Wolfe's display of affectation.

Today, the wines he mentions would run \$60-\$75 a bottle, depending on the wine and the vintage. A bottle of Dom Perignon that is now running for \$45, in the late thirties, early forties was \$2.50. A good claret, something like the Chateau Latour, which would soothe a tiger, was \$2 a bottle. The great white Burgundies, which are \$60 a bottle now, was \$3 a bottle. In [CLIE], Archie sent Dom Perignon to Austin Hough, and said, "I didn't put it on the expense account." However, this was not exactly the most generous of gestures, as he sprung for five or ten bucks at the most. Even then, Wolfe's salary was certainly into the six figures. He could afford to buy and serve nothing but the best wine.

Wine, of course, plays other parts in the stories. It's used for cooking as well as for serving and plays peripheral parts in stories. In [CHAM], poison was slipped into the wine, and at least twice knockout drops were placed in drinks.

Fritz uses a great deal of spirits in his cooking, particularly wine. He uses Madeira, Grand Marnier and Sauternes. Archie says he wants Fritz to "make the grape jelly with twice as much Sauternes and only half the sugar." Archie spells Sauternes without the final "s." True French Sauternes is spelled with a final "s." Sauternes is that wonderful wine that's been affected by noble rot that allows the water to escape and you're left with a very concentrated grape, which produces a luscious sweet wine. American is made from ordinary grapes and sugar is added. Somehow I don't see Fritz using American Sauterne for his jelly nor do I think Wolfe would allow it. So either Archie has made a mistake or Fritz is sneaking in a cheap bottle of Almaden Sauterne or something similar without Wolfe knowing about it. I'm sure Wolfe would not be happy about it. If, however, Archie made a mistake, I would love to have been privy to the scene in the office when Wolfe read the story and called Archie to task, as I'm sure he would have, for leaving out the final "s" in Sauternes.

We know that Fritz drinks wine. In (eeny), he drank three bottles of white wine after Bertha Aaron got strangled with Wolfe's tie. It didn't even get him drunk. I suspect that most of the wine that's left over from dinner or company would be used for cooking. I

also imagine that Fritz made his own vinegar, using the mother of vinegar and to which are added the remains of the wine, to constantly replenish the vinegar barrel.

In [BASE], Priscilla Eads asked for Myer's rum and Lauren asked for B & B, both of which were available. When company is expected, Archie and Fritz argue about whether or not wine should be included on the refreshment cart, Fritz wanting one bottle of red, one bottle of white, and Archie saying wines made Americans sleepy (he must have picked up some of Wolfe's European prejudices), so they would compromise by having two bottles of white wine and no red. The usual drinks served at an office gathering were hard liquor, brandy or liqueur. However, in [BASE], Andy Famos drank white wine mixed with club soda.

As this was written about 1952, he might have been the first person ever to drink a spritzer. So it is possible that the first spritzer ever served in the country was at West 35th Street. Imagine Wolfe's face when he saw someone taking wine, insulting a great Montrachet, and then diluting it with club soda. No wonder he wanted Archie to throw Mr. Famos out.