

# Weird Tales



NOVEMBER, 1952

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D. McLWRAITE, Editor

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# Fermentation

BY CURTIS W. CASEWIT

*The jolly god in triumph comes,  
Sound the trumpets!  
Beat the drums!*

DRYDEN

IT ALL started one morning when Orville Rausch came gasping into my laboratory, waving his tiny hands.

"I have it!" he yelled.

As chemical analyst at his winery I was, of course, quite interested, in what he might have. He was a tireless source of new ideas, of formidable advertising projects and endless schemes to beat and smash his competition. Rausch was a quaint mixture of crackpot and business wizard and sometimes quite admirable.

"What is it, sir?" I asked.

"Zerobnick's secret! I have it—we're going to bring it on the market first!"

Clem Zerobnick, *Excellos* Wineries, was Rausch's great rival. Lately he had become his great obsession. When Zerobnick dropped prices, Rausch had to follow; and when the other bought fifty inches of advertising, Rausch gobbled up a whole page.

"What secret?" I asked.

"It's a revolution in wine making! A fabulous discovery! From Mexico. They discovered a wild grape. It grows—"

"Excuse me," I said. "Grapes are somewhat rare in Mexico. I—"

"They were. But they aren't now," he raved. They have grafted these on cactus—they grow like wildfire."

"Cactus?" I said dubiously.

His receding chin went up and down, scraping against the wilted shirt collar.

I moved away from him. "You mean they're producing wine—"



Heading by Anthony Di Giannurio

"Yes, yes! Don't you understand? They built an experimental winery down there. Greatest wine specialist of South America in charge. Man named Vasco Rodriguez. I've contracted for his whole output. Pal Zerobnick won't get a drop of it. We'll knock 'em dead now."

I'm a scientist and a skeptic. "Where did you find out about this?"

"Rodriguez wrote me. But never mind this." He now did an impromptu dance on his thin little legs. "Labor is cheap down there, so I'm buying the wine for practically nothing. They pay half the freight. The cactus needs no cultivation nor—"

"Tell me," I said, picking up a Bunsen burner he'd knocked over. "Tell me: this wine from Mexico, how do we get it up here?"

"Tank cars!" His voice became smug. "The first one is already on the way."

"Oh?"

"There'll be hundreds more! Not like one or two a week from California! No, Eric! Hundreds of cars. The whole West will drink it. We'll ship it everywhere!"

WITH that he ran out of the room to return with an exotic looking, black decanter. A tiny ripple of excitement went through me when he pressed the cold bottle into my hands, a bottle with a neck like a cactus pear and a yellow label that read "Vino Opuntia."

"Look," I said, still doubtful. "Plants that mushroom up overnight should deserve some research. Fermentation rules don't always apply to them. If—"

He ignored me. "Vino Opuntia, eh? The Wine of cactus? Let's get a good name. You try!"

"I'm sorry."

"No imagination at all, Eric. Just like a chemist, no feeling for publicity."

He groped for a name, babbled half a dozen, probing, searching. It was magnificent to watch an idea forming in his mind, gathering, slowly, slowly and then all at once thundering into the room like an avalanche. "Opuntia," he whispered, "opium—utiopia—I got it! *VINOPLA!*"

He handed me a corkscrew "Here goes Zerobnick's neck!"

I put the bottle between my knees, pulling with vigor. The cork sat tightly.

"Give it to me," he snapped.

And while he had his teeth clamped together, all tautness, energy and rivalry, while he was pulling there, failing, pulling again, I thought of Zerobnick. I had never witnessed a more intense competition.

When the bottle finally came open Rausch's hands were sticky.

I took a file cover and marked in red pencil:

*Vinopia.*

I took a sheet and wrote in ink:

*Disturbing characteristic No. 1: "Cork, unusually tight. Reason?"*

Rausch had meanwhile grabbed a glass. His eyes were glinting, his body shaking with impatience. He poured a drop. It was the supreme moment. We found a wine that was heavy and green. Ceremoniously, Rausch sniffed, his pointed nose moving back and forth over the rim of the glass. He took a sip, smacking his tongue. "Terrible! That'll kill old Clem!"

At the same moment he gazed at me, bewildered.

A hundred green specks had appeared on my white coat.

