

# The day the LCBO found 1200 bottles of superb wine hidden under a pile of straw in Argentina

And other tales of the LCBO's derring-do in seeking out the best vintages for its Rare Wine and Spirits Shop

By Michael Vaughan

It took several months, tens of thousands of miles, and the intervention of several educated palates, but the results are now on view: the bottles that line the shelves and stockroom of the LCBO's Rare Wines and Spirit Shop at 43 Freeland St. — the retail outlet that stocks the widest selection of wines in Ontario.

The creation of this shop, just around the corner from the LCBO's store on Queen's Quay, east of the Toronto Star building, was the decision of a fairly enlightened group of LCBO administrators. As General George Kitching, the board's recently appointed chief commissioner, puts it: "The wine explosion was just beginning, and the LCBO had to decide whether to get into, or get out of, wine."

Luckily, they decided to get in. Bob Galichon, the board's director of product control, and Peter Adams, overseas consultant, spent months last year assembling stock for the October opening. Importers were invited to submit lists and samples. But the key to the operation was the trips abroad, where the LCBO's experts were able to assess the product on the spot and deal directly with the vintners.

Last year, in less than five weeks, General Kitching, Adams and Galichon visited more than 60 European shippers and tasted approximately 1,000 wines, selecting some 150 rarities on the spot. While this sounds rather glorious, I was assured that it was not only exhausting but also subject to numerous surprises. In Bulgaria, for instance, the group found a superb blended Cabernet-style wine. The

Eric Jarvi, expert wine consultant, is happy to advise you at the Rare Wines and Spirits Shop.

General, intrigued, wanted to visit the winery and vineyards before placing the board's order. After a two-hour ride through snow-covered mountains, they arrived at a small valley winery. The identical wine was tasted once again, but they found the wine's character had changed significantly. With regret the order was not placed, as shipment to Canada could have easily led to substantial alterations in quality.

Europe, of course, is not the only source of great wines. General Kitching traveled to South America, Portugal and South Africa searching for new treasures as well as replacements for the increasingly expensive European wines. In the prov-

ince of Mendoza, Argentina, where there are over 1,300 wineries, most presentations were held in Mendoza City. On one occasion, however, the General and John Rallo, supervisor of wine services, took a hair-raising drive to a small winery near Maipu. The atmosphere was most relaxed and the proprietor, wearing overalls and heavy boots, appeared out of the vineyards when the group arrived. An old shed became the tasting room and the rusty sink a spittoon. After tasting number of recently produced wines, the General asked if the owner held any older stocks of wine. The answer was negative, until one of the farm hands remembered some half-bottles of sweet white wine

## Tasting notes on rare wines

MARKS OUT OF 10

<b>Bollinger Brut R.D. 1961</b> (Recently Disgorged — February 1972) An outstanding full-bodied champagne with a big fruity bouquet and mature, somewhat heavy, taste. (8.5)	<b>\$16.45</b>	<b>(3059B)</b>
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### WHITE WINES

<b>Château-Gai Muller Thurgau 1972</b> Real vinifera fruity full aroma. Taste was dry, firm and fruity. A real rarity (only 5 cases produced) by Canadian vintners. (7.5+)	<b>\$ 3.50</b>	<b>(3259B)</b>
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<b>Hochheimer Kirchenstuck 1971, Riesling Spatlese (Von Schonborn)</b> The color of this Riesling grape wine is characteristically lighter than the color of the Sylvaner grape wine which follows. An elegant slightly sweet fruity aroma. Well-balanced fruity sweet taste with spicy aftertaste. Will improve with age. (9+)	<b>\$ 8.05</b>	<b>(3058B)</b>
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which were stored about 10 years ago in the cellar under a pile of straw. Some samples appeared and the wine was tasted. "My God, the D'Yquem of South America," the General murmured. He bought the entire stock of 1,200 half-bottles. They haven't arrived in Toronto yet, because the proprietor didn't own any export cartons. Hopefully the shipment will arrive this spring, but nobody knows for sure.

And what, one might well ask, are the General's qualifications for selecting the wines that the rest of us will be allowed to drink? Well, he's a self-taught connoisseur, but he studies in an excellent school: the diplomatic circuits of London and Paris, where he served as Ontario's commercial representative. He also selected the wines for the Ontario Pavilion at Expo 70 in Osaka, where he was the pavilion's chief commissioner. He doesn't possess the breadth of knowledge of professionals like Adams or Galichon, but he's easily capable of differentiating between a great vintage and one that's merely good. He can also be credited with a certain shrewdness; in 1950, after all, he was buying Gevrey Chambertin in London for \$1.25 a bottle.

