

# CLUB ENOLOGIQUE



## Syrah and beyond

How the Rhône's winning blend  
finally conquered the world

# What's on a collector's mind

**To the outsider, it can seem a very fine line between collecting and obsessing. With some devotees even turning their passion into a museum, Victoria Moore asks what drives collectors – of wine, watches or cars**

Illustrations by Noma Bar

**L**a Chapelle-Bâton is a small, little-known village in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region of western France that collector Michel-Jack Chasseuil hopes soon to put on the map, just as Brigitte Bardot did for St-Tropez. There the 80-year-old former industrial draughtsman has built what he is calling 'the Louvre of wine', a museum underneath his home, showcasing some 50,000 bottles of fine wine.

The price of a ticket? €500. Visitors will, Chasseuil says, be able to 'profit visually from the bottles' – in other words, there will be strictly no pulling of corks and no drinking. This struck me as a trifle idiosyncratic. At the Louvre, it is possible to experience the *Mona Lisa* in the way that Leonardo da Vinci (presumably) intended. Without being able to see the liquid inside a bottle, let alone smell or taste it, what even is a wine to its observer? Chasseuil has a ready answer: after the wines fade too much to be enjoyed, 'they will become works of art'.

The story made me consider the process of collecting. The human urge to collect is widespread and deeply embedded. 'One third of the American population ... collect[s] one thing or another,' writes Shirley M Mueller in her book *Inside the Head of a Collector: Neuropsychological Forces at Play*. We start as children, collecting the likes of beads, football cards and Lego sets, and we continue as adults. Collections might be formed from objects, such as paintings, jewellery or antiques, each element of which has a high value in its own right. But there is almost nothing that someone somewhere does not collect. Actor Tom Hanks collects typewriters; Bill McBride, a man who lives in South Texas, owns more than 70,000 pieces of Darth Vader memorabilia; others collect botanical specimens, comic books, snow globes, the *musélet* from Champagne bottles or, like Chasseuil, wine they will never drink.

What drives people to sink hours, days, weeks and years, not to mention (in some cases) considerable financial resource, into amassing so many objects? There are many different compulsions that can act on the collector. One is the desire to 'connect oneself to a person or a certain historical period', says psychologist Dr Zoubida Guernina, which in wine translates to the frisson associated with sipping, say, a 1945 Bordeaux or a Madeira made from grapes grown in the 19th century. As we roll the wine around our mouths, we imagine it as a living object, a slender thread invisibly connecting us to another time. For some, the experience is unnecessary, the artefact is enough. Asked by the *New Yorker* in 2007 why he bought old wines that he had no intention of drinking, the billionaire businessman Bill Koch replied that he also owned General Custer's rifle, but 'I'm never going to shoot [it].'

For collectors operating on a grand scale, legacy can be another motivation. We see this outside wine. 'In the 19th century, there was this great drive for civic museums in the provincial cities ... often associated with an industrial collector, a magnate who is putting together a large collection that reflects well on him and their contribution to the city and the self-image of that city,' says Antonia Boström, director of collections at the V&A Museum in London. Art collector and socialite Peggy Guggenheim was explicit in her aim. 'A collection means hard work. It was what I wanted to do, and I made it my life's work. I am not an art collector; I am a museum,' she wrote. There is more than a glimmer of this sentiment in Chasseuil's assertion that his bottles 'will belong to the heritage of mankind'.

What about those people whose collections will never be museum wings or entries in the *Guinness Book of Records*? We all know oenophiles (perhaps you are one) who began buying to drink, then found they owned more wine than they could



consume in a lifetime. I had assumed such wine lovers were principally overenthusiastic shoppers, albeit operating on a different wealth scale to me. I buy too much pasta from Ocado; they buy too many 1982 first growths. But then I started talking to a few. Many spoke of ‘the strange urge to acquire’. A barrister friend said that, although he did buy to drink, ‘ultimately, sitting down and drinking that bottle is probably the thing furthest from my mind when I buy it. Cross-referencing the points, the tasting notes, the scores; assessing the quality of the vintage, tasting some of the wines; trying to get a sense of value for money... I spend a lot of time researching the wines I want to buy.’ He had become a collector completely by accident.

