

## wines of the week archive index | apr - jun 2001

25 Nov 2004 by JR

Chianti Classico 1999 - Villa Cafaggio?

I bring this wine to your attention partly because it is on offer at a particularly good price from one of Britain's bigger retail chains until 20 May (£8.99 reduced to £6.99), but mainly to draw the quality of the 1999 vintage in Tuscany to your attention.

Non-Riserva Chianti Classico from a good address such as this one can be an absolutely stunning drink (although on no account attempt to drink it without food). Attention is currently focused on the lauded 1997 vintage in Tuscany - and certainly now is the time to get your hands on the best 1997 Chianti Classico Riservas (which are nowadays approx five times better than they were 10 years ago, and five times more expensive). But 1999 may well turn out to be the superior year - and definitely more consistent. Quite a number of the 1997s are just too much of a good thing to be long-term bets. The 1999 straight Chianti Classico should be great for drinking over the next four years while the better 1998s are already really perfumed and zesty (as Fontodi's was recently). This 1999 Villa Cafaggio has wonderfully savoury fruit with some sleek oak still apparent but not oppressive on the nose. You could drink it now but I'm planning to buy a case and drink most of it over the next few years. Cafaggio's owner Stefano Farkas (ably counselled by rising star oenologist Stefano Chioccioli) is so enthusiastic about his 99 Chianti Classico he says that although you can drink it now, it should last for another 10-12 years. Micro-oxygenation, injecting tiny amounts of oxygen into the wine while in cask, is reckoned to have played a major part in adding allure to the wine.

Unwines currently sell Villa Cafaggio Chianti Classico 1999 (till May 20) for just £6.99. Other UK stockists include [Berry Bros & Rudd](#) ([www.bbr.com](http://www.bbr.com)), Woodhouse Wines (01258 452 141), Sandhams of Lincolnshire (01472 852 118) and D Byrne of Clitheroe in Lancashire (01200 423 152). Byrnes always have very keen prices and currently list this wine at £6.59 but expect to pay around £9 elsewhere. See [WineSearcher](#), for stockists outside the UK.

2/04/01 updated 27/04/01

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Château Bellefont-Belcier 1998, Grand Cru St Emilion

My trip to taste the infant 2000 red bordeaux en primeur rekindled my enthusiasm for young claret, which has become a rather unfashionable drink. In fact Bordeaux bashing has become a favourite sport, in Britain at least, where many a palate has been seduced by the higher alcohols, more obvious sweetness and softer tannins of New World reds. I have never needed reminding of the perils of high alcohol wines, but the 2000s reminded me just how refreshing ripe tannins can be - especially with food. Obviously we won't be able to drink the 2000s for ages. In fact we won't even be able to stroke a bottle for at least a year or two since the serious wines are still in cask. But the 1998s are now in commercial circulation and were extremely toothsome in many cases, especially on the right bank. The Médoc *cru bourgeois* Ch d'Agassac was most enjoyable the other day, as was this St Emilion, Ch Bellefont-Belcier made with a little help from Louis, son of François Mitjavile of Ch Tertre Roteboeuf fame. This is a wine that could (just) be drunk now, but would repay keeping another three to five years depending on your tannin tolerance. British wine buyers can take advantage of Oddbins' current on-the-shelf offer of 1998 clarets - a clever move - instead of committing hundreds of pounds to a case of 2000 for the longer term.

Oddbins £15.99, although [www.uvine.com](http://www.uvine.com), the fine wine trading site, was quoting half this on their March 31 posting on [winerecherche](#)

9/04/01

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Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese 1999 Meulenhof

It's high time we all laid in some thrillingly fine German wine, especially those of us in the northern hemisphere with, in theory at least, summer ahead of us. No matter what the weather, however, this full, creamy, extraordinarily welcoming wine would make a stunning aperitif. The odd wine drinker might shriek in horror at its rich fruitiness, confusing this with the sweetness added to cheap, entry-level wines. More sophisticated palates will recognise it as genuine sunshine and slate trapped in a bottle and held together with all the tension of a top quality Mosel. I find that almost everyone is stunned by the soaring quality of Germany's best wines when presented with them. This was yet another highly successful vintage for Germany (heaven knows what state German wine would be in if it had not been blessed with such a miraculous decade as the 1990s) producing particularly open, friendly wines which can be enjoyed unusually early in their development even if the best, like all good Rieslings, are serious candidates for bottle ageing too.

