



A Nichols Worth of Wine

November Value Picks

2004 Sonoma Cutrer Chardonnay – Russian River

Few California wineries do a better job at producing “Burgundian” style wines than Sonoma Cutrer. The 2004 chardonnay vintage, perhaps the best in a decade, was especially kind to the Russian River area of Sonoma. This wine has exquisite flavors of honey, lemon and just the right touch of sweet oak. With great balance and acidity, the wine has amazing depth and an exceptionally long mineral finish. It will pair well with most seafood dishes and cream sauced pasta entrees. This is a widely available wine throughout the Naples area at under \$20.

2004 Jim Jim Shiraz

Silly name, serious wine value! South Australia continues to turn out incredible wines, red and white, and this shiraz from 5th generation winemaker Hugh Hamilton, in McLaren Vale, is the essence of that commitment to quality and value. Deep in color, richly textured with soft, silky opulent fruit, this wine over delivers for the money at about \$12 a bottle. The Hamilton’s make a number of great wines with quirky names. Ask your local wine merchant to find them!

In The Vineyard

Is it okay to fool Mother Nature? Well, yes when it comes to winemaking, especially in vintages deemed to be “off years”. The practice of adjusting to the forces of nature is helping to overcome the less-than-banner vintages that seasonal climatic conditions can mean to the wine that ultimately ends up on our table. Winemakers, now more than ever before, employ a number of practices both in the vineyard and in the cellar to offset unfavorable weather conditions.

Does a long, hot, rain-free growing season always ensure a great vintage? Not necessarily. If the grapes are allowed to proliferate in the scorching sun of summer, swelling the clusters to historic yields, the acidity is baked out of the fruit and the wine becomes flat and flabby. Conversely, will a short cool season spell disaster for the harvest? Not always. While too much rain and a sharp decline in the average number of days of sunshine can produce wines that are thin in flavor and tart, most grape varieties often depend on moderating climates. The winemakers “Goldilocks” dream is to get the right balance of warm days, cool nights and lots of customers. Working with the hand Mother Nature has dealt, winemakers can manipulate the vines and adjust their winemaking strategy to their –and our favor!

Ultimately, vintages are but a slice of the quality wine equation. Placing too much emphasis on annual vintage reports should not completely govern your wine buying decision. When selecting wines, the focus should be on choosing from top-quality producers – big or small, and perhaps more importantly, seeking the advice and recommendations of wine merchants who are committed to delivering the best wine any vintage has to offer.

Defining Value

Can you think of any commodity where value is as ill-defined as wine? Are wine ratings the answer? How do we assign a value to two wines both rated 90 points by the “experts”, when one retails at \$10 and the other at \$200 or more? If you know, please e-mail me the answer!

The value of wine ultimately lies in our enjoyment, regardless of price or ratings. Measuring that value however is where it gets tricky. Unlike many of the goods we buy, once consumed, wine has zero value. Except perhaps for the memory of the experience, it's gone.

Can we always rely on the prestige of the winemaker or winery? Generally yes, but because the most well-crafted wines can often take years to develop, determining the success or disappointment of a particular vintage soon after its release is guesswork at best. Paying upwards of \$500 to \$1000 for a single bottle of Bordeaux's Chateau Petrus or Napa's Screaming Eagle, two of the more sought after wines in the world, draws a frenzied following at each release. Interesting though is that in any given vintage, regardless of their pedigree, wines can differ substantially in quality. Prices however, especially from the premium producers, seldom decline proportionately. The adage of “where there's a seller, there's a buyer” certainly prevails in the world of wine. If you're buying expensive wine as an investment, fellow buyers willing to pay almost any price will surface. But then, do you really get the value of enjoying the wine?

At the other end of the value and price spectrum are the basement bargains of wine, those under \$10. This is often the “you get what you pay for” category. That is not to say that great value wines can't be found; at \$8 a bottle, the recently released Columbia Crest 2003 Grand Estates Merlot was certainly an exception. Just be prepared to be either surprised or – more often than not - disappointed.

When you deconstruct the cost components of a \$10 bottle of wine the quality and value picture becomes somewhat clearer. After backing out land costs, vineyard maintenance, labor, production (picking and making the wine), bottling, storage, the label, the box, marketing, and profit margins, care to guess what you're actually drinking is truly worth?

As a note, I believe that the next price point, those wines in the \$15-\$25, is where the real “values” are found. This is also the most plentiful pricing category, so there's a tremendous selection to choose from!

Webster defines “value” as, *the monetary worth of a thing*. So, how do we then know whether we're getting our money's worth at any price point? Blind tasting can be your best wine value barometer. Trying just two wines in the same price range or a larger selection of your favorite varietals in different price categories is a fun way to not only learn about wine, but also serves as a guide in determining the price-value relationship of your purchase. Not unlike learning a foreign language, immersion is critical. Go out and experiment – have fun!

Did You Know...

At only 110 calories a glass - the same as milk, wine contains no fat and is cholesterol free.