

## Chicago Chef Sued for Selling Counterfeit Wine Bottle

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Jacob Andrzejczak/Getty Images

Two wine collectors from New York City have filed suit against famed Chicago chef Charlie Trotter for selling them a counterfeit bottle of wine for \$46, 227.40.

The collectors, a married couple, filed the suit on June 13 in U.S. District Court in Northern Illinois. They are seeking over \$75,000 in damages: In addition to \$30,000 worth of punitive damages, they want the \$46, 227.40 back.

When reached by ABC News, the couple declined to comment and asked that their names not be revealed for privacy purposes.

Trotter operated Charlie Trotter's, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Chicago. (ABC7 reported that Trotter closed his restaurant in the summer of 2012 to attend graduate school.) According to the restaurant's website, it has received awards and citations from the James Beard Foundation, the Wine Spectator and Restaurant Magazine.

It was these accolades that took the couple there when they flew to Chicago in June 2012. In addition to

sampling the food, they wanted to buy a bottle of Burgundy from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti to add to their wine collection. The court documents maintain that this type of wine is among the most valuable in the world.

They purchased a 1945 DRC Magnum for \$46, 227.40, according to the court documents. But when they wanted to add the bottle to their homeowners' insurance, they were told to verify its authenticity.

They contacted Maureen Downey, a San Francisco based wine consultant, who said the wine was counterfeit.

Downey told ABC News that she was skeptical of the bottle because it was a magnum, which is equivalent to two bottles. She said Domaine de la Romanee-Conti only produced two barrels-roughly 50 bottles-of wine in 1945.

"The chance that they would make large formats [of the wine] when they were in postwar shambles is not very high," she said.

Downey also said the photographs of the wine bottle that the couple sent her were identical to the photographs of another client.

"The details are the same with the fake aging. They have both been allegedly faded to make it look as though they have been aged and it's just not probable that these two different bottles would look so exactly the same," she said.

Trotter has refused to cancel the sale with the couple, according to court documents. He could not be reached for comment.

Vincent Louis DiTommaso, the couple's attorney, told ABC News that he attempted to resolve the dispute outside of court but was unable to do so.

"I am just surprised because to me we had clear evidence of just showing that the wine was a fake, and to me the right thing to do is give the person their money back and be done with it," DiTommaso said.

John Riccione, who DiTommaso said had been representing Trotter, was out of the office until Monday and could not be reached for comment.



Jacob Andrzejczak/Getty Images

Chef Charlie Trotter prepares a dish for a press conference at The Grand Opening weekend of The Palazzo Resort Hotel Casino on January 18, 2008 in Las Vegas.

# Wine Spectator

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## Wine Collectors Accuse Charlie Trotter of Fraud; Chef Denies Allegations

**Brothers allege in federal lawsuit that they bought phony magnum of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti from restaurant**

*Mitch Frank*

Posted: June 14, 2013

Charlie Trotter probably thought he was finished with diner complaints when he closed his Chicago restaurant last year. But a pair of New York wine collectors filed a lawsuit in federal court June 13, alleging that the chef and his staff sold them a fake magnum of Burgundy last year. Brothers Bekim Frokaj and Ilir Frokaj (FRO-kah) are suing Trotter and his restaurant for \$70,000 plus punitive damages, alleging multiple counts of fraud.

Trotter denies the allegations. "We have never had a complaint in 25 years," he told *Wine Spectator*. "I think my reputation stands for itself."

The wine in question is a magnum of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Romanée-Conti 1945, which the complaint alleges the Frokaj brothers paid more than \$46,000 for. The brothers, who live in the Bronx, share a wine collection. When they saw that Trotter was preparing to close his restaurant last year and was selling wines from his 7,000-bottle cellar, the bottle that caught their attention was the DRC 1945, and they contacted the restaurant about it. The complaint says they flew to Chicago in June 2012, had dinner at Trotter's, and discussed the wine with both Trotter and a sommelier. They paid \$40,000 in cash, put the rest on a credit card and had the bottle shipped home.

When Bekim tried to add the wine to his home insurance policy, the complaint continues, the insurer asked him to have it authenticated by an expert. He contacted Maureen Downey, founder of Chai Consulting. Her report concluded the bottle was a fake. "I've got issues with the bottle's glass, with the label, with the capsule and with the cork," Downey told *Wine Spectator*. "I am 100 percent confident that the wine is counterfeit." Downey also said that she has been unable to confirm the purchase of the bottle with the importer from which the staff allegedly bought it.

According to Vince DiTomasso, the brothers' Chicago-based lawyer in the case, his clients asked Trotter for a refund but did not receive a satisfactory answer. "You spend more than \$46,000 to buy a wonderful bottle of wine and you find out it's fake, you'd be disappointed, shocked, angry—all kinds of emotions," said DiTomasso.

"I think this is a case of buyer's remorse," said Trotter, who is taking a sabbatical from the culinary world and pursuing a degree in philosophy. He said Bekim contacted him four months ago claiming the bottle was bad. "He bought a bottle from us that we bought 12 years ago. We bought it in good faith, and we've never had a complaint before that a wine was not authentic."

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## Charlie Trotter accused of selling counterfeit bottle of wine

Chicago chef Charlie Trotter has been sued for allegedly selling two wine collectors from New York counterfeit wine .

### **Tribune staff and wire reports**

6:28 a.m. CDT, June 14, 2013

The famed Chicago chef Charlie Trotter has been sued for allegedly selling two wine collectors from New York a big, bogus bottle of wine.

According to a lawsuit filed Thursday in federal court in Chicago, Bekim and Ilir Frrokaj paid more than \$46,200 last June for what they thought was a magnum of 1945 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti from Trotter's Michelin-starred restaurant.

Trotter closed his restaurant last August, citing a desire to travel and to study philosophy, and as part of the closure made plans to sell thousands of bottles from his restaurant's wine collection. This drew interest from wine aficionados who admired the restaurant's collection of Bordeaux and cabernets.

"During dinner, Charlie Trotter and the sommelier explained the rarity and value of the DRC magnum to Benn and Ilir," according to the court filing. "Charlie Trotter and the sommelier also spoke about wines from the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti estate and how those wines are some of the rarest and most valuable in the world."

But the Frrokajs contend this was not true, and that it was only when they tried to have the bottle insured that they learned from a consultant that it was counterfeit.

When reached by phone, Trotter denied the allegations. He said he received a phone call a month after the purchase from one of the buyers, who asked for his money back.

"It was a disgruntled client who probably paid a lot more money (for the bottle) than he's ever paid before," Trotter said. "It's buyer's remorse."

According to the complaint, when consultant Maureen Downey met with estate co-owner Aubert de Villaine, he stated "Domaine de la Romanee-Conti only produced small yields in 1945 and as a result did not produce any large format magnum-size bottles."

The lawsuit accuses Trotter and his former restaurant of violating federal and state consumer laws, and seeks \$75,000 in damages. Efforts to recover without going to court proved unsuccessful, the plaintiffs' lawyer John Auchter said Thursday.

*Reuters and Tribune reporter Jennifer Delgado*

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By Alana Abramson Jun 15, 2013 7:00am



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