



Bargain Hunting

WHAT MAKES A GOOD WINE A GREAT DEAL

Had any best buys lately? It has to be the number one question asked of me by consumers.

That's part of the reason why *Wine Access* will host the first-ever International Value Wine Awards in June in Calgary.

Wine writers love to use the term "best buy" or "best value" to make sure you pay attention to their review, but what does best value really mean when you open that bottle of wine?

If price is seldom a measure of quality, can it possibly be a measure of value? At *Wine Access*, "best value" or "best buy" as it applies to our reviews is never strictly price-driven.

Value is all about exceeding expectations or, as the marketers like to say, over-delivering in the glass, and there is no better accolade one could give a wine than that.

It is my experience that value falls into three broad categories: wines \$75 and above, wines under \$25, and perhaps the most significant mid-range of \$25 to \$75.

Why is the mid-range so important? Well, if we agree there is a fixed cost in growing grapes and making wine, we won't likely encounter many best buys under \$10 — mainly because most of that \$10 is eaten up by production and shipping costs. (And, across most of this country, a healthy whack of taxes.)

On the other hand, if it only costs \$10 or \$15 per bottle to make the finest wine in the world, how can you justify calling a \$95 wine good value?

It's a question we wrestle with every month at *Wine Access*. In the end, it comes down to what's in the glass as well as the experience to draw upon when considering what the same money will buy in the marketplace.

Years ago, when I visited California's Ridge Vineyards, then-vice president Don

Reisen told me that winemaker Paul Draper had issued a warning to his staff to leave no stone unturned in pursuit of making the Ridge Montebello. Simply put, it had to be the best that money could buy.

Riesen went on to point out just one facet of production at Ridge as it affects Montebello. When it comes to handling the

value is in the details.

Earlier this year, I stood in the middle of a vast Monterey vineyard where Kendall Jackson operates a sophisticated belt press, mounted on a tractor-trailer. It is used to whole cluster-press chardonnay fruit in the middle of the night right in the vineyard. When the job is done, it can be hooked up and delivered to the next vineyard.

The mobile press is just part of the value story at K-J, but its flexibility allows K-J to grow its grapes and care for them over vast areas and across many appellations. Translation: affordable estate-grown chardonnay. Sounds like value to me.

One of the best "value" tips I can give you is to compare the best wines of a young or emerging region with those of an old venerable district. If you can't tell the difference between second growth Bordeaux and Canadian meritage blends, save yourself \$40 to \$60 and buy locally.

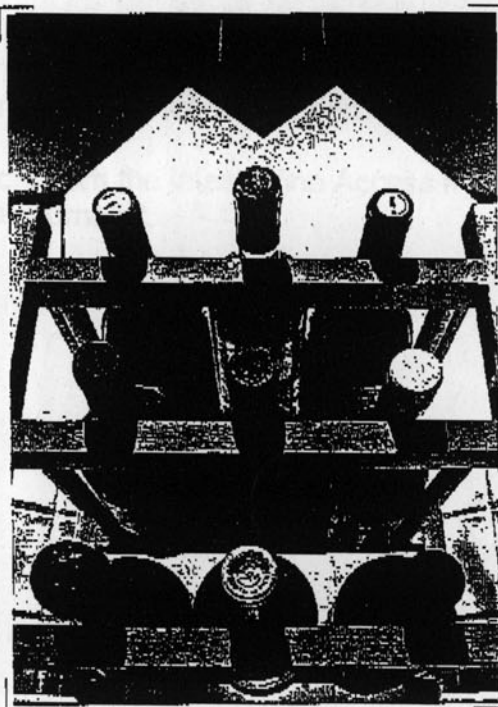
Similarly, the best cabernet blends of Chile, or the finest malbecs in Argentina are usually excellent value when compared to the best of California or France.

Don't think this is Euro bashing. There are many French, Spanish and Italian labels coming from non-traditional areas that are turning heads for a tenth of the price. Think Hecula Castano from Spain, or Chateau de Nages from the Languedoc, or Donnafugata from Sicily. Most are cheaper than VQA wine and deliver more value.

When you hear old people say there has never been a better time to buy wine, believe it. But don't wait too long to get into the game.

Today's best buys might not be so affordable next year and the year after that. The rising level of interest in wine and ease of accessing information via the Internet means there are more and more buyers for less and less wine. That's another kind of value — scarcity — and it works best when the wine is already in your cellar. ☞

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press wine at Ridge, they go to great lengths to keep track of the juice or press wine that is yielded from successive fractional pressings of the remaining pulp.

There can be as many as 15 to 20 separate lots of the dark, harsh, tannic press wine and perhaps none will be used again at Ridge. But they keep track of it all, just in case. The