

The Wine Curator

The first merchant of wines.

Interviewed by Susan Kehoe, Ph.D. | Photography by Jerry Zolynsky

S *SEEN* visited the dynamic wine connoisseur John Jonna for his advice about collecting wine. After 40 years in the business, he's still known as the former owner of the Merchant of Vino. His current local food and wine interests include Vinoteca Wine Bar and Vinology Wine Bar and Restaurant, among others. We caught up with him at the Bird & the Bread restaurant/wine bar/tap room, which he runs with his daughter, Kristin, in downtown Birmingham. He was just returning from conducting a presentation at Seaholm High School's career day, with some future wine masters in tow.

SEEN: Is wine a good investment?

JJ: YES!

SEEN: Many experts don't believe in buying wine for investment.

JJ: The reason to buy wine is to drink it and share it. But it's still a good investment for two reasons. First, you're investing in your health. Remember the French paradox that examined why members of one village in France lived longer than anywhere else? When the researchers controlled all the factors, drinking wine remained as the reason for the longevity. Red wine has even been shown to reverse cholesterol.

SEEN: How does that happen?

JJ: This occurs because wine is "fermented chemically" and is transformed into a substance that's good for the body. Scientific evidence proves that phenolic compounds in wine react positively with the body.

SEEN: And the second reason?

JJ: If you buy wine in a good year, the price of that wine rises every year it gets closer to maturity. As it ages, more and more people want to drink it or have it in their collection.

SEEN: What makes a good year?

JJ: Many factors determine which years produce grapes that are wine-worthy. Without getting into a long explanation, the vintage of



a harvest is critical. A sequence of meteorological events involving sun, rain and temperature are propitious in making a good vintage in a particular year. These are rare occurrences. The reason for buying a good vintage is because those exact conditions can never be duplicated again.

SEEN: What are some of the best vintages?

JJ: The 2000 Chateau Mouton Rothschild is sought after for its vintage as well as for the gold-enamel art on the bottle. The art is a departure from the Rothschild practice of using a different artist each year to create a custom label. 1964 Clos Vougeot is fully aged and ready to drink now. And the 2001 Penfolds St. Henri Shiraz from

South Australia will be excellent at maturity.

SEEN: But who determines when wine is fully aged?

JJ: Industry experts who study vintages release ratings that indicate the numbers of years needed for a wine to fully mature. You can drink the wine at any point, but drinking it at full maturity delivers all the complexity layered in the wine during aging. A bottle of perfectly aged wine is a wine lover's dream.

SEEN: No such thing as an over-the-hill bottle of wine?

JJ: If you keep wine after it matures it's worthless; the wine goes bad or "falls off." It literally oxidizes upon

opening and goes from a red color to that of rain water. In the business we call it "rust." You may as well pour it down the drain.

SEEN: What else is important when buying a wine for investment?

JJ: Another condition affecting maturity is keeping the wine in a perfectly controlled wine cellar — otherwise it loses its full flavor and ability to age. A cellar must be consistently kept at 55 degrees in temperature and between 70-80 percent humidity, along with low light and no vibration. Vibration occurs whenever the bottles are moved or unsettled in some way; so moving wine often can cause it to lose its value, too. At auction, a wine must have an excellent "provenance" that details the care of the wine over the years, including proof of the cellar's conditions and an account of how many times it was transported.

SEEN: What do you recommend for assembling a respectable wine cellar?

JJ: All the world's wine-growing regions are different and that's why you collect a variety from different countries. I suggest acquiring wine from the classic regions of the world in certain percentages:

- France, 50 percent, concentrate on Bordeaux
- Napa Valley, Calif., 20 percent, best reputation for American wine
- Northern Italy, 15 percent, from Tuscany and Barolo
- Spain, 10 percent, from Rioja and Priorat
- Germany, 5 percent, Rieslings

SEEN: What is your most important advice on wine?

JJ: Don't fall in love with it. Wine is something to be shared with friends, not locked away in a cellar. **NS**

John Jonna

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