In the UK this wine can be found for £7.30 at Tanners of Shrewsbury ([www.tanners-wines.co.uk](http://www.tanners-wines.co.uk) tel 01743 234500) who work consistently hard at their German selection. [WineSearcher](#) lists four US stockists of Meulenhof's wines. Wine-drinkers elsewhere may have to content themselves with sniffing out other 1999 Mosels from their best local German wine specialist - and these stalwarts deserve our support! One day Riesling's time will come, and with any luck this is just around the corner.

19/04/01

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Argento Chardonnay 2000, Mendoza

This wine has done most to overcome a terrible prejudice of mine: that Argentina cannot produce interesting white wine. My first and only trip there six years ago suggested that even the interestingly aromatic native Torrontés grape produced wines that might have attractive acidity but were irredeemably alcoholic. And as for Argentina bothering to produce copies of the classic European white varietals, I used to think this a waste of time. Nor am I the greatest fan of inexpensive Chardonnay. But this wine from the admirable Catena stable (producers of Catena Alta, Alamos and Gascon and co-producers of La Rural) is far, far better than it deserves to be, given its reasonable price and the low latitude at which it was produced.

The answer of course is altitude. The fruit comes from relatively new vineyards planted at Tupungato and Agrelo in Mendoza's coolest subregion, the Uco Valley at altitudes of between 900 and 1200m above sea level. I hope the Argentinian winemaker Miquel Navarro will forgive me for saying that what I like about it is not its demonstrably Argentine origins, but that it tastes like a rip-roaring Californian Chardonnay at four times the price. It is also packaged superbly.

In the UK it can be bought for just £4.99 from, according to UK importers [Bibendum](#) of London NW1, Tesco, Sainsbury, [Asda](#), and Budgens. As always, the bigger the store, the greater the likelihood of finding the wine.

Outside the UK, I am assured by Catena that it is 'sold in markets throughout the world', again under the name Argento, although [WineSearcher](#) is blissfully ignorant of any non-British retailers (Tesco, Calais is as exotic as it gets). You could always try emailing the producers at [bod.esmeralda@interlink.com.ar](mailto:bod.esmeralda@interlink.com.ar) to try to extract details of a local stockist or at least importer.

24/04/01

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Red Chassagne Montrachet

Here's a bargain for burgundy lovers: red wines from villages much more famous for white wines. Some of the most beautifully tender red burgundies of my acquaintance are Coche Dury's of Meursault, for example, and tasting three red 1999 Chassagnes recently selling for half the price of their white counterparts, reminded me what good value they are in general. Red winemaking skills are much more common throughout Burgundy today than they were a decade ago.

Majestic Wine Warehouses of the UK are currently offering Fontaine-Gagnard's, Bader-Mimeur's and Blain-Gagnard's at £10.99 each and very toothsome they are too. The Blain-Gagnard is the most closed and least alluring at the moment but the Bader-Mimeur is extremely flattering in a gentle, feminine, slightly oaky way while the Fontaine-Gagnard is a little more severe but absolutely correct and attention-grabbing. Both should provide pleasure for the next two or three years

but would make a great match with salmon hot or cold this summer.

See my [notes](#) on Burgundy 99s for other specific recommendations.

2/05/01

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Dry Gewürztraminer 2000 Clare Valley, Knappstein Wines

First things first. Actually there are so many important things about this wine that it's difficult to choose which to tackle first. Perhaps the fact that the wine is terrific. I had rather fallen out of love with Gewürz. It's such an obvious flavour that after a while a little can go a long way, and so many Alsace examples nowadays are sweet, blowsy and lacking focus... But this one single wine has completely revitalised my affair with the grape variety, just as a dalliance is supposed to. Perhaps part of the reason for the grip and focus of this wine is the great Clare Valley drought which meant that the 2000 crop was a fifth its normal size, which has concentrated an amazing amount of flavour into this bone-dry wine, plus quite enough acidity and real zest - yet no shortage of crystal-clear lychee and rose petal Gewürz flavours too.

Another important thing is that it was made by the excitingly consistent Andrew Hardy, winemaker for Knappstein Wines (now part of the Petaluma conglomerate), not by Tim Knappstein who has left to run his own admirable Lenswood operation in the Adelaide Hills (particularly good at Sauvignon Blanc and an increasingly good Pinot Noir).

The wine was also bottled entirely under screwcaps in protest at the high level of cork taint experienced by Australians who both demand absolute cleanliness of their wines (Ch de Beaucastel not an obvious Oz favourite) and tend to feel they get the the scrapings off the cork suppliers' floors, being so far from Portugal.

