

Fine but not rip- offs

19 Jun 2010 by Jancis Robinson/FT

It never ceases to amaze me how loose is the correlation between wine price and the amount of pleasure it gives. Rarity, hype and (sometimes deluded) belief in investment potential all play their part in inflating prices above their true worth.

The main reason why a wine might be fine yet undervalued is fashion. The Zinfandel grape can produce some delicious wine but at this point in history is not viewed as a name as glamorous as Cabernet Sauvignon, for instance. Sherry in general is ridiculously underpriced, precisely because it is not in vogue. Wines from up- and- coming wine regions are generally (though not routinely) priced well under the classic prototypes on which they are based. And then of course there are those few benign producers who are simply kind, and unburdened by debt, when setting their prices.

Here are some of my best- value fine wines, mostly in the £30-50 per bottle bracket but occasionally less expensive.

Pierre Moncuit Blanc de Blancs Champagne

Champagne made by one of the better growers is always better value than a heavily marketed famous name and the wines of the Moncuit family in Mesnil- sur- Oger seem perennially undervalued to me. Based entirely on Chardonnay, these Blanc de Blancs provide the quintessential aperitif - superbly stimulating.

Equipo Navazos Sherry

This new range of hand- picked bottlings is based on individual, numbered casks or butts, selected by Jesús Barquín, a Granada professor of criminology and huge sherry connoisseur, and Eduardo Ojeda, technical director of the group that owns Valdespino and La Guita. Each limited- edition wine is numbered and labelled La Bota de ... Manzanilla, for instance. No 16 is a great wine by any measure but can be found for well under £25 a bottle.

Egon Müller Scharzhofberger, Saar

For me, and many other wine professionals, Riesling is the greatest white wine grape. In the first half of the 20th century top German wines were more expensive even than Bordeaux first growths. But the dreary sugarwater exported by bigger German bottlers from the 1960s, and some equally uninspiring eastern European wines labelled, rather inaccurately, Riesling, served to depress prices and all but the rarest, sweetest examples tend to be underpriced. Egon Müller's Scharzhofberger is the gold standard of Riesling at its most delicate yet intense and long- lived. Spätlese probably represents the best value, and improves over decades.

Grosset, Polish Hill Riesling, Clare Valley

Jeffrey Grosset is the Egon Müller of Australia (although Müller himself now makes Riesling in South Australia, as well as in Slovakia). Much denser and drier than most German Rieslings, Polish Hill is a particularly expressive, high- altitude vineyard whose *gravel, slate and shale* bedrock Grosset is careful to express in mineral- scented bottlings with notes of lime that become increasingly complex over five to 15 years in bottle. On release they can cost under £20 a bottle but they deserve bottle maturation.

Coche- Dury Bourgogne Blanc, Burgundy

Jean- François Coche is a white burgundy genius whose premier cru Meursault and Corton- Charlemagne fetch four- figure prices wherever knowledgeable wine lovers are to be found. However, his basic Bourgogne Blanc, which sells for about a third of the price of his village Meursaults, can be almost as fine, and also passes the test of greatness: that it improves considerably in bottle.

Châteaux Chasse- Spleen/ Lagrange/ Smith Haut Lafitte, Bordeaux

As prices for the 2009 Bordeaux come tumbling out, each one more inflated than the next, I hesitate to select any Bordeaux property as offering particularly fine value. But on the basis of their previous track record, the owners of these three properties have not been rapacious. Chasse- Spleen is a relatively modest Médoc estate but in the most successful vintages, such as 1978, 2000 and 2005, can outperform its ranking impressively. Lagrange has shown itself a very solid St- Julien this century, and the Cathiards of Smith Haut Lafitte have not been grasping when pricing their impressive red and white Pessac- Léognans - so far.

Château de Fonsalette, Côtes du Rhône

This wine, made by Emmanuel Reynaud of legendary Châteauneuf- du- Pape Château Rayas, is infinitely more complex and satisfying than most Côtes du Rhône wines. Its price reflects this and it usually costs £35-50 a bottle, but again, the quality gap between it and Rayas is very much less than the price difference. The red shows the wonderful spice, herbs, warmth and longevity of any great southern Rhône wine.

Ridge Geyserville, Sonoma

This long- living, complex rich red is based on the ancient vines, mainly Zinfandel, planted in a single vineyard in the Alexander Valley by Italian immigrants in the 19th century. It is crazy in a way that this classic expression of California in a bottle costs less than a fancy Cabernet made from vines planted recently in the Napa Valley. This marvel generally costs less than £30 a bottle.

Trinity Hill, The Gimblett, Hawke's Bay, New Zealand

The Gimblett Gravels section of New Zealand's Hawke's Bay region is clearly magically suited to producing good copies of smart red Bordeaux. In a blind [comparative tasting](#) of some of the top Kiwi wines with 2005 Bordeaux first growths the 2006 vintage of this wine, which can be found for well under £20 a bottle, was very impressive.