

A Fine Wine

‘Extraordinary! Quite, quite extraordinary!’

Daniel Appleby did not often use such words to describe the wines he tasted. The other man in the room was waiting to see if he liked this one or not. His future depended on what Daniel Appleby said – if he liked the wine it would be bought by one of the biggest supermarkets around. It would be sold everywhere. The man who owned the vineyard looked on nervously. His vineyard was small, but it was one of the oldest in the Bordeaux region of France. If he sold his wine, the business that had been in his family for over two hundred years would be saved.

Daniel Appleby held the glass to his nose and smelled the wine again. He lifted the glass up to the light from the window to see its colour better. He was the Chief Wine Taster for Happimart Supermarkets. If he liked a wine, then everybody bought it. If he didn’t like a wine, nobody did. His word was like the judgement of God.

‘You say you have been making this wine for the last two hundred years?’ he asked the other man, Monsieur Colbert, a proud-looking man of over seventy years of age, whose hair was still as black as it had been when he was twenty.

‘I am old but I am not *that* old, sir,’ Monsieur Colbert said with a little smile. ‘But my family has been making this wine since the time of Napoleon Bonaparte. If I may

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say so, this is the only vineyard in all of France to produce wine in this way. It is my secret.'

Monsieur Colbert was hoping that his little joke might relax things a little.

Daniel Appleby took his profession very seriously. He was the best. He never, ever joked when he tasted wine. He might joke about other wine tasters at other times – in fact, he often did. But he never joked *during* a wine tasting. It was too important. *He* was too important. He held the glass up to the light once more and looked at the deep red colour before finally putting the glass onto the table in front of him. He had made up his mind.

'Monsieur Colbert,' he said, as he placed his thumbs into the pockets of the red jacket he wore, the one that matched his tie so well. 'You are to be congratulated: this is an exceptionally fine wine with a strong bouquet and a rich fruity flavour with suggestions of blackcurrant; a wine to go well with any game or red meat, or to be enjoyed on its own for its excellent and strong personality . . .'

Monsieur Colbert smiled with delight. This was just what he had hoped to hear.

' . . . but,' Daniel Appleby went on as he took out his glasses from the pocket of his expensive jacket and put them on again, 'is this the right kind of wine for the customers of Happimart Supermarkets? They are used to wines that cannot compare with this quality. Their tastes are . . . er . . . less well-developed than those of people such as ourselves. I wonder if they would fully enjoy the finer qualities of this remarkable wine? I wonder if they would be prepared to *pay* more for such quality?'

The old man's smile disappeared. Monsieur Colbert was

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proud of his wine but he was not a rich man. He had to sell his wine or go out of business. He was getting old and he owed a lot of money. He needed money if he was to retire with his wife, whose health had never been good since their only son, Jacques, had died two years before. This could be their last chance.

‘I promise you, Monsieur Appleby, that my wine is worth every franc; there is no better wine of this type in the region!’

Daniel Appleby smiled and picked up the glass again, holding it up against his fleshy nose and allowing the edge of the glass to brush against his neat sandy moustache. He breathed in deeply through his nose and sighed.

‘Ah, you are right, Monsieur Colbert – this is one of the best wines I have ever tasted!’ He stopped for a moment to think of the numerous examples of wine that had passed his lips. This was by far the finest, none of the others could compare with it. And it would be great to add this to the Happimart wine list, *his* wine list. But it would have to be on his terms, of course.

‘But,’ he continued, ‘there is little demand for expensive fine wines – not in our type of supermarkets. Oh, there are wealthy men who will always pay for quality, that is true. But are there enough, Monsieur Colbert, are there enough? The customer of today is the ordinary shopper, not the rich man. And there are a great many more ordinary shoppers than there are millionaires; the shoppers are the ones who make our money for us, Monsieur, and we have to please them, you can be sure of that.’

‘Just what exactly are you saying, Monsieur Appleby? Are you refusing to buy my wine because it is too good?’

asked Monsieur Colbert, his voice showing more anger than he had intended. Times had been bad and his small vineyard had always depended on the high prices that wines of superior quality fetch. But fewer people were prepared to pay for such luxuries now, and he knew that the Englishman from the supermarket was quite aware of this. He didn't want to lose his business completely. He would have to see what he was offered and hope for the best.

'I am saying, Monsieur,' said Appleby, finally, 'that Happimart Supermarkets always try to offer the best value for their customers. *We* are experts at selling for the best prices on the market and *you* are expert at making quality wine. I say we can combine our abilities and offer our customers the finest wines at prices they can afford.'

Monsieur Colbert was not familiar with Appleby's way of doing business. He liked people to be direct and open when they were dealing with him.

'And what exactly are your terms, Monsieur Appleby?' he asked.

Daniel Appleby played with his glass as he spoke, admiring the rich dark colour of the wine as he held it up to the light from the window. He was used to moments like this, and enjoyed them almost as much as the fine wines he loved.

'My terms are the terms Happimart offers to all the smaller vineyards it does business with. *We* like to see fine wines made, but we are realistic about today's market. We offer to buy your vineyard from you and take the responsibility from your hands, while employing you to be in charge of wine production . . .'

‘But Monsieur . . . ?’ Monsieur Colbert did not like the sound of the idea.

‘Well, naturally we wouldn’t expect you to produce the wine by yourself! Our expert production staff would work under your direction. That way you have the best of everything – you continue to make wine but you have the money from the sale of your vineyard and a contract from Happimart, too. A very fine offer, I think you’ll agree. . .’

What Appleby didn’t mention was that once the ‘production staff’ had learned everything about Colbert’s ways of producing his wine, Happimart would find some reason to get rid of him.

Old Monsieur Colbert spoke again.

‘This vineyard has been in my family for generations, Monsieur; it means a lot to me and the honour of my family name. What price are you offering for a wine which was good enough for the Emperor Napoleon himself?’

Daniel Appleby smiled and he named an amount that took the old man’s breath away. It was far, far less than old Colbert had hoped for. But it would be just enough to pay back the money he owed and have a little left over. And he would have a job, at least. He would have to retire later than he had wanted to but he was used to working.

Old Colbert recovered himself and spoke. ‘Monsieur, will you allow me a few moments alone to think over your offer?’

‘Certainly, Monsieur. Take as long as you need, though I will have to leave soon. It would be a pity to go without having our business brought to . . . er . . . a happy conclusion. I will take a walk around your vineyard for a while.’