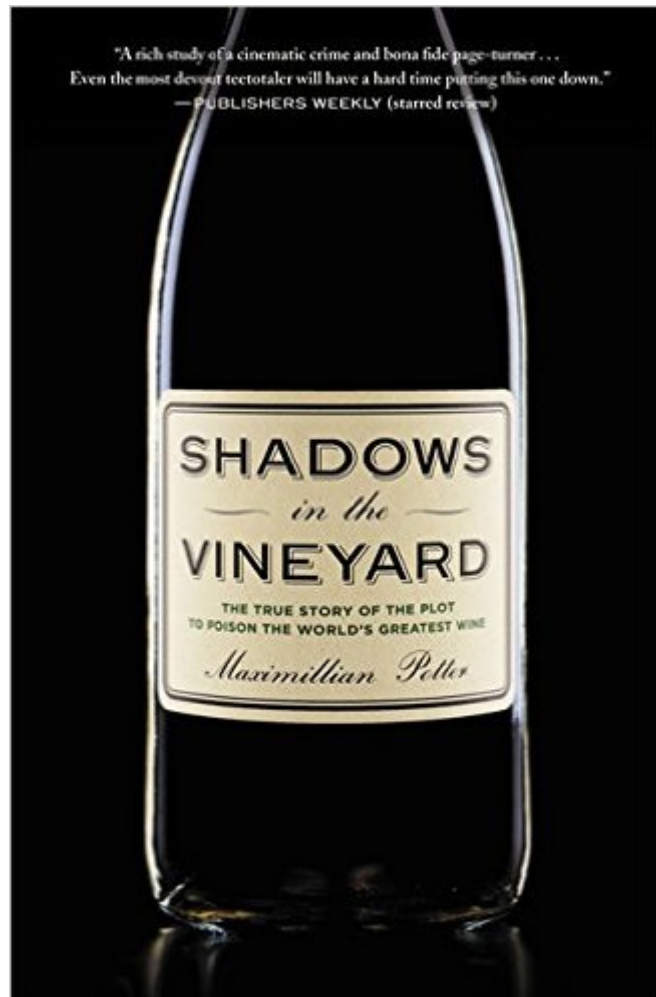


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# Shadows In The Vineyard: The True Story Of The Plot To Poison The World's Greatest Wine



## Synopsis

Best Book of the Month, July 2014 Journalist Maximilian Potter uncovers a fascinating plot to destroy the vines of La Romanée-Conti, Burgundy's finest and most expensive wine. In January 2010, Aubert de Villaine, the famed proprietor of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, the tiny, storied vineyard that produces the most expensive, exquisite wines in the world, received an anonymous note threatening the destruction of his priceless vines by poison—a crime that in the world of high-end wine is akin to murder—unless he paid a one million euro ransom. Villaine believed it to be a sick joke, but that proved a fatal miscalculation and the crime shocked this fabled region of France. The sinister story that Vanity Fair journalist Maximilian Potter uncovered would lead to a sting operation by some of France's top detectives, the primary suspect's suicide, and a dramatic investigation. This botanical crime threatened to destroy the fiercely traditional culture surrounding the world's greatest wine. SHADOWS IN THE VINEYARD takes us deep into a captivating world full of fascinating characters, small-town French politics, an unforgettable narrative, and a local culture defined by the twinned veins of excess and vitality and the deep reverent attention to the land that runs through it.

## Book Information

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: Twelve; Reprint edition (July 28, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1455516090

ISBN-13: 978-1455516094

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (126 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #75,507 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #10 in [Books > Cookbooks, Food & Wine > Beverages & Wine > Wine & Spirits > Collecting](#) #23 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > True Crime > White Collar Crime](#) #37 in [Books > Business & Money > Industries > Restaurant & Food](#)

## Customer Reviews

I have been torn between my competing impulses of not being able to put "Shadows in the Vineyard" down and a contradictory desire to extend the time it takes for me to finish this book for as long as possible so as to prolong its enjoyment. The character development and imagery are

incredibly vivid and seamlessly melded across time and geography. When you combine this with a love of historical writing and historical fiction as well as crime and mystery novels, "Shadows in the Vineyard" has accomplished at least a trifecta of everything that is dear to me in a book. Although this book is non-fiction, it reads like a novel and keeps you on the edge of your seat.

If you're going to write a book set in the French wine country, and you are bound and determined to sprinkle it with French phrases, to the point where the culprit in a crime-against-wine is in a hideout with his "moutarde"/mustard in a pot on table alongside some carottes/carrots, and where you talk about the traffic in the rues/streets constantly, here's a tip: at least make sure you have an editor who will ensure it is used properly. Otherwise, by the time your hapless reader wends his/her way to the end of the book, at least some of the pleasure will have been spoiled. Luckily, the worst howler was reserved for the final pages, when the author solemnly tells readers the following about the culprit: "now he was the Blackmailer and everyone was listening to him. Jacques referred to himself as "Le Maître Chanteur", the Master Singer." Actually, maître-chanteur simply means blackmailer... I suspect that even a simple online translator could have fixed that one. However... The merits of this book are there, even if they aren't quite as billed. There's really no "sinister story" here; more of a sad and pathetic one. Forget the idea of a "dramatic investigation": when vineyard owner Aubert de Villaine, whose domaine produces one of the most sought-after vintages in the world, is told that his grapes will be poisoned if he doesn't cough up a million Euros, it sounds as if the reader is, indeed, en route to a great and exciting roman policier. Nope. Instead, the author darts back and forth, recounting the history of the domaine (from the days of the Benedictine and Cistercian monks to the prince de Conti's feud with Mme de Pompadour in Enlightenment-era Paris, and then turning his attention to the evolution of great wines, and great wine appellations, most notably Romanée-Conti. Sometimes there is altogether too much darting around, to the point where my head started to spin, but ultimately, it was all interesting and fresh enough to someone who isn't a dedicated wine nut but who is familiar with the region and the historical context. Best of all was the detailed explanation of what is meant by the concept of terroir, and how it influences or even dictates what is produced -- in this case wine, but really, anything that grows on a particular plot of land. The bond between the people of a region and their traditional cultivation of grapes and the production of wine is portrayed vividly. The TGV may whisk past the vineyards en route south but even though the vines themselves are today the result of grafting old rootstock with phylloxera-resistant Californian pinot noir, the essence of Burgundy's vineyards probably hasn't changed much since the Middle Ages. The mystery? Well it's there, and the cops get to the root of it

