# Please buy generously

24 Feb 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT

*See my full tasting notes on all 80 Wine Relief wines.*

Every two years I get involved in a national fundraising campaign in the UK for Comic Relief. Wine Relief is a vinous subset of the nation's biennial emptying out of the pockets in aid of thoroughly worthwhile projects in Africa and the UK. This year one of the major wine-related ways we hope to raise money is to revert to our tried and tested mechanic of having major retailers select some of the wines from their range as their Wine Relief wines, with 10% of their sales in the run up to the Red Nose Day denouement on Friday 18 March going straight to Comic Relief.

In the past these wines have tended to favour the first half of the phrase cheap and cheerful. This year, I am delighted to say, there has been a distinct step up in quality. Many retailers, especially Majestic and Laithwaites, have included some really very superior wines in their Wine Relief selections. Marks & Spencer wins the prize for the sheer number of wines included in the scheme: their entire and very varied 27-strong South African range (which includes the frightening-sounding Mochatage Pinotage, offering a hint of coffee in your red wine).

Certain general trends are discernible among the 80-odd Wine Relief wines. The British drink, just, more white wine than red (although pink has become almost incredibly popular and five of the Wine Relief wines are rosés). Among white wine grapes, Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris reigns supreme. Altogether six of them were chosen, as compared with just two varietal Chardonnays. And, fortunately, they are all really interesting examples with a local story to tell - quite unlike the ocean of bland, off-dry white that constitutes the majority of Pinot Grigio sold in the UK. (It is a mystery how the affections of the nation's white wine drinkers were transferred over the turn of the millennium from Chardonnay to its theoretically more aromatic cousin, 'grey' - actually pink- skinned - Pinot.)

Another extremely obvious trend is just how popular screwcaps now are in mass-market wine retailing in the UK. By far the majority of these wines come in screwcapped bottles - a boon for tasters in a hurry and for those who like to re-stopper opened bottles, even if not for the Portuguese cork industry that has seen a substantial drop in demand for natural corks, even though they are - at last - less prone to taint than they were a few years ago.

The second most popular white wine was Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand's biggest wine region - which is hardly surprising since the region has seen the most extraordinary glut of its defining grape variety recently. New Zealand has, as a result, struggled to retain its status as wine exporter to Britain with the highest average retail price.

Red wines chosen tended to vary much more than whites but three retailers chose deliciously toothsome Beaujolais from the exceptional 2009 vintage - in fact these wines, a Morgon, a Fleurie and a Beaujolais-Villages, may well turn out to be some of the longest-lasting of these Wine Relief 2011 selections, the majority of which are designed for early drinking.

Majestic's eclectic selection bravely includes two Rieslings at opposite ends of the fruitiness scale. Gunderloch Estate, Fritz's Riesling 2009 Rheinhessen, is super fruity yet quite bracing enough to be refreshing - a great wine with spicy food, I would imagine, and also for sipping after a meal - while Knappstein Hand Picked Riesling 2010 Clare Valley, like most Australian Rieslings nowadays, seems to have entered a competition to see who can make the driest wine in the world. Both are £8.99 a bottle.

Waitrose's range of Wine Relief wines is a little more timid than I might have expected from this creative wine retailer. Forte Alto Pinot Grigio from the Dolomites has admirable purity for £6.99 a bottle while Juan Ramón Lozano, Vuvuzela Tempranillo/Cabernet 2010 La Mancha, has to be the most intriguingly named wine. Vuvuzela made in Spain long after the last penalty was scored in the World Cup characterised by this African loudhailer…?

Marks & Spencer's range unashamedly embraces 100% South African wines, and ranges from its basic, German-bottled Cape Quarter blends at £5.40 to the admirable Newton Johnson Pinot Noir 2008 Elgin at £16.99. Booths selection is limited but intriguing and includes the bargain Brown Brothers Dry Muscat 2008 South Eastern Australia for just £5.60. By rights this should have keeled over by now but it just shows the white winemaking skills prevalent in Australia today. Gone are the fat oaky monsters, to be replaced by tight, focused, extremely refreshing wines full of personality such as this one.

Bravely carrying the torch for high-street wine retailing, Wine Rack is offering arguably the single most delicious wine in the entire Wine Relief 2011 range: Guado al Tasso, Il Bruciato 2007 Bolgheri at £18.99, a wine from Antinori's Maremma estate that really does taste like a baby Sassicaia. (When it was reduced to £14.99 it was a wine of the week.) They also have 20% off all their core French range until mid May.

But of course much of the growth of the UK wine market is in online and mail-order retailing, as evinced by the increasingly powerful Laithwaites, whose owners also operate the great majority of wine clubs in the UK and an increasing number of them abroad. They have chosen six reds as the focus of their Wine Relief effort, with my fellow wine writer Oz Clarke supplying tasting notes thereon. I was impressed by Giesta 2009 Dão, which is so much fruitier than many wines from this region in northern Portugal and seems good value at £7.49, but my favourite was the Grande Réserve de Gassac Rouge 2009 Vin de Pays de l'Hérault at £7.99 from the family responsible for Mas de Daumas Gassac in the Languedoc. What was strange, however, was that although these six wines came from four different countries in two hemispheres, they had a remarkably similar style of extremely direct, not especially subtle, fruit.

Another Languedoc wine was my favourite from the Wine Relief selection from Laithwaite's sister company Virgin Wines. Les Arbousiers Rosé 2009 Coteaux de Languedoc is a particularly pretty pale pink and is not, unlike so many rosés, marked by an excess of residual sugar. At £7.49, this is almost more like a keenly priced Provençal pink.

I urge those of you living in the UK who know they have large parties to cater for later in the year to buy ahead from these Wine Relief selections, knowing that 10% of what you spend will go to some extremely worthy recipients.

**SOME FAVOURITES**

**Brown Brothers Dry Muscat 2008 South Eastern Australia** £5.60 Booths
**Les Arbousiers Rosé 2009 Coteaux de Languedoc** £7.49 Virgin Wines
**Nosio, Forte Alto Pinot Grigio 2010 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti** £7.99 Waitrose
**Grande Réserve de Gassac Rouge 2009 Vin de Pays de l'Hérault** £7.99 Laithwaites
**Villa Lanata, Lo Zoccolaio, Suculé 2007 Barbera d'Alba** £9.99 Majestic
**Newton Johnson Pinot Noir 2008 Elgin** £16.99 M&S
**Guado al Tasso, Il Bruciato 2007 Bolgheri** £18.99 Wine Rack

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