And finally, the bad news. As far as I can tell, this wine is available only in Australia (see [WineSearcher](#)) but is practically given away, even by the Australian Wine Centre who claim they will ship the wine anywhere in the world from both Australian and US distribution points. Unlike the slightly more expensive but very fine Hand Picked Riesling 2000, this is not a wine to stashed in a cellar, but one to be enjoyed with and without food and with a great big smile on your face over the next few months.

10/05/01

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Domaine Cazal Viel Viognier

Viognier is an overloaded bandwagon nowadays, with speciously scented little numbers emerging from Argentina to Australia. The Languedoc is awash with suspiciously fragrant, light-bodied whites labelled Viognier but Domaine Cazal Viel's is very much better than most. Thanks to yields of just 35 hl/ha and possibly some judicious barrel maturation, the 2000 has real concentration for the price and is not too sickly. The British supermarket chain Tesco normally sells the 1999 at £5.99 in the UK (£3.72 at their duty free shop in Calais, northern France). Their current Spring Wine Fair promotion however knocks a straight 20 per cent off the UK price of every French wine until May 22, so this attractively labelled bottle can be yours for just £4.79. J Webb of Alberta, Canada also imports it, according to my old friend [WineSearcher](#). It could be drunk as an aperitif, or with strong Mediterranean flavours.

This family domaine in St Chinian is a consistent producer of superior reds too. The St Chinian, Cuvée des Fées 1999 is also pretty convincing, based on mountain-grown, low-yielding Syrah. Waitrose list it at £6.99 in their stores and also by mail order from Waitrose Direct (Somerset have it too).

I'm not so sure about the domaine's latest offering, however: Larmes des Fées (the fairies' tears this time) 1998 which Sainsbury's are trying to flog for £18.99. There are lovely deep flavours here and the wine is clearly set for a truly satisfying development in bottle, but that price just sticks in my gullet. I suggest the £18.99 stays in your wallet. My tasting notes ended 'Very well done for £12.99....'

15/05/01

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St Véran 1999 Domaine des Deux Roches

This expanding domaine in Davayé on the northern fringes of the Pouilly Fuissé appellation goes from strength to strength, both in terms of sheer wine quality and, especially, value.

I tasted this wine in a line-up of Chardonnays from around the world and it made them look like crude pastiches (at higher prices). This seductively sleek, alluringly honeyed offering is not a complex wine, but one that is bumpiously attention-grabbing with real life, a certainly minerality and a powerful, long finish. Drink over the next year or two.

From Jean-Luc Terrier's own clay-limestone vineyards, this wine is blissfully unaware of the existence of the oak tree and just plumb full of flavour concentrated by old vines luxuriating in being planted in just the right spot on the globe.

The domaine's Mâcon Davayé is even less expensive. Think of both wines as better than many a Pouilly Fuissé at twice the price (although the proportion of excitingly well made Pouilly Fuissé has been increasing of late; see my [list of reliable producers](#)).

1999 was an excellent vintage in the Mâconnais and one which is highlighting just how dynamic this region is now (see Dominique Lafon's move south, for example).

In the UK the St Véran 1999 is £7.75 from [Berry Bros & Rudd](#) ([www.bbr.com](http://www.bbr.com)) and £7.99 from Oddbins and Unwins. For availability in other countries, see [WineSearcher](#).

22/05/01

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[Reliable Pouilly Fuissé Producers](#)

Domaine Cordier Père et Fils, Fuissé  
Roger Lassarat, Vergisson  
Verget, Sologny  
Domaine Guffens-Heynen, Vergisson  
Domaine Robert-Denogent, Pouilly-Fuissé  
Ch Fuissé, Fuissé  
Valette, Chaintré  
Jean-Jacques Robert, Fuissé  
J. A. Ferret, Fuissé  
Corsin, Davayé  
Daniel Barraud, Vergisson  
Jacques Saumaize, Vergisson  
Saumaize-Michelin, Vergisson  
Olivier Merlin, La Roche Vineuse  
Ch des Rontets, Fuissé  
Domaine la Soufrandise, Fuissé  
André Auvigue, Solutré

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Pemberton Pinot Noir 1999 Western Australia

An Australian Pinot Noir? Surely some mistake?

It's true that Australia does not exactly have a embarrassing number of delicious Pinots to offer. There's the Yarra Valley with Coldstream Hills which can be deliciously Beaune-ish in its best Reserve versions (though new owners Southcorp are not exactly nurturing wine writer James Halliday's old property at the moment). Diamond Valley, Tarrawarra and Yarra Ridge Reserve have all shown that Yarra Pinot has a serious future. Bindi in the Macedon Ranges of Victoria also show

promise. Tasmania is also obviously cool enough and both Freycinet and Stefano Lubiana are doing a good job with this, most finicky of grapes. I tasted some very fine Pinot in the equally cool Canberra district made by Lark Hill - notably their 1999.

