

Collectors collect, it's what they do, and once the collection is complete, it often ceases to be of interest and they pursue something else. Stamp collectors - who assemble and then document all known items within their chosen theme - can move on more easily than specialists in Art Deco glassware. For the latter the possibilities are infinite, the collection can never be complete, and they are more likely to engage emotionally with the *objets*.

When wine drinkers possessed of a collector's mentality consider what to put into their cellars, many fail to recognise that they are faced with a wholly different proposition. Egged on by books with titles like "1001 Wines to Drink Before you Die" some imagine that there is a finite number to the bottles they need to obtain. Even assuming that this were to be the case - it is possible, for example, to assemble a Mouton Rothschild vertical of every one of the different artist labels since the late Baron Philippe launched the idea with the 1945 vintage - you can't both be a collector as well as a consumer. The collection only has value if it remains intact, so once you've acquired every bottle, the one thing you can't do is open one of them to celebrate.

You could conceivably own more than one bottle each of the Moutons from 1945 to 2015, allowing you to drink some while keeping a complete set. This is how drinkers with a collector's mindset - and with a narrow enough field of interest - make their objective appear achievable while appearing to remain consumers. Also, since having the collection usually involves boasting about it, they might serve some of the duplicates, but would never draw a cork on a unique example.

Herein lies a further difficulty: wine, unlike stamps, deco glassware or Georgian silver, is a wasting asset: there will come a time when you will know, with unerring certainty, that the contents of some of your prized bottles are declining precipitately. The dilemma here is what to do about it. Do you leave these treasures to rot away, or do you succumb to the temptation to drink the wine before it's too late? If you do decide to knock off a bottle, the game is over. While any rational consumer would go for bust - if you're a collector at heart, this requires a massive mindset change.

But these are minor difficulties compared with the overwhelming problem of defining your collection beyond the narrowest range: the punter who assembles the Mouton vertical can sell it as such, and realise (in theory) an amount which is greater than the sum of its parts. The collector who decides he must have (and perhaps even drink) every 100 point wine, every memorable current release, every icon of a particular vintage is setting himself up for failure on a Napoleonic scale. Firstly, there's no guarantee of unanimity amongst critics, so compiling a definitive list of what to buy is a challenge in itself. Secondly, it's a moving target (wines change in the bottle) ensuring, for example, that the "must-haves" from the 2009 vintage in Bordeaux are different today from when the wines were first released. Finally, there's no way of arriving at a finite judgement about your collection (assuming you're willing to sample the wines) because wine is performance art - every bottle is different - while taste memory is fragile.

Your best chance of arriving at a definitive judgement is to open all the bottles at the same time and compare them with each other. If you do that before the wines are properly mature, you lose the opportunity of enjoying them at their peak; too late, and they are a shadow of what they might have been. In short, the collector's quest for a full house is futile. The Irish have a proverb for this: "there are more fish in the sea than have ever been caught."