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Shipwreck champagne sells for €30,000

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By Andrew Ward

A Singaporean investor has set a new record for the world's most expensive champagne by paying €30,000 (\$44,000) for a bottle of 1841 Veuve Clicquot salvaged from a shipwreck in the Baltic Sea.

The 170-year-old champagne was the first to be auctioned from a batch of 145 bottles found by divers off the Aland Islands, between Sweden and Finland, last July, and thought to be among the oldest in existence.

The new record beat the \$84,700 paid for two bottles of 1959 Dom Perignon Rose in 2008.

John Kapon, chief executive of Acker Merrall & Condit, the wine auctioneer which conducted Friday's sale, said it was "testament to the continued growth of the auction market for fine and rare wine".

In addition to the 1841 Veuve Clicquot, the anonymous Singaporean bidder paid a further €24,000 for a bottle of 19th century Juglar champagne found on the wreck.

More than 600 people attended the auction in the Aland capital of Mariehamn, with bids made by telephone and the internet from around the world.

More of the salvaged bottles are expected to be sold by the Aland government in future, delivering a windfall to the semi-autonomous Finnish territory. Until now, the islands were best known to many for duty free rules that make them a haven for "booze cruises" from Stockholm and Helsinki.

Björn Häggblom, spokesman for the Aland government, said proceeds from the auctions would be donated to maritime-related good causes, including efforts to clean-up the heavily polluted Baltic Sea. "This champagne came from the sea so it is only right that the money goes back to the sea," he said.

While some of the salvaged bottles were ruined by leakage of sea water, many were found to have been well preserved. Experts said the Baltic seabed had proved to be an ideal wine cellar with low temperatures, darkness and little oxygen.

Wine tasters hailed the "very strong, intense bouquet" when they sampled the champagne last year. All bottles will be tasted and recorked before being sold.

It is thought the champagne was en route to Finland or, most likely, Russia, when the schooner carrying it sank.