

WHAT TO DO WITH A BOTTLE OF COW



RICHARD BERCUSON

The party is in the pre-hors d'oeuvres stage. Guests arrive in drabs and drabs, those hybrid cars that run on electricity and concentrated orange juice.

At the door, you dutifully perform the ceremonial ritual: a greeting squeal, then (choose one) a hug, double-cheek peck or handshake.

Each guest arrives with liquid refreshment. A six-pack of imported Madagascar beer will surely create minutes of stimulating dinner banter. George must have hunted high and low for it as he knows it's a favourite.

People bring tall, colourful bags containing bottles of wine. A few bags are obvious Christ-mas retreats. You tilt your head and smile, saying something trite like, "You shouldn't have," even though the invitation clearly indicated to bring your own.

You slowly draw out each bottle from its bag just enough to recognize the label. An Australian Shiraz, a French (is there any other?) Bordeaux, a Niagara chardonnay. With each, you symmetrically cock your head the opposite way and express glee at receiving a wine you haven't seen in, well, ages.

You pull out one bottle. You don't recognize it and realize this one must be special indeed. "I hope you like it," she says. You strain to read the label. Cuvée des Vaches. Is it from one of those new, reconstructed vineyards? you ask. "It sure is," and she laughs. You draw out the entire bot-

tle. The label, which features the drawing of a cow, is a bit crooked. The cow is sort of grinning and has a chunk of grass hanging from its mouth. In small print, you read, "Bottled lovingly at the Happenstance Vineyard Store."

The cow is sort of grinning and has a chunk of grass hanging from its mouth. In small print, you read, 'Bottled lovingly at the Happenstance Vineyard Store.' It's dated last month. The best before date is next week.

It's dated last month. The best before date is next week.

Oh, you mutter, we'll have to try it. "Yes, you must," she says. "I have a case in the trunk." And she launches into a list of the other wines. There's Cuvée des Chiens and Cuvée des Singes and many more. Each one tastes like a real wine. "You can't tell the difference," she

promises. Probably not, you say. Then she tells you how much she's saved on wine by bottling her own. "In the LCBO, this very same Merlot is nearly \$20. Mine is less than \$2 a bottle and you can drink it right away."

You gently touch her shoulder in a gesture of gratitude. You push the bottle back into its bag and set it on the floor behind you as the next guest arrives.

Later, the wines and imported beers are laid out on a table for people to try. You don't quite know what to do with the Cow. The woman's an old friend and certainly not destitute. She

can afford a trip to the wine store. Instead she brings a bottle of Cow. You then notice she's returned from her car with another. You politely grin as she plunks it next to a beautiful Muscadet.

The label, upside down, shows a squirrel spitting out a mouthful of nuts. Cuvée des Ecureuils.

You try to recall the e-mail invitation. You never did write not to bring homemade wine. No one else did. In fact, the other guests went to some trouble to select really good wines. The Madagascar beer, you learn, was bought on eBay.

You could do the polite thing and leave her to open her own Squirrel and Cow. You could set them at the end of the table, nearest the washroom, as a gentle metaphorical statement. You could softly tell her that perhaps her Happenstance Store wines aren't quite up to the standards and maybe she'd

like to hold onto them for when she comes back alone and they can be enjoyed with nachos and salsa.

You wonder if her gaffe is socially acceptable. Or, is she in some perverse way, trying to sabotage the party?

Should one bring homemade wine to somebody's house?

There's a crowd at the table and much animated conversation. Your friend is in the middle of it. The Squirrel and Cow are nearly empty as everyone is giving them a try. No one is sure what they taste like. Pinot Noir or Beaujolais or even Syrah. She's told to hurry out to the car and bring in the Dog and, hey, why not the Monkey, too?

You're the only one drinking the Muscadet. You can't help wondering what animal it tastes like.

RICHARD BERCUSON is an Ottawa writer. He does not, yet own his own vineyard.