(apologies for the pun) very, very quickly. Hence, I suppose, the structure: had this been about the attempted blackmail, the book would have ended up resembling a very, very thin pamphlet. Still, I couldn't love the book. Even had the egregious errors and oddities of the French language usage been corrected, there were enough of the latter in English to niggle away at me throughout the tale. One character is "a shrewd man who had chessed out all of the possibilities" (chessed out??) Early in the novel, we are given ominous hints about the behavior of one member of M. de Villaine's circle, denied access to the domaine "because of things she denied but were proven in court". (You'll have to wait about 175 pages to find out what, however...) Then there are endless, somewhat tortured attempts to make tie style to subject matter: "a decision that would cause vintages of trouble..." I'm a fan of Twelve's books, and was looking forward to this one. I could have survived either the combination of a less compelling narrative than initially suggested and the rapidfire changes in narrative direction OR the sometimes tortured syntax and linguistic snafus. Combining the two, however, just made this book harder to read with each chapter I finished, regardless of how interesting I found what turned out to be the real tale at its heart: that of a man and his vineyard. Sad to say that what could have been a 4 star book ended up with 2.5 stars, rounded up.

There are plenty of true crime books out there. *Shadows in the Vineyard: The True Story of the Plot to Poison the World's Greatest Wine* (Twelve) by Maximilian Potter tells the story, as the subtitle points out, of a unique crime, and one that after this book, readers will hope does not inspire copycats. The crime - pay me off or I will poison your vines - is related in less than half of the pages of Potter's book, so if you just want a police procedural, look elsewhere. The other pages are about wine lore stretching back over the centuries and about the current family holdings and production status of the esteemed Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (known as the DRC in the business) in the Burgundy region. They aren't filler; they help show wine culture, the importance of this particular vintage, and how horrifying the crime could have been. I know nothing about wines, slightly less than Potter did when he started investigating this story. He was a crime reporter, and true to the image, he had stuck to beer and whiskey. He learns plenty while working on this story, and has obviously enjoyed recounting the bizarre crime during the length of the book and the meandering but colorful asides throughout. Also, lucky fellow, he has gotten to enjoy the wines themselves. The DRC would be a good target for extortion. It produces red wines that are regarded as the pinnacle of viticulture. Some of them can cost \$10,000 a bottle. Jacques Soltys knew something about wine. He was a failed bank robber and kidnapper, and hatched the plot of

kidnapping vines while he was in prison. One evening in January 2010 the Grand Monsieur of the DRC, the elderly Aubert de Villaine, found a ransom note along with a detailed map of the vines of the DRC. The French equivalent of the FBI went to work, initially thinking it was an inside job, and amazed to find when it came time to pay off the ransom in a quiet local cemetery that there was no truck full of gun-toting hoods, no motorcyclist who sped away with the duffel bag full of money, but only a man who casually appeared from nowhere, picked up the bag, and sauntered off. It must have been a big let-down for the cops to make a simple arrest of an unsophisticated former robber, and there were essentially no loose ends after the arrest; case closed. I don't mind telling the ending here, because there isn't much excitement to the story and the denouement of the capture of the sad and incompetent Soltys is only surprising because it has no surprise to it. The story of the crime and capture threads throughout the book, but it is the digressions that make it worth reading. Among these are the descriptions of the Grand Monsieur himself., who remains close to the earth with an unassuming home life, complete with cheap cars he can use for what was essentially the career of a farmer. He did regard his vines as his children; when he learned of the plot and regarded the poisoned plants, he wept. Villaine always said that to fully appreciate a wine, you had to understand the vines and you had to understand the terroir, or all the natural characteristics that go into it, like soil, sun, and rain. But he also thought you had to understand the history of the place and of the people who brought the wine through the centuries. Potter's work does this for DRC and its region. Not only does he profile Villaine and his family, he goes into the court intrigues during the reign of Louis XV, the economic competition that secured the original vineyard for the raffish and mysterious Prince de Conti, and the religious and political intrigues that led up to the French Revolution. Other illuminating tangents are the devastation of the vineyards by the pest *Phylloxera* in the late 19th century, how Americans got interested in French wines, the effort to make the region of the DRC a World Heritage Site, and a glimpse at the history of wine fraud. Even for those of us who never drink wine, and those who will never get to taste one of the Grand Monsieur's bottles, this is a satisfying crime story expanded into a love letter to a great French vineyard.

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