I'm a skeptical man, and on occasion I have a temper.

"Did you spit on me?" I asked.

"I did not!" he sputtered indignantly. "You must've spilled it when you opened the bottle."

"I beg your pardon, sir. *You* opened the bottle! I'm sure I didn't—"

"Never mind," he muttered, staring at my white coat which looked as if a spray gun had been at work.

An embarrassed pause followed. We both glanced at the open bottle suspiciously.

"Anyway, make an analysis, at once!"

"Yes, sir!"

"And taste the wine too."

When he'd gone, I took my *Vinopia* file and marked on a sheet in ink:

*Disturbing characteristic No. 2: "Green specks. Reason?"*

I pencilled, tentatively: Excessive pressure? Possibly a fermentation ad infinitum?

Then I tasted the wine. It had a queer bouquet of concord mixed with zinfandel. The tartness was not unpleasant.

AS I went to my tasting equipment, the phone rang. I had just inserted the first drop of wine into the ebullioscope.

"Hello," I said, with annoyance.

"Eric? This is Clem Zerobnick. How would you like a job?"

I knew the fox had an ulterior motive. I could imagine his clean-shaven face grinning, his stubby hand running over the cropped hair.

"I've got a job," I said.

There was a pause. "I hear 'old Rausch has something up his sleeve?"

"His sleeve is loaded!"

"What with?"

I ignored the question.

"It's a secret, eh?" His voice was metallic. I waited.

"Listen, Eric. I'd like to know what's happening over there. And I like you. If you ever need a little extra cash—"

I hung up on him.

Uneasily I went back to the black bottle. After boiling a sample with the ebullioscope, I tested it with the ph—and hydrometers.

I was puzzled that I couldn't find anything disquieting. I copied the formula on a slip for Rausch and went to his office. His desk was as cluttered up as usual, his wall calendar two weeks behind, chairs and tables filled with labels and half-filled bottles.

He was talking to his advertising agent. "Frances Langford? Yes, sure. She's fine. Let her hold the glass in her left hand. Give her a good background: fireplace, burning logs. That sort of thing. Copy to the paper: Socialite Frances Langford, tasting Vinopia, a product of—"

He turned to me, hands over the mouthpiece. "Yes, Eric."

"I have the analysis," I said.

"Won't be long, Eric. And listen to this!"

He turned back to the agent. "You

there? Good. Full page spread. Draw inside of a liquor store. People waiting. Lots of people. Vinopia on all the shelves. And this slogan:

"So elegant—

"So mellolloquent—

"That's VINOPIA WINE for you!"

"Standing in line?

"For VINOPIA, anytime!"

"Cause VINOPIA is the finest,

"From California to the Rhine!"

He hung up and I gave him the slip. He read it. "Alcohol percentage: 21.5—malic acid: 0.001%—Tartaric acid: 0.0003%—acedetahyde: 0.0055%. Wonderful! Good figures. Nothing wrong."

"There's nothing wrong," I said. "For now. There could be plants, though, with a different kind of fermentation. And this cross-breed of cacti and grapes could—"

"Aw, let me do the worrying!" His eyes were darting nervously. "We've got brother Zerobnick just like that—" His hand closed into a fist as if he were holding a fly. "Yes, sir! Like that. Frances Langford in the society column, day after tomorrow. Drinking VINOPIA! People already standing in line and—"

I walked out of his office back through the sleepy warehouse, past the huge redwood vats. There were the two new ones, and their varnish glittered in the sunlight. These were for Vinopia. It was lunch hour. A deathlike silence hung over the filters, coolers, the capping machinery. Suddenly they looked like a sorcerer's implements.

Irritated, I had to spend the balance of the day in conference. Rausch was already launching his plan: invite every liquor store owner within three hundred miles. Telegrams were being sent out en masse. A sales manager held pep talks to his men. Rausch was everywhere, interrupting, organizing, briefing personnel, a vivacious hornet of a man.

Before going home that night, I went into his office once more. Again I objected, warning against rashness.

"Wait? Test it? Are you crazy? We're making history, man. History! The tank car

will be here. Tomorrow. Hundreds of people. We'll show 'em how the pumps work, the feeding machinery, and—

"I hope you won't hold me responsible," I said. "Something may happen."

