

ONE BOTTLE: The 1999 Piper-Heidsieck Champagne “Cuvée Rare”

by JOSHUA BAER

In the days and weeks leading up to the collapse, we told each other that the only way to survive was to prepare for the unexpected. Survival was an art, not a science. There were no guarantees. The collapse would begin with a moment, and when that moment came, it would come out of left field. No matter how much cornmeal and distilled water you had stashed in your basement, the scale of the collapse would terrify you. Civilization had been around for a long time. We were all addicted. The collapse would not be a fair fight. It would ignore your strengths and exploit your weaknesses. By the time you knew what to expect, it would be too late.

One night, after dinner—and this must have been a couple of weeks before the moment arrived, because the phones and the Web were still working—a friend of mine, an older man with owlish eyebrows, took me aside and gave me some advice. “You’ll make it,” he said. “I won’t, but you will. The thing is, after you survive, you’ll feel guilty. You’ll ask yourself why you made it and I didn’t.”

“You’ll survive,” I said.

“No, I won’t,” he said. “And you can stop pretending that you think I will, because we both know I won’t. But that’s not the point.”

“What’s the point?”

“The point is, when the time comes, and you’re sitting there, asking yourself why you survived and I didn’t? Don’t do it. Don’t be tempted. Because the moment you ask yourself that question, some vigilante is going to jump out from behind a bush and slit your throat, just for practice. Just because he managed to sneak up on you and catch you in the act of feeling guilty. And then we’ll both be dead. So don’t do it. Promise me you won’t indulge in any of that survivor syndrome nonsense. You made it. I didn’t. The end.”

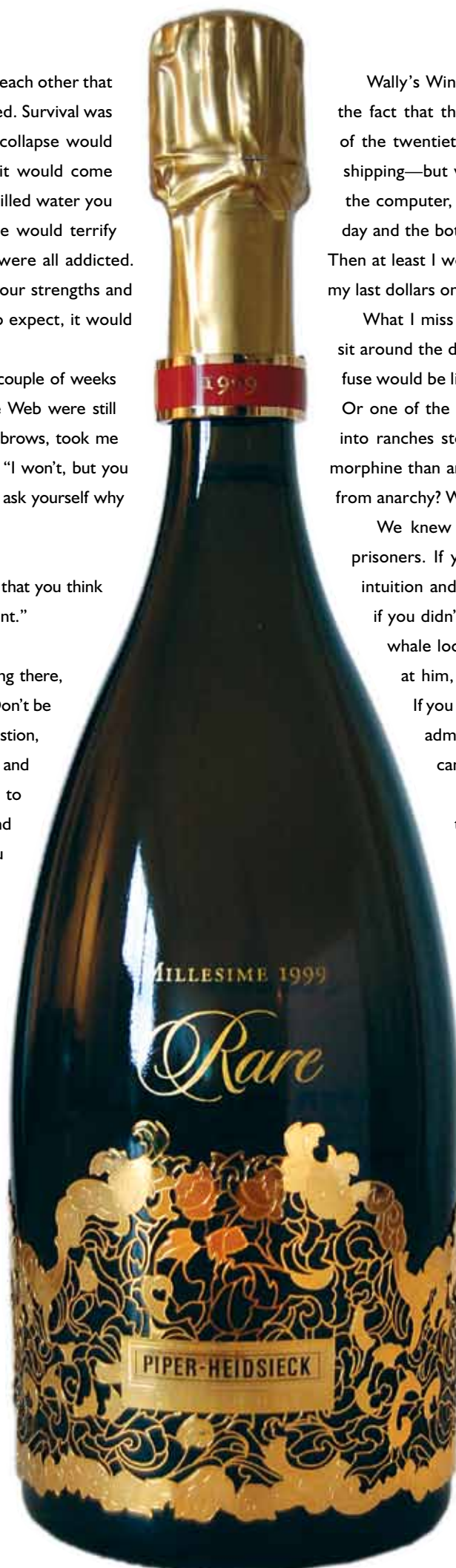
“Okay,” I said. “I promise.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Now I can die happy.” He put on his coat and went home.

After he left, I did the dishes. Remember doing the dishes? Remember how good it felt to have unlimited quantities of hot water flowing over your hands?

After I did the dishes, I turned on the computer. Bloomberg had a story about the morphine shortages in England and the ammunition shortages in the United States. At the end of the story, the writer said: “That’s the difference between England and America. They hoard comfort. We hoard ways to kill each other.”

After I read the story, I went to Wine-Searcher and looked up the Piper-Heidsieck Champagne “Cuvée Rare” in all vintages. My hands were trembling but I figured, Hey, it’s now or never. I had tasted the Cuvée Rare twice. On both occasions, time had stopped. It was my favorite Champagne. If I wanted to taste it again, this was my last chance.



Wally’s Wines in Los Angeles had a bottle of the 1999. I remember liking the fact that the 1999 was not only a pre-9/11 Champagne but also a relic of the twentieth century. The 1999 Cuvée Rare was expensive—\$178, plus shipping—but what was money? I paid for the bottle with PayPal, turned off the computer, and went to bed. With any luck, Wally’s would ship the next day and the bottle would arrive before the end of civilization. And if it didn’t? Then at least I would have the satisfaction of knowing that I had spent a few of my last dollars on Champagne.

What I miss about those threshold evenings are the theories. We used to sit around the dinner table and speculate about when and where and how the fuse would be lit, and who would light it. Would it be the jihadis? The Chinese? Or one of the Christian tycoons who had already converted their portfolios into ranches stocked with more distilled water, cornmeal, ammunition, and morphine than anyone could consume in a lifetime? Who had the most to gain from anarchy? Who was planning to come out on top?

We knew we were being silly. We knew the collapse would take no prisoners. If you survived, it would be by accident, with maybe a dash of intuition and no small amount of luck folded into the accidental mix. And if you didn’t make it, well then, whose fault was that? If some evangelical whale looked into the future, saw the dark side of history staring back at him, and prepared for the worst, did that make him your enemy? If you were honest with yourself—or even if you weren’t—you had to admit that blame was an exercise in futility. If and when the collapse came to pass, what difference would it make whose fault it was?

It was that unfocused apprehension, that loss of certainty, that made those last days so sublime. If you believed in God, and you sat across the table from an atheist, you knew that in the space of ten minutes you could convert to atheism and the atheist could hear God’s voice, telling him to get up from the table, go out to his car, drive to Sam’s Club, buy six months’ worth of cornmeal and distilled water, and head for the hills.

Which brings us to the 1999 Piper-Heidsieck Champagne “Cuvée Rare.”

The bottle arrived in the nick of time. In the glass, the color of the 1999 Cuvée Rare was a cross between silver and gold. The bead was so fine it made you wonder if you were hallucinating. On the palate, the 1999 Cuvée Rare was sheer joy. It was a fearless, reckless Champagne. The finish was bizarre and long and uninterrupted, like the first days of a doomed love affair. You knew it couldn’t last but you didn’t care. And then there was the bottle, with the red choker at its neck and its bodice of bling. Like the Champagne inside, the bottle was an echo, a souvenir from an era when our greatest luxuries were the things we took for granted. ♡

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