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International Wine Fraud Ring Dismantled

Joint Operation Nets Wine Counterfeiters, Seizes Millions in Fake Bottles

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A joint investigation between France, Italy, and Switzerland has dismantled a criminal network dedicated to counterfeiting French wines with Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). The actions, carried out on October 14, led to the arrest of six individuals, including a high-value target, and the execution of 14 home searches. Authorities

seized large quantities of counterfeit wine bottles from various Grand Cru estates, along with materials used in the production of the falsified wines.

The investigation, led by France's Gendarmerie Nationale and supported by Italy's Carabinieri and the Swiss Federal Police, received backing from Europol and Eurojust. The operation targeted a criminal organization that produced counterfeit wines in Italy and sold them globally, with prices reaching up to 15,000 euros per bottle. The wines were falsified in Italy before being transported to an Italian airport for export. Presented as authentic high-value products, the bottles were distributed through legitimate wine merchants who were unaware of their fraudulent origins.

During the raids in Turin and Milan, authorities not only seized substantial quantities of fake wine but also labels, wax products, ingredients for filling the bottles, specialized recapping machines, and luxury goods. Additionally, they confiscated electronic devices valued at 1.4 million euros, over 100,000 euros in cash, and various documents that proved crucial for the investigation.

Forensic analysis of the bottles allowed investigators to identify the methods used by the network for counterfeiting, helping to connect this case with a previous investigation that had been closed in 2015. That earlier investigation involved a Russian citizen and two Italian wine producers, who have also been linked to this new case. The inquiries revealed that the network continued selling counterfeit bottles, even replicating new security features on the labels.

Investigators traced a latent clue back to 2014, found on the back of a label, leading them to identify an individual already known to authorities from a similar case. Since 2019, new counterfeits began appearing in Swiss and Italian markets, often alongside older falsified bottles. Cooperation between authorities and information-sharing through Europol enabled France's Gendarmerie Nationale to identify a new distribution channel for these bottles, using the identity of renowned Grand Cru estates.

Europol has played a central role in this investigation since 2021, coordinating operational activities and facilitating information exchange among the countries involved. On the day of the operation, Europol deployed two experts on the ground to cross-check operational data with its databases, providing new leads for the national

investigations. Eurojust, meanwhile, facilitated collaboration between judicial authorities in France and Italy and ensured the execution of European Investigation Orders in Italy.

The coordinated efforts of multiple authorities were key to the success of the operation. The participating bodies included the Gendarmerie Nationale of France, the Court of Dijon, Italy's Carabinieri, the Prosecutors' Offices of Turin and Milan, and various Swiss authorities such as the Geneva Cantonal Police, Zug Cantonal Police, the Federal Office for Customs and Border Security, and the Swiss Federal Police. On October 15, the list of involved authorities was updated to include all entities that collaborated in dismantling the network.

The operation highlights the sophistication with which these counterfeiting networks operate, with the ability to mimic high-end products and deep knowledge of the market. It also underscores the importance of international cooperation in tackling such crimes, which not only harm the economy and reputation of legitimate producers but also pose risks to consumers who unknowingly purchase counterfeit products.