"What will happen will be bags of money, Eric. Think of the sales! A push-over! Sky high! Money! We'll swim in it."

He clutched an open decanter. "This is the thing people want. The wines of California? Forgotten! Muscatel? Port? Tokay? Things of the past! A blessing, that Vasco Rodriguez!"

THE next morning I drove back to the plant which is located at the city limits, with no other factories within several miles. Only telegraph poles, the broad highway and a blue sky. I had slept badly and at breakfast my wife handed me a clipping from the morning paper. My wife also is a conscientious person. I read:

"There will be an open house at the Rausch Wineries this morning, with refreshments being served. Most refreshing of all news, however, is the discovery of a new wine which Mr. Orville Rausch ably called Vinopia. He tells us that in years of research at his laboratories this fine beverage was perfected—"

And in the car, I heard the radio advertising. There were formidable drums, then the ear-splitting voice of a high pressure announcer, and afterwards, the mellow voices of a girl's chorus: "Stand in line? For Vinopia, anytime!"

I entered my lab with a feeling of premonition. I found the bottle on the same shelf as the night before.

But its shape had changed!

I reached for it, disbelieving. The black glass was cracked on one side; on the other, a blister-like formation had risen.

It was again difficult to get the cork out. My hands became sticky. Confused, I placed the bottle on the table. Suddenly, I saw it stir, ever so slightly. My heart was pounding. Was I seeing things?

As I subjected another sample to my test tubes, Griffith came in. Griffith looked after the bottling operations, took care of

the casks, cases, conveyors. He was a flaxen-haired chap, his face all innocence.

He came closer and the bottle stirred again, sliding toward the edge of the table. My throat was tight. I grabbed Griffith's arm. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"That bottle! It moved!"

Griffith looked at me philosophically. He didn't speak, but his face spoke for him.

"I saw it," I began to yell, "I saw it. It moved to the end of the table."

Griffith shook his head and then patted my back complacently.

"You need more sleep, professor!" And out he walked.

I felt rotten and alone then, and the symptoms I had witnessed crushed my mind.

I said to myself: If a small bottle of Vinopia gives us such trouble, what about a whole tankful?

Swallowing hard, I took the Vinopia file.

*Disturbing characteristic No. 3:*

Objects touched by the liquor will move. Reason?

*The show must be stopped. Or there'll be a disaster.*

I LEFT the lab in search of Rausch. When I crossed the plant I saw how much scrubbing had been done: the centrifugal pumps had been checked and the huge doors leading to the railway siding. The bottling and capping equipment and the conveyors had been greased and cleaned, and thousands of yellow labels stood ready in open boxes. But no Rausch.

He wasn't in his office, either. Griffith was there, talking to a dozen girls who had been hired for the special bottling operation. It was a field day for Griffith all right. He wore an extraordinary garment: all white, with a green V from his neck to his belt. "V" for Vinopia. And the girls also had new uniforms, likewise adorned with the "V" and the same wide sleeves.

I saw Rausch's secretary. "Did you see the boss?"

She looked up at me. She wore a round

clasp, with a green "V." "Nope, Eric. Haven't seen him all day."

I was frantic now because the automobiles of the retailers were already pulling up in front of the building. The sky was blue outside. My head felt like a tombstone. They were already strolling through the plant, staring at the vats and the ceiling, with Griffith amongst them, explaining eagerly. He noticed me. "What's eating you?" he asked.

"None of your business," I said. "Did you see Rausch?"

"There he is, professor."

I found him standing at the door which connected to the offices, talking to the liquor men. Wines were dispensed by the gallon around him and the place was bustling with men and women, drinking and gulping down sandwiches, and salesmen were busy, carrying—so to speak—mental order books.

At length I managed to get to Rausch, and tugged at his sleeve. He wore a double-breasted suit which was comically large for his emaciated body. "I have to talk to you," I said softly.

"Sorry," he said, turning away from me.

I kept on his toes. "It's vital."

He turned. "Darn it, Eric. Don't you see I'm busy now?"

"I do," I said. "But you'll be so busy soon that you'll be out of business." Despair made me bold. I didn't care.

"Keep your shirt on, man."

You may lose yours, I thought. "Could you come with me?" I said.

I took him into the lab and showed him the bottle.