My barrister friend talks about wine collecting as a sport. Boström says for some collectors the rewards are ‘like a drug. They cannot stop, and they cannot help themselves, and there is no more room at home. I knew one person, years ago, who had a smallish flat and a wonderful collection and ended up having to hang paintings on the ceiling’ – flush, not dangling like an infant’s mobiles. At least wine collections can be remotely stored in a bonded warehouse; other collectors frequently end up buying the house next door or building a garden shed in which to store their pieces.

The thought of homes filled with possessions reminded me of a tabloid story I had seen about a woman who was crushed to death (or was it asphyxiated?) when piles of junk she had hoarded fell on top of her. On googling to find the details, I discovered it was not a one-off. There are many similar tales, including that of the Collyer brothers in New York, who died in 1947 in a house so crammed with stuff that they had had to dig tunnels through it to get around.

Psychologists differentiate between collecting behaviour, which is considered normative, and extreme hoarding, like that of the Collyer brothers, which is pathologized in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*. Collectors are actively acquisitive, defining their (often narrow) area of interest. Those diagnosed with hoarding disorder are simply unable to throw things away without intervention,

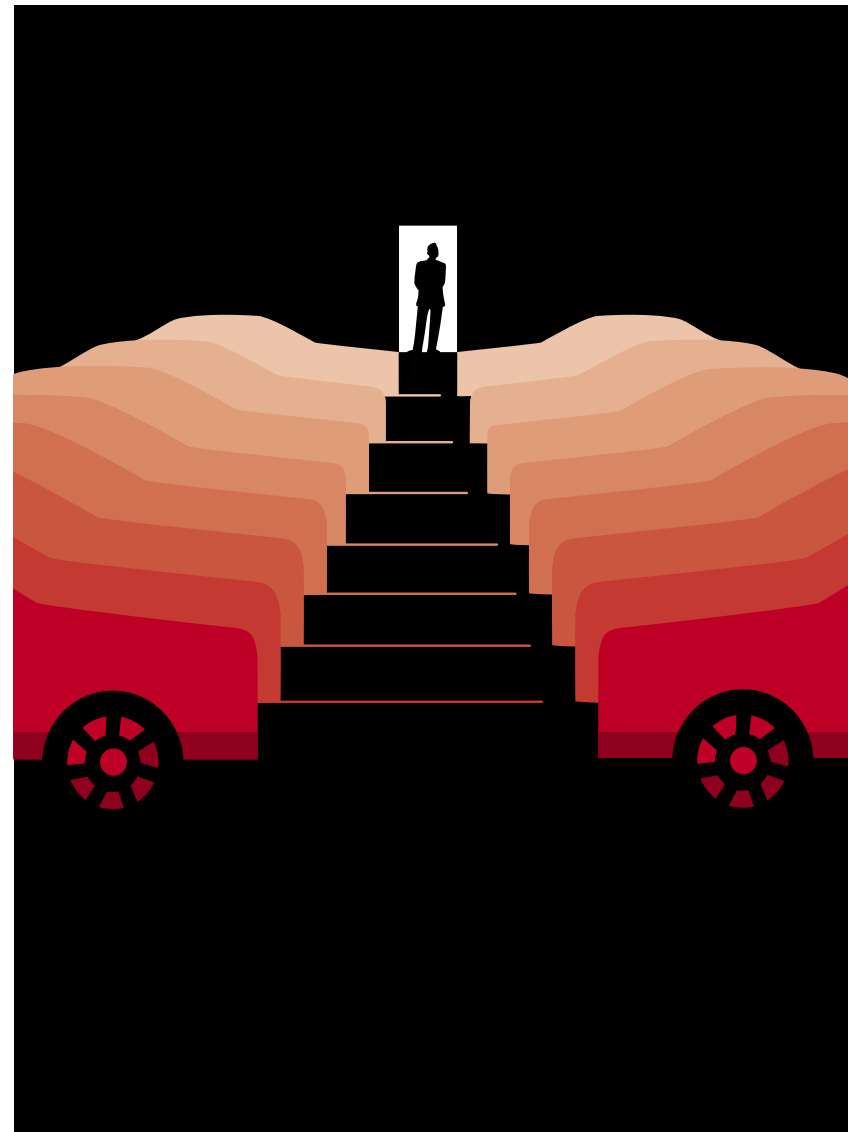
and they may also compromise the intended use of their living space. While hoarders’ possessions pile up in a higgledy-piggledy mess, collectors are systematic, seeking to order, catalogue, display or document their collection, as well as collecting information around individual items.

