



## The Best Of Days, the Worst of Days

BY MADELEINE ALBERT

For 14 years I waited tables in an unusually great restaurant run by a brilliantly talented, wildly idiosyncratic chef. Our wine list was modest, so the owners graciously allowed customers to bring in their own bottles. This drove “R,” the Vigilante Hostess, crazy. She disliked seeing people enjoy themselves and prevented it whenever she could. R was so moody and sadistic, in fact, that on the nights she seated customers, my first 10 minutes at each table were spent helping them recover from the experience. It was better to intervene at the door, as I did the night The Wine Guy and his wife came in.

The Wine Guy, a boisterous, no-nonsense man, immediately bristled when R “greeted” him with a smug reproof that we “frowned upon” customers bringing in their own wine. “It doesn’t come in, neither do I,” he challenged tersely, clutching his bottle to his chest. I slid between them with a smile, and offered to tend to the wine as I led the couple to their table. “Does it need decanting?” I asked. With R smoldering in the background, I snuck a peek at the label: Château Pétrus 1947.

Plenty of great wines came through this restaurant. A bottle from someone’s home was usually one saved for a special occasion, so every few weeks I’d see a fabulous old *premier cru*. Sometimes I’d be offered a splash to sample; mostly I enjoyed them vicariously. However, I had

never seen a wine like this before, and I knew I never would again. As the magnitude of the bottle sank in, I experienced mild panic. What if the foil was brittle, the cork rotten? What if I swooned and dropped it on the floor? I took a deep breath, smiled at The Wine Guy and said, “Wow.”

He clapped his hands together. “Get yourself a glass!” he cried happily.

To my good fortune, there was apparently nothing The Wine Guy enjoyed more than sharing great wine with someone who knew what it was. His wife loved wine, all wine, he said, and could tell no difference from one bottle to the next. While she laughed good-naturedly, he told me about a time he came home and found her sitting on the floor of their cellar with her best friend, eating chicken salad sandwiches and drinking a bottle of Château d’Yquem. “Now,” he said, “I color-code the bottle tags: Green=Help Yourself, Yellow=Call Me, and Red=Open This And I Call A Lawyer.”

“It really helps,” she smiled, with the amused patience women married to such men often show.

I opened the wine. The foil and cork were sound, the body and color superb. The Wine Guy jubilantly poured me a glass—a full glass—of 1947 Pétrus. We tasted it.

I have heard Ella Fitzgerald and Kathleen Battle sing. I have seen Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and Monet’s *Water*

*Lilies*. I have kissed a man I truly, deeply love. It was all there in that glass.

I excused myself, took my glass into the kitchen, sealed it in plastic wrap, and hid it in a corner. I would not sip this hastily between trips to the dining room. I would take it home and savor it with my husband. We’d light candles. It would be incredible.

The Wine Guy and his wife had a long, leisurely meal and were the last customers to leave. It was after 1 a.m. when I gathered up my purse, my wrapped glass of Pétrus, and said good night to R, who locked up behind me. I walked to my car and got in.

A man in a ski mask grabbed me before I could close the door. What happened next is a blur: I remember screaming and kicking, fearing for my life. We struggled, he grabbed my purse and fled. I ran to the restaurant and pounded on the door in vain. Someone heard me and called the police, who found me sitting in the front seat of my car, sobbing.

“Are you hurt?” they asked gravely.

I looked down; my white blouse was splattered with what they apparently mistook for blood. On its side between the clutch and brake pedals was my half-wrapped glass, and in it was one sip of the world’s most elegant Bordeaux.

Which, later that morning, I savored with my husband. It was incredible.

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