For a moment, his hand followed the receding lines of his tiny chin. When he should have been excited he was perfectly calm. "So what?" he mused.

"So what? Look at it. Some lunatic reaction in the wine. It won't stop fermenting. You know that fermentation *has* to stop. Here it doesn't. The bottle is already half empty."

"You must've dropped it."

"Of course not. The alcohol percentage has increased. It's sixty percent now."

"Good! Forty percent more than I expected. We'll make 'em pay more!"

"Deposits," I said.

Deposits, or sediments are an evidence of foreign substances in wines. The dark glass may have been intentional, to conceal such sediment. "I insist we do more testing—"

"Out of the question," he shouted. "The tank car will be here any minute now." Through the glass wall he pointed to the crowds. "What about those, Eric?"

JUST then I saw Frances Langford stepping on the platform which had been placed in the middle of the plant, and Rausch stormed out of the lab toward her. A glass sparkled in her dainty hand, and she moved it back and forth over the heads of the people under her, until the confusion of voices broke and then ceased altogether. Her features were lovely, topped by blond hair that was boyishly cut; and her figure was appealing, as it gently swayed from side to side.

"So elegant—"

"So melloquent," she recited and then the remainder of Rausch's verse. Someone took the glass from her hand, and she stepped down, the applause wild and Rausch's raspy voice now filling the room.

"Ladies! Gentlemen!" he shouted. "What you see here is sixty thousand square feet of efficiency. Examine, gentlemen! Scrutinize, ladies! These huge vats, for instance—in a few moments you'll see them filled with Vinopia!"

He went on to explain what Vinopia was and where it came from.

"In a few more minutes, our special tank-cars will pull into our own railway siding. The doors are open! Look!"

The timing was perfect.

From afar came the droning of an engine, at first scarcely audible. A moment later, there was complete silence in the building. A locomotive stopped, puffing. The liquid in the car gave a bubbling sound as it slapped the metal.

When Griffith signalled it into its precise location, all eyes followed him.

"And now you'll see our latest innovation! A plastic hose!"

Griffith dragged the hose and inserted it into the body of the car. Then he climbed the small ladder and began to turn the outlet valve.

"You're now living a moment of history! Yes, a decade in wine making!" Rausch fingered his tie. The bony head suddenly appeared strong and forceful. His eyes hung on every one of Griffith's movements. He watched him climb down to attach the hose to the pumps. It was oppressively quiet.

THE green liquid started to surge through the hose, splashing into the massive empty vats. The pumps began to hammer rhythmically and there were the hissing sounds of the liquid as it hit the bottom of the vats.

Then I caught my breath.

With the first gush of wine, a thin, sticky vapor began to fill the room. The spectators, the machinery, everything delicately changed color. I heard a murmur of astonished voices.

Rausch ignored the baffling phenomenon. "The first Vinopia runs into these vats. Soon you'll see our pasteurizing equipment at work. And the filters, gentlemen! From there into the bottles!"

He had hardly spoken when the vats gave out a first peculiar sound. It was a remote vibration, followed by a noise as if a dozen woodpeckers were busy inside. The wood started to groan slightly, then to creak. Varnish peeled off. Green vapor thickened to fog and a drizzle settled over the audience. Then there came grunts, snarls and finally a roar: The first crack appeared in the wood. An unseen force seemed to push it from the inside. "Fermentation," I thought, observing a churning froth of wine running through the seams. An acid fragrance—not entirely unpleasant—filled my nostrils.

Frances Langford screamed before I even saw the metal rings flex and then burst. The wood came open with a deafening blast which echoed from wall to wall and

that was immediately followed by a metal clang. The double doors of the factory had rolled shut. At this point, the room had turned into bedlam. I scrambled to the doors, found the hoses neatly severed, still wriggling like snakes. I kicked the ends aside, pushing the door handle. It was stuck. The door was glued into the wall as firmly as the cork into the bottle. We were trapped.

Rausch who had been listening grimly on his platform now leaped down: "Griffith! The pumps!" I saw Griffith make for the first pump and hug the valve frantically.

"It doesn't close!"