The board is still hunting for bargains, and passing on at least some of the benefits to Ontario wine-drinkers. They're stocking the better 1970 clarets — which shouldn't be drunk for years, and they're priced at a level which Peter Sichel, a New York wine authority, assures me is fair market value. The board's Peter Adams has also been attending the famous Christie and Sotheby wine auctions in London, and has grabbed off a few bargain rarities. Time alone will tell whether the consumer gets any of the benefits.

What makes a wine "rare"? General Kitching's terse reply: "It's availability." In other words, the wines available at the Rare Wines and Spirits Shop cannot be reordered in most instances. Rare, unfortunately, is usually synonymous with expensive. However, on the current list of 168 wines, 22 are priced under \$6 a bottle and 33 between \$6 and \$10. Of course, just because a wine is rare and/or expensive is no guarantee that you will enjoy it. That's a matter of personal taste, and since tasting is a most enjoyable learning experience, I feel that a carefully budgeted (if that is possible) tasting of rare wines can be a rewarding experience.

If you need any advice regarding the selection of rare wines you should not hesitate calling either Pat Counahan or Eric Jarvi, two exceptionally capable wine consultants who are on constant call at the Rare Wines and Spirits Shop. Phone 965-3036.

The tasting notes on page 41 and 43 are from a recent blind tasting of rare wines which was attended by both novices and experts. Naturally it is important to remember that these evaluations are subjective and may not coincide with your own appreciation of each wine. ■

# Tasting notes continued

**Ruppertisberger Nussbien 1971,** \$ 7.15 (3006B)  
**Silvaner Auslese (Sichel)**

A full, sweet, fruity aroma. An immensely rich sweet taste with velvety texture and long lingering aftertaste. Possibly a little short on acidity. (9+)

The German wines of the 1971 vintage which were enjoyed by expert and novice alike are outstanding in terms of quality and value. They may be laid away for several years to improve in bottle.

## RED WINES

**Château Bouscaut 1967,** \$ 7.80 (3075B)  
**Graves A.C. Grand Cru**

Very dark red color. Light delicate fruit bouquet. Strong full slightly astringent taste, lots of tannin; lingering aftertaste. Still very young. (7+)

**Château La Rose-Pourret 1970,** \$ 6.45 (3037B)  
**St. Emilion A.C. Grand Cru**

Deep red color. Bouquet was slightly light and did not show much fruit. A very strong slightly earthy heavy taste. This wine is too young and not ready for drinking. (7+)

**Château Figeac 1967** \$12.80 (3094B)  
**St. Emilion A.C. Premier Grand Cru**

A slightly light red color with some browning. Good medium fruit bouquet. Medium-full vinous taste. Visually the wine appeared to be older than the 1964. (7.5+)

**Château Fonplegade 1964** \$10.45 (3042B)  
**St. Emilion A.C. Grand Cru**

Deep dark red color. Earthy deep fruit bouquet. Full slightly tannic taste. Wine will last some time yet. (8+)

Generally speaking, I was not overly impressed with the Bordeaux wines tasted which seemed a little "closed" (not showing much fruit). I suspect that additional cellar aging will greatly improve almost all these wines.

**Pinot Noir 1970** \$ 3.85 (3107B)  
**Bin R 15 (Seppelt) (Australian)**

Medium-dark color. Good fresh fruity young aroma. This wine has a specific odor which should dissipate with aging. Medium-full, quite rich fruity taste. Needs time to mellow. (7)

**Barbaresco 1967** \$ 4.60 (3184B)  
**Riserva Speciale (Calissano) (Italian)**

Medium red with slightly brown edges. A good heavy strong fruity bouquet. A very strong, somewhat tannic, earthy taste. Needs time. (7.5)

**Beaune 1969** \$10.45 (3017B)  
**'Clos de la Feguine' (Calvet)**

A deep heavy fruity perfume, somewhat reminiscent of burned wood. A deep rich taste and lingering aftertaste. Great wine. (9)

While the seasoned lover of Burgundy will enjoy this and other excellent 1969's, I discovered that some novices objected to what they described as the "old" or "musty" bouquet. Obviously this is not a wine for everybody.

## DESSERT WINE

**Bright's Old Canadian Cream Sherry 1964** \$ 4.50 (3231B)

A mellow, rich, smooth goldensherry. Another fine Canadian rarity well worth the money. (8)



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