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From the Czar of Russia to Fort McMurray: SMS Wine Auction Acquires Rare Port

BY REBEKAH BENOIT for connect
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Russia in 1941 was a land in turmoil. With the steady and relentless approach of the Nazis, the streets were in a panic. The nation's greatest valuables were being hidden, squirreled away in top-secret hiding spots in the hopes that Russia's most valuable treasures would escape the Nazi scourge.

And some of the most valuable of these treasures weren't artistic masterpieces painted on canvas or finely wrought jewelry fashioned from gold and silver --- they were bottles of wine.

In 1894, the Czar of Russia commissioned a one-of-a-kind wine cellar. He ordered seven 150-metre long tunnels to be bored by hand into a flinty gray mountainside. These dark caverns, called the Massandra Cellars, provided the ideal storage place for bottles of wine, specially selected for the table of the royal household and the most important visiting dignitaries.

"These tunnels were designed to have the perfect environment for long-term storage of wine, between 13 and 14 degrees centigrade," explains local sommelier Jamie Clinch. "It was that specific."

Following the Russian Revolution and the fall of the monarchy, the wine collection became the property of the government, closely guarded by Stalin's Red Army.

As World War II progressed and the Nazis marched onwards towards Russia, the Red

RIGHT: The handmade glass bottle, the top carefully sealed with wax, waits for the SMS Wine Auction which will be held Saturday, October 1st this year. Along with many other unique bottles of wine from all over the world, this 1932 Massandra red port will be auctioned off to one lucky bidder who will walk out with a piece of history.

PHOTO: Courtney Palmer



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Army was ordered to carefully gather the Massandra collection and remove it from the tunnels.

“The Russians considered these bottles to be of incredible importance, like national artwork,” Clinch explains. “They moved every one, bottle by bottle, to three secret locations and they weren’t returned until after the Nazi occupation ended, three years later.”

Where the bottles were during that time remains a mystery, a closely-guarded secret that may never be known by the world. What is known is that the bottles were returned to the Massandra cellars where they remained until the early part of the new millennium, when Russia auctioned off many bottles from the collection to bring much-needed foreign currency into the country.

From Russia, one of these bottles traveled to Sotheby’s auction house in London, and from there to Arkansas, USA and now to Fort McMurray.

Today, the handmade glass bottle, the top carefully sealed with wax, waits for the SMS Wine Auction which will be held Saturday, October 1st this year. Along with many other unique bottles of wine from all over the world, this 1932 Massandra red port will be auctioned off to one lucky bidder who will walk out with a piece of history.

Clinch says that, because of the rarity of the vintage, it’s impossible to guarantee that the bottle will be drinkable, but he has spoken with a wine connoisseur who purchased Massandra from a similar vintage .

“When he poured it out, it had lost all of its dark red colour and he had to be careful in pouring it, because of the sediment that had accumulated in the bottle. He wasn’t sure if it was going to be good or not,” Clinch says, adding that the wine had taken on a rich amber colouration. “But it turned out to be absolutely delicious.”

The port, a sweet dessert wine, will be best served with dark chocolate or old cheddar, but Clinch says the buyer may not choose to drink it at all. “Everything about this bottle makes it a piece of history,” Clinch says. “When you imagine that this bottle was hand-picked by the Red Army, put into a box on the back of a Russian military truck and hidden away from the Nazis for years, it really takes on a whole different feeling.”

The bottle is one of many unique items acquired from collections all over the world, including a Madeira that predates Confederation, a 1979 Chateau Palmer from one of France’s most revered wineries, and a 1986 Opus One which represents a collaboration between Baron Philippe de Rothschild and Robert Mondavi.

More bottles continue to be added to the auction, which will support Big Brothers Big Sisters and promises to be one of the city’s premier annual events. “It’s really a scavenger hunt from around the world in order to acquire these bottles,” says Clinch.

“We’re targeting older wines so that buyers can choose to cellar them or drink them right away. It’s always a shame when you go purchase a bottle of wine to mark a special occasion and find out you have to cellar it for 15 years before you can open it!”

Tickets are now on sale and are already starting to sell fast as numbers are limited. To learn more or order your tickets visit www.fortmcmurraywineauction.ca or call 780-791-2447.



LEFT: 1979 Chateau Palmer from one of France’s most revered wineries. 1986 Opus One which represents a collaboration between Baron Philippe de Rothschild and Robert Mondavi will also be available for auction October 1, 2011 at the 2nd Annual SMS Wine Auction in support of Big Brothers Big Sisters Wood Buffalo. PHOTO: Courtney Palmer



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