"Then try the safety stem!" Rausch stumbled to the pump himself. So did I. We pulled at the valves, wine curling over the ground around us, and the odor choking us. The valve was locked. Tight. *Like the cork!*

I elbowed my way toward the office doors. Panic stricken crowds surrounding me, faces flushed with terror, exclamations.

"Hey! What's goin' on?"

"My new hat!"

"Sue 'em!"

"Stand in line—haw haw!"

My head was sickeningly heavy. My body was lead. Still, I lunged against the two office doors, one after the other. They held. Locked. Tight.

And then I made my way back through the room, a room where every inch was green now: green the faces, arms, legs, the clothing, bricks.

Finally, as I struggled back to the lab, and listened and stared through my glass partition, hearing still more screams, screams edged with laughter, I saw the most incredible sight.

The vats were leaving their cement foundations. Till this day I don't understand it. Uprooted, the huge containers glided toward the ceiling, an inch, four inches, a yard—how do I know?—and a river of wine followed their path. And the sprinkler system suddenly began working. People ran from wall to wall, diving under the conveyor belts. Rausch under his platform.

And then—I'm a skeptical man—came the sudden vision of a man strutting, fast, fast toward my sanctuary. He had an extraordinary gait: arms swinging, head darting right and left, his long hand holding a jar with the green liquid he'd scooped up.

The door was open all at once and he entered, ignoring me completely. His face was contorted in a grin, eyebrows shooting up and down. He was using my instruments now—I've never seen anyone work that fast with an ebullioscope and a hydrometer—and mumbling little words, which I half heard. "Ah—esselent—splengdid—ah—good—fine formula—ah—gradiose—"

"Pardon me," I said. "Who are you?"

He went on working, at his incredible speed, as he said. "Vasco Rodriguez, technical advissur. Ciudad Vino. Mexico."

His head went up and down as he spoke. I moved nearer. He was as tall as myself.

And then I blinked, I saw his head. *It was crowned by a circle of grapes!*

I was astonished that my eyes and brain were still functioning. I was groggy but something of a scientist must have still been left in me because I succeeded in finding a jar with caffen powder, opening it, and swallowing a handful. It tasted like gall. And my companion, seeing the powder, disappeared as fast as he had come. Suddenly I realized that it had been Bacchus himself. Bacchus—the God of wine—behind the whole project, under a false name, doing his business in a perverse fashion.

Thereafter things happened fast.

The phone came into focus and I took it out of its cradle, asking for the fire department.

As I spoke, the big doors of the plant had been opened—it is still not clear by whom—and I saw the unbelievable melee dissolving, the crowds charging from their prison toward their automobiles.

Later, I found Rausch creeping out from underneath the platform.

"E-Eric." His tongue was lolling.

"Where did you find out about this wine?" I cried.

"Ne—never mind!" he said, drunkenly.

I shook his green carcass. For a moment I thought his bones might come apart.

"Tell me, or I'll drown you in your Vinopia!" There was still some on the ground. Patches of it.

"I—I stole the secret," he babbled. "Zerobnick said something about it. Had someone break into his desk."

I shook him some more.

"Got the address that way. Wired Rodriguez before Zerobnick could place an order!"

"Imbecile," I shouted. "Don't you see what Zerobnick has done to you?"

He almost became sober. "How's that?"

"Zerobnick made the experiments up here. He discovered the wine's potency and—"

"Hey, Eric! I got it. We'll make money out of it. Airplanes will run on Vinopia and everything!"

"Never!"

"But why?"

I told him that the wine ferments constantly, vaporizing almost at once. And while I spoke to him, still holding him by his collar, I suddenly saw Zerobnick's head popping through the door. It happened only within a fleeting second and by the time I could run toward the door and let go of Rausch, the pair of eyes had already disappeared, eyes examining the damage.

"Look, Eric," Rausch said. "We'll open up again! And you—you'll be on the ground floor!"

"I leave the honor to you." I dropped him and he fell like a bag of asparagus. When I ran out beyond the door, sirens were screaming, two, three, four times, and quite clearly I noticed the fire trucks pulling up. Quite clearly, too, way down the road I saw a patrol car in pursuit of a speeding automobile.

It was Zerobnick's. He was a cautious man who never drove more than thirty miles per hour near the city. But this time he did. Because next to him sat none other than the fellow with the wine-leaves and grapes on his head. And both men were in a great hurry.