But Western Australia has not so far been widely associated with the red burgundy grape. (Winters here are generally so much warmer for a start, and summers too in many parts.) Signs are however that Pemberton, a coolish inland area halfway between Margaret River and Great Southern, may be an interesting source of scented, correct Pinot Noir flavours. The Pannells have been producing an admirably Burgundian style at their new Picardy winery since 1996 with the 1999 the most appetisingly delicate so far. Lost Lake Pinot 1999 was most appealingly bumptious when tasted recently, although I believe there may have been winemaker changes since. John Horgan's Salitage Pinot 1999 also has good juice and structure. Look out for these wines which are not expensive for the amount of pleasure they deliver.

In the UK Domaine Direct ([www.domainedirect.co.uk](http://www.domainedirect.co.uk)) import Picardy and Lost Lake and can sell bottles as part of a mixed dozen (£9.35 for a bottle of the Lost Lake). Lost Lake is on the wine list of the excellent Cotto restaurant (44 Blythe Road, London W11) for £27.25 but I suspect Raymond Blanc charges a bit more than this at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons. You can also buy it by the single bottle from The Old Passage Inn, Passage Road, Arlingham near Stroud in Gloucester, tel 01452 740 547. Salitage Pinot 1999 is available on [www.virginwine.com](http://www.virginwine.com) but at a much less appetising £16.49.

Outside the UK see [WineSearcher](#)

26/05/01

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Grüner Veltliner Sandgrube 1999 Aigner, Kremstal, Austria 7

I recently wrote an article in the *Financial Times* suggesting wines to serve when entertaining in hot weather. It seemed to me that [Alsace 1997 Grand Cru Rieslings](#) are drinking very well now and have both refreshment value and enough body to stand up to many a dish. But this was a choice aimed at those with reasonably conservative tastes. Rather more adventurous but not a jot less rewarding would be a dry white from Austria, either a Riesling or, broader in flavour and perhaps a bit more versatile, the country's signature grape Grüner Veltliner. Grown in the fertile north-eastern Weinviertel, it makes lively wine for gulping. But in the much more serious wine regions just west of here - Kamptal, Kremstal and Wachau - it is capable of making really head-turning wine. The soils here are much shallower and yields much lower. The point is not oak, but real concentration of fruit and more than a whiff of the primary rock on which many of the vineyards are sited, often on terraces.

There are many theories about Grüner Veltliner's characteristic flavour. White pepper is a common tasting note but I often get something vaguely akin to gherkins and dill. (Strange but true.) No matter. What does matter is that these are full-bodied, dry, really zesty wines with lots of appetising acidity and the ability to age in bottle. Aigner's 1999 from the ancient (not very sandy) Sandgrube vineyard seems particularly good value to me (£8.79 as part of a mixed dozen from Hamer Wine of Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey), but there are many fine examples. Look particularly for the likes of Willi Bründlmayer or Hirsch of Kamptal, or virtually any Wachau producer (although note that many of the Wachau's 1998s, particularly the Smaragd bottlings, were exceptionally rich). Remember, *Alte Reben* means old vines. Just key in your location and Gruner [no umlaut] Veltliner on [WineSearcher](#).

**Newsflash!** Virgin Wines are desperate to get your (and my) attention. So much so they are kicking off their summer wine sale from 14 June with a pre-sale offer of champagne and fizz discounted by 10 to 50%. Check out their current offer of Lanson Black Label NV for just £9.49 a bottle, and Billecart Salmon NV for £15.49 on [www.virginwines.com](http://www.virginwines.com)

05/06/01

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Boizel Joyau de France 1988 Champagne

Mature champagne is not easy to find at a decent price. Virgin Wines dangled the prospect of a Canard du Chene (sic) 1990 at £16.49 in front of assembled wine writers at a tasting last week, only to report a day or two later that it had all but disappeared. (Do report on any similar experiences with their Lanson NV offer at £9.49 reported here last week.) This

Boizel bottling seems an altogether more exciting prospect - better value and available in greater quantity.

Joyau de France is the name dreamt up by this reliably good-value, middle-of-the-road champagne house for its vintage cuvée. (How do all the champagne houses manage to perm their Cuvées, Réserves, Grands, Frances, Blasons, Clos and Spéciales so widely, I wonder?) It comes in an elegant and sophisticated bottle and the wine? Ah yes, it really does taste both mature in terms of layers of nutty, citrus flavour, but still quite taut and refreshing thanks to that cussed old 1988 vintage which has been so slow to unfurl all over France. Dom Pérignon it ain't, but it's a jolly good buy.

