

## What is wine value?

26 Apr 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT

The media, and not just in Britain, made much of an 'experiment' at last month's Edinburgh Science Festival in which 578 people were asked to taste a wine and say whether it was under £5 or between £10 and £30 a bottle\*. That they managed this only half the time, as often as they would have done if they had chosen at random, gave rise to such headlines as 'Wine drinkers wasting money on expensive vintages'.

What fascinated me was how passionately wine drinkers reacted to this story. Those who presumably rarely spend much on wine patted themselves on the back, while those used to spending double-digit, perhaps even occasionally treble-digit, sums per bottle were incensed by the stupidity of the comparison and leapt to the defence of fine wine, for all its apparent lack of immediate appeal.

It is true that wines currently on sale for around £30 a bottle in British stores would typically be very young - too young - examples of wines that are meant to be aged for many years. A 2008 bordeaux classed growth, for example, would still be chock full of off-puttingly chewy tannins and youthful acidity. Only a professional would be likely to prefer this, for current drinking, to a soft, fruity £4.99 Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon. The same could well be true of a comparison between a young premier cru Chablis and a cheap South African Chardonnay. Unfortunately in the UK it is still relatively difficult to find mature wine on sale by the single bottle, although the situation is improving, not least thanks to the mushrooming of independent wine retailers in the wake of the disappearance from the high street of the likes of Thresher, Unwins and now, it seems likely, Oddbins. We must assume that many of the more expensive wines in the recent headline-grabbing experiment were years away from their prime.

But do you get what you pay for with the wine on offer today? I strongly believe there is little correlation between price and the pleasure a wine gives. There are overpriced wines at all price levels, and certainly many underpriced wines at well under £30 a bottle.

It is extremely hard for anyone to justify the price of bordeaux first growths at £1,000 a bottle. Who will buy the 2010s other than status-conscious acquirers of luxury goods? But for most people it is hard to understand why anyone would pay even £100 for a bottle of wine when there are so many well-made, delicious wines available at between £10 and £20 a bottle - and a worldwide surplus of them. What is even stranger is that some of the world's most overpriced and most underpriced wines come from the same region, Bordeaux. Only a week after the world's wine trade descended on Bordeaux to taste the primeurs samples of the smart wines, hundreds of Bordeaux vigneron demonstrated outside the offices of the generic wine organisation complaining of their desperation over the uneconomically low price of basic AC Bordeaux.

Given the extraordinary progress that has been made in many of the less famous vineyards and cellars in Bordeaux, I would certainly cite some basic Bordeaux, wines from the Bordeaux Côtes and less famous Médoc and Graves wines as some of the world's wine bargains. The only problem is picking the wheat from the chaff in a region with more than 8,000 vine growers.

Despite all the attention given to a tiny number of trophy wines, France is stuffed with underpriced wine, wine that is better quality than it has ever been but is struggling to find a market. I am thinking specifically of the more handcrafted wines of the Loire, the Languedoc, Beaujolais (resoundingly back on form since the 2009 vintage) and the southern Rhône, where, so long as you can stand alcohol levels well in excess of 14%, you can easily find £8 Côtes du Rhône that are far more characterful and delicious than most supermarket Châteauneuf-du-Pape at twice the price.

If it's freshness and lightness that you crave, then perhaps you can help to put the growers of the Loire out of their misery. Muscadet producers are in a particularly parlous state currently, despite making much more concentrated, interesting wines than they have ever done.

Or, you could consider German wine in general, which, with the exception of very sweet rarities and the most sought-after dry Rieslings that qualify for the newish Grosses Gewächs designation, is rarely expensive even though, thanks to climate change and vastly improved winemaking, it is far, far better quality than it used to be. Dry German Rieslings and Silvaners are a worthy match for much more expensive, and often less reliable and refreshing, white burgundy. UK specialist

retailers of modern German wine are The Winery of London W9 and The Wine Barn in Hampshire.

My prize for the single most obviously underpriced wine goes to sherry, the unique and magical white wine grown on folds of chalk around the Andalucian city of Jerez. There has been resistance to sherry on the grounds that it is inconveniently potent, but the most refreshing styles Fino and Manzanilla, both of them bone dry and miraculously appetising, are only 15% alcohol, much the same as Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Napa Valley Cabernet are nowadays - and the darker, stronger dry sherries offer exceptionally mature wine for a song, especially under supermarkets' own labels. See, for example, last week's [wines of the week](#).

Supermarkets' 'special offers' of table wines are not necessarily great value on the other hand. Many of these 'half-price' promotions are based on regular prices that were wildly inflated in the first place, and successive duty increases and currency movements have put terrible pressure on the quality of the wine behind many mass-market labels. But own-label champagnes are used mercilessly by supermarkets as bait and can sometimes offer real value, especially during their regular '25% off' fests.

Chilean reds and South African whites often seem underpriced to me while my candidates for most overpriced wines include not just the bordeaux first growths but a host of Napa Valley Cabernets (although Marks & Spencer and Laithwaites are two UK retailers who have responded to the much better California value available under less well known labels) and Priorat in Catalunya. Neighbouring Montsant can offer much better value.

\*I am grateful to Jamie Goode's researches reported [here](#) into exactly how the 'experiment' was conducted.

#### **SOME CURRENT WINE VALUE IN THE UK**

**Paradiso Shiraz 2010 Central Valley, Chile** £4.99 (usually £6.99 and worth it) M&S

**Barbadillo/Tesco Finest\* Fino, Manzanilla and Dry Oloroso sherries** £5.29 for 50 cl Tesco

**Ch Henry de France 2008 Premières Côtes de Bordeaux** £5.49 (usually £7.39) Spar

**Champteloup 2009 Muscadet de Sèvre-et-Maine** £5.99 Waitrose

**Emilio Lustau/Sainsbury's Taste the Difference 12 Year Old Amontillado sherry** £7.99 per 50cl Sainsbury's

**Les Vignerons de Villeveyrac, Grande Réserve de Gassac Rouge 2009 Vin de Pays de l'Hérault** £7.99 Laithwaites

**Ch de Pizay 2009 Morgon** £8.99 Majestic

**Villiera, Brut Blanc de Blancs Sparkling 2007 Stellenbosch** £9.99 M&S

**Tesco Finest\* Vintage Champagne 2006** £12.99 (usually £25.99 and definitely not worth it) Tesco