With its hierarchies and systems, its crus and appellations, and its vintages and villages that can be pored over on a map, wine is a subject that readily lends itself to the collector’s desire to create order and sets. It can be parsed in myriad ways, into horizontal collections (such as all the grands crus of one Burgundy producer) or vertical collections, regional collections, single producer collections and so on. Set completion is considered one of the key motivations in the psychology of the collector, regardless of whether the collection has financial value (like fine wine) or not (like the cards inside children’s sweet packets). ‘Collectors initially gather objects that have value to them as individual units. Later, as more parts are added and a group begins to take shape, single pieces are of less interest but are valued for the good they offer to make the set whole,’ writes Mueller.

At an auction level, Christie’s expert Charles Foley says, ‘Verticals of Château Mouton Rothschild are the most sought-after thing. But people want to make their own; they don’t want to buy one.’ But of course – where would we be without the thrill of the chase, the glorious hunt to track down a rare vintage. (In wine, these are often the off-vintages because they are more likely to have been drunk than exceptional vintages, which are cellared.) It’s all about the gratification that comes with a conquest.

The collector’s world might light up with the excitement of rivalry, but it can also become a refuge, an alternative reality – one that is simpler, more clearly defined and contained than the dreadful mess that is the real world. It is telling that the great collector of data Norris McWhirter, for many years co-editor of the *Guinness Book of Records*, liked nothing better in his spare time than to explore Britain’s 1,049 offshore islands – in itself, a sort of collection, finite and contained yet with a great depth of detail to investigate.

**‘A collection means hard work. It was what I wanted to do, and I made it my life’s work. I am not an art collector; I am a museum’**  
– Peggy Guggenheim



Some collectors do not just prefer to operate alone, they actually relish their anonymity so much ‘that even we don’t know who they are’, says Christie’s Foley. ‘They come up on accounts as “anoni” or whatever.’ For others, the sense of community is one of the draws. These collectors may participate in discussions on internet forums or be part of a dining group such as those in New York or Hong Kong. They may taste together. They may trade highly specialised information, like football fans talking about the stats of a star striker, or sculpture historians discussing the minute details in the facture of a Giambologna.

‘There’s also the sense of competition,’ points out Boström. ‘You’re competing with other collectors; you want to do better than them.’ Indeed. I remember a discussion, some years ago, in Thessaloniki, with Greek winemaker and keen corkscrew collector Vangelis Geroassiliou. He told me, with some intensity, that the Spanish winemaker Pedro Vivanco ‘is my friend, but I have more pieces than him. At least if you count like I do, only one for each kind.’

In *The Collectors* (the English translation was published in 1967), author Philippe Jullian dares to suggest that collecting is part of ‘the struggle against the void’. But he points out that it is also ‘a passion which transcends the barriers of age, sex and society, which can entirely occupy the minds of the most profound as of the most superficial’. Surely that can only be a good thing?

## The psychology of collecting

**David, 43, is a lawyer living in London**

‘I always felt that getting into wine was a sweet spot in the intersection between sensual pleasure and intellectual analysis or categorisation. On the one hand, you have the sheer pleasure of drinking a fabulous glass of red with a steak or something. Then, on the intellectual side, there’s the fascination of understanding how that glass of wine came about – not so much in terms of the scientific or chemical processes but, starting with France, the fascination with the appellation regime, the way different grape varieties are organised, the rules applicable to each region, the maps... But it’s not a purely data-driven exercise, because it all leads you back into the sensual aesthetic pleasure.

‘It’s that strange urge to acquire. I must have bought hundreds of CDs in my lifetime that I literally never listened to, but it was music I really liked and felt I needed to have in case I ever wanted to listen to it. And so with wine: I never bought stuff I wouldn’t want to drink, but I definitely bought more wine than I would be able to drink. The fact that you can sell it if you need to gives you permission to buy more. And the fact that you can store it online means you can pore over your collection, virtually fingering the labels, enjoying the aesthetics – and they are pretty. I can visualise in my mind huge numbers of the wines I own but have never seen.

‘When you’re looking to buy, building a vertical collection or making sure you have a good horizontal spread of 2015s – those things and all the data you’ve read to inform the decision are at the forefront of your mind. And although you’re reading about what the wine tastes like, in the buying moment, the anticipation of actually sitting down and drinking it is almost absent.’ ○