At £17 a bottle from Fine & Rare Wines of London W10 (email [wine@frw.co.uk](mailto:wine@frw.co.uk) or tel 020 8960 1995) including all VAT, duty and delivery anywhere in the UK mainland (provided at least a dozen assorted bottles of wine are ordered), this looks a good deal to me. Especially when compared with the price quoted by Classic Rare Wines of Bromley, Kent ([www.classicrarewines.com](http://www.classicrarewines.com)) which is £37.34 plus £15 for delivery.

12/06/01

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Andrew Murray Enchanté 1999 Santa Ynez, California

Here's a wine that will give you a delicious way of tasting all that confusion about Randall Grahm's clone of Roussanne that turned out to be Viognier in California (see [my story about Roussanne and Viognier in California](#)). Andrew Murray is a young man with something of a riches-to-rags story - or at least three Michelin stars a day to dirty fingernails. His dad had a chain of Mexican restaurants in southern California. Used to take him on mega eating trips round Europe (part-financed by tax breaks in the Ronald Reagan era which allowed this sort of thing, apparently). They fell in love with Rhône wines and Rhône varieties and in 1990, just as young Andrew was planning to go off, drop out and become a seriously wasted student, his dad bought a 200-acre ranch in Foxen Canyon in Santa Barbara which everyone else had given up on because it was so hilly and inhospitable. Andrew was lured back to run it and, after a succession of vintages up to 1996 which he claims not to be terrifically proud of (several made while he was a student at Davis!) he is starting to develop a style. He has an unusually cosmopolitan outlook, thanks partly to all that *gourmandise* in France and partly through the generosity of Rob Bowen of Western Australia who took him in hand when he was extremely wet behind the ears.

Enchanté is the name of the Andrew Murray blended white, as opposed to the varietal Viognier, and in 1999 was the better wine, despite being less expensive. Whatever the label says, it is made up substantially of the Roussanne-that-turned-out- to-be-Viognier (called 'R clone Viognier' now) with a little true Roussanne and Marsanne. It has been given full-on malolactic and oak treatment so this is no retiring flower, but it has a lovely honeysuckle aroma such as one would be delighted to find in Condrieu. The Viognier 1999 has a rawer edge, but the Viognier 2000, made substantially of the R clone, unlike the 1999, is also cracking. Very full and rich. These are wines to serve with bold summer foods.

Find the Enchanté 1999 at Bibendum in London NW1 ([www.bibendum-wine.co.uk](http://www.bibendum-wine.co.uk)) for £12.27, MacArthur Beverages in Washington DC ([wine@bassins.com](mailto:wine@bassins.com)) for \$16.99 and The Wine Sellars of California ([info@thewinesellars.com](mailto:info@thewinesellars.com)) for \$19.95.

20/06/01

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Bonarda Reserva 2000, Nieto Senetiner/Valle de Vistalba

We hear a great deal about Malbec in Argentina and how the special small-berried clone there performs so much better than in its Cahors homeland, but actually there is now more Bonarda planted in Argentina than Malbec. Even less is known about the exact nature of Argentina's Bonarda vine. Bonarda's a pretty complicated story back in northern Italy, where there are various versions. Much of what is called Bonarda in Lombardy is in fact the Croatina vine. Perhaps the best policy is simply to concentrate on the potential of Bonarda here in Mendoza.

This particular example is not the only promising Argentine Bonarda I have come across but it's the most impressive so far, albeit in dramatic New World style. It's a young wine but one that is bursting to be enjoyed already. The depth of colour is sensational. The perfume is slightly dusty, in a not unattractive way. This is followed up by velvety, ultra-supple,

explosive fruit with lots and lots of mulberry character.

There is a regular, non-Reserva version which is oaked with inner staves rather than genuine oak barrels - a less dramatically bumptious variation on the above.

Almost 100 Asda supermarkets in Britain sell the Reserva for £6.95 as Bonarda Reserva 2000 Nieto Senetiner. British online retailer Virgin Wines ([www.virginwines.com](http://www.virginwines.com)) plan to list the regular version for £6.49 from July 2. Both versions are available in Switzerland under the Valle de Vistalba label and are imported by [Casa de Vinos Argentinos](#) of Bern. German importers Vinco Import of Trier have so far imported only the regular bottling.