

The Pour: A blog on the pleasure, culture and business of wine, beer and spirits.

Modest Luxuries for Lean Times

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ARGUMