

# BORDEAUX IN THE BACK ROOM

As a grocery-store wine steward, Senior Digital Editor **Jameson Fink** was accustomed to introducing customers to wines. But what happened when one of them returned the favor, with a legend no less?

Working as a wine steward in a bustling Seattle grocery store was rarely, if ever, like being in a quiet, refined shop. Though I cultivated friendships with some customers, I also witnessed brazen shoplifters who stuffed bottles down their pants or clandestinely chugged cough syrup in the aisle. For every well-meaning person who brought me leftovers from home, there'd be one who'd scream random threats.

One day, a customer asked me to pick out a nice wine for a dinner party. That wasn't an unusual request, but her reason was that it would serve as a backup to a special bottle she found while cleaning out her closet. She was worried it might be a dud. Naturally, I asked what she discovered.

"A 1982 Haut-Brion," she said.

I gasped at the mention of this legendary wine from a legendary vintage. I will also admit to being skeptical. How does a wine novice comb through the dark recesses of a closet and discover such a treasure? More to the point, how was she the one who gets to find it and not, well, me? I'm ashamed to say that I let envy cloud my attitude, but I recovered to help her select a more modest, but very fine bottle.

What were the chances this Haut-Brion was still good, anyway? It could have been baking in the closet for years. Still, I had to bring out my tired joke that if she and her friends needed help drinking it, I could stop by and assist. (Not surprisingly, no one ever took me up on that offer, and it seems creepy in hindsight. Sorry.)

I went back to my usual duties: I helped customers with wines, stocked the beer cooler and wrote shelf talkers. And, since I worked in a grocery store, I also directed people toward the toilet-paper aisle.

As my shift wound down that evening, that customer returned. She was in the middle of her dinner at a nearby apartment, so she could steal away. After a quick hello, she revealed the open, not-quite-empty bottle of the Haut-Brion. Strangely, my first thought was, "You can't have an open bottle of wine in the grocery store!" That instinct was quickly banished when she offered to pour me a small amount.

Our backstock room doubled as a tasting room. It was always a trip to have a stylish winemaker visit and pour wines amid mop buckets, a mountain of PBR 12-packs and assorted detritus of the retail wine business.

But, on this occasion, I was there because I was the recipient of a small pour of Haut-Brion. My new favorite customer returned to her dinner party. I closed the door, said a quick prayer that I wouldn't be paged and focused on the wine.

I should have been dreaming of enjoying it at a fancy restaurant, wearing a suit and gazing into the eyes of a lover. Yet, in a strange way, this seemed the perfect setting to appreciate it, free of distraction and artifice. Just me and the mop bucket. How romantic.

The verdict on the Haut-Brion? It was spectacular—worthy of its legendary status.

The experience reminded me that wine encourages us to live in the moment, take what comes your way and never lose the ability to be surprised.

Alas, there was no time to linger in this reverie. A customer needed to know where to find the kitty litter.

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