

Calif. Collector Who Sold Bogus Wine Gets 10-Year Term

LARRY NEUMEISTER, Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A collector convicted of making bogus vintage wine in his California kitchen and selling it for millions of dollars was sentenced Thursday to a decade in prison by a judge who said he wanted to send a message to others who might tamper with what people eat and drink.

"The public at large needs to know our food and drinks are safe ... and not some potentially unsafe homemade witch's brew," U.S. District Judge Richard M. Berman said as he announced the prison term for Rudy Kurniawan. He also ordered him to forfeit \$20 million and pay \$28.4 million in restitution.

Kurniawan, a 37-year-old Indonesian citizen of Chinese descent, lowered his head as the judge explained the sentence and described Kurniawan's quest as a "bold, grandiose, unscrupulous but destined-to-fail con."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Stanley Okula described Kurniawan as the "kingpin of counterfeiters," a man who turned his Arcadia home into a laboratory where he poured wine into what appeared to be vintage bottles before attaching elegant fake labels and selling them for tens of millions of dollars.

"He did it to line his own pockets," Okula told Berman, who concluded that Kurniawan had caused losses close to \$30 million, primarily to seven victims. One of them was William Koch, a billionaire yachtsman, entrepreneur and wine investor.

Koch testified at Kurniawan's December trial, when Kurniawan was convicted of mail and wire fraud.

Before he was sentenced, Kurniawan twice apologized, saying "I'm really sorry" and expressing a desire to take care of his mother, who lives in California after receiving asylum.

Kurniawan, who moved to the United States at age 16, had his own request for political asylum turned down, and he was ordered deported in 2001. He continued to live in the United States after his appeal was rejected in 2003. He will be deported after he serves his sentence.

His lawyer, Jerome H. Mooney, asked for leniency, saying his client got swept up in the thrill of mixing with California's wealthiest people.

"He was insecure, very insecure," Mooney said. "He wanted to be them. He wanted to be part of it."

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Mooney said Kurniawan used some of his family's fortune to buy \$40 million of wine, eventually selling \$36 million of it before he realized he could develop a business in which he created mixtures that tasted like the world's greatest wines.

He said Kurniawan's victims were wealthy and aware that counterfeit wines were a frequent occurrence in the marketplace.

"Nobody died. Nobody lost their savings. Nobody lost their job," he said. The lawyer said the 2 1/2 years Kurniawan has served in prison was enough penalty, since he had lost everything and been branded a cheat.

Okula called the defense lawyer's comments "quite shocking," especially when he suggested that Kurniawan should get lenient treatment because he ripped off rich people rather than the poor.

"Fraud is fraud," he said.

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