Wine Relief 2007 - what to buy

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Last weekend the veteran commentator Egon Ronay was reported fulminating against organic food, arguing that the public were being cheated and that the evidence that organic is better for you than conventional food is thin on the ground. While I admire him for having been such an effective thorn in the flesh of the UK food business for decades, I think on this issue he is overlooking one important aspect of consumer behaviour. Many people choose to buy organically grown produce not because they think it is better for them but because they feel it is better for the planet and a better thing to do in the greater, altruistic scheme of things.

I feel very much the same about the various ways in which we can buy wine and help to solve some of the world's manifold injustices. The wines themselves may not always be as delicious as the rarities I wrote about last week but in place of perhaps the most haunting aftertaste in the world, they bring with the warm glow of helping, in however small a way, to right a wrong or two.

The most obvious way in which wine drinkers in the UK can make a difference while buying a bottle or several is to take part in Wine Relief, part of the biennial, red nose-wearing fundraising marathon that is Comic Relief. Since Wine Relief was launched in 1999, wine lovers have raised £2 million for the many projects in the UK and Africa that Comic Relief so carefully choose and supervise. This admirable sum is the equivalent, for example, of giving 4,000 African street children shelter, food, healthcare, skills and the training they need to get a good job and escape poverty, or 700,000 hot meals at an old people's lunch club. (Food for Egon perhaps?)

Wine Relief is now firmly established in the wine trade calendar and all of the major UK wine retailers, with the exceptions of French-owned Oddbins/Nicolas and American-owned Asda, are taking part. The fundraising mechanic is delightfully simple. Ten per cent of the retail price of the chosen Wine Relief wines, which should be clearly signalled on the shelf or wine list, goes directly to Comic Relief. Many of the retailers have already started their Wine Relief promotions, most of them culminating on Red Nose Day, Friday March 16, although the big two, Sainsbury's and Tesco, concentrate their efforts on three weeks from the end of February.

Tesco has the widest range of Wine Relief wines, more than 30, from Lambrini at £1.27 but mainly higher up the scale, including no fewer than a dozen of their own-label wines. I was particularly impressed by **Tesco Finest Gavi 2005** from Fratelli Martini at £5.99. Like so many Italian white wines today it has a delicious combination of true fruity core and refreshing crispness. I also thought Tesco's two 'Finest' single vineyard wines from Ventisquero in Chile were superior with extremely lively fruit: **Tapiewy Sauvignon Blanc 2006 Casablanca** and **Kulapelli Cabernet/Carmenère Reserve 2005 Maipo**, both at £7.99.

Sainsbury's are concentrating on nine South African wines, on the basis that Comic Relief has always spent a good two-thirds of the millions it raises each year on the neediest continent. Another racy Sauvignon Blanc caught my attention here, **Eagleviel Sauvignon Blanc 2006 Western Cape** at £5.49 has admirably racy fruit and is made by Englishman Tony Hindhaugh whose struggle to establish this new winery has been chronicled on the Discovery channel. **Stormhoek Shiraz 2004 Western Cape** at just £4.49 is another good wine – fragrant, extremely fruity and easy – and has the distinction of having been made by the company that has pioneered blogging as a wine marketing tool.

It was Stormhoek that published online just before Christmas a 40 per cent discount voucher at Thresher, the country's dominant chain of off-licences. (This was far from crippling for the company which already prices their lines as though everyone will take advantage of their three-for-two offer – and resulted in a dramatic increase in sales.)

Thresher has also chosen a theme dear to Comic Relief's work for their selection of Wine Relief wines, eight Fairtrade wines from producers which guarantee to give a fair deal to disadvantaged primary producers in the developing world. Fairtrade Fortnight, fortuitously, runs from February 26 and many UK retailers will be showcasing all sorts of such products. (In the US Fairtrade activity seems so far to focus mainly on coffee, but then there are few more obvious commodities with which to start.)The pineapple-flavoured **Fairtrade Equality Chardonnay/Viognier 2006** from CoViCa in Chile at £6.99 looks the best bet to me – especially if you buy two and get a third 'free'.

This is also one of Morrisons' eight Wine Relief wines, priced at £5.79 for a single bottle. **Fairtrade Equality Cabernet/Carignan 2005**, also £5.79, is positively bursting with blackcurrant fruitiness and seems much more influenced by its share of Cabernet than Carignan grapes.

The Co-op has long championed Fairtrade products but for its Wine Relief wines has gone elsewhere, most notably to South Africa (again) for **Balance Chardonnay/Semillon 2006 Western Cape**, a 64:36 blend which I find remarkably zesty for £3.99 (it's just a shame that this bottle yields just 40 pence for Wine Relief – kindly buy in quantity).

Australia dominates the selection at Somerfield, which has just lost its glamorous wine buyer of long standing. **McWilliams, Hanwood Riesling 2005 South Eastern Australia** at £5.99 is fruity and floral Riesling while **Zontes Footstep Shiraz/Viognier 2005 Langhorne Creek**, £7.99, is yet another blend of two grape varieties, the heady aroma of Viognier only just perceptible on top of all that soft, easy-to-like Langhorne Creek Shiraz from South Australia. (I was particularly impressed by the **2006** of this last wine tasted recently.)

Marks & Spencer, Majestic and Waitrose offer the most sophisticated selections of Wine Relief wines by far and these should already be on offer. At M&S I thought their **Petit Chablis 2005** at £7.99 is better than many a fully fledged Chablis sold elsewhere while Nicolas Potel's **Bourgogne Chardonnay 2004** at £6.99 is an even better buy with real savour. I like all five of the reds they are offering but best value I think is the **Marqués del Costal 2002 Conca de Barberá** Bordeaux blend from Spanish Catalonia which delivers far more flavour and potential for development than most £7.49 wines.

Among their dozen, Majestic have chosen one I have recently been recommending to friends as a party white, **Montes Reserve Sauvignon Blanc 2006 Casablanca** at £6.49 which has real richness on the nose as well as typical Sauvignon green fruit flavours on the palate. I also think their **St-Emilion 2002** from the co-op is a fine buy at £7.49 for those who value full maturity in their claret while, at the same price, **Chianti 2004 Manucci Droandi** from Majestic's increasingly impressive Italian range is an admirable example from this superior vintage (better than the 2005 also on offer).

At Waitrose I liked their **Calvet-Thunevin, Cuvée Constance 2004 Vin de Pays** at £8.99 so much I made this intense red wine of the week on my website, but **Gobelsburger Grüner Veltliner 2005 Kamptal** at £6.49 and **Bellingham, The Maverick Chenin Blanc 2006** at £8.99 from Austria and South Africa respectively are equally impressive whites.

Café Rouge restaurants meanwhile are serving two Wine Relief wines from Laroche and many other smaller retailers are also doing their bit. Please look out for, or even dream up, other ways of increasing wine drinkers' contribution to this very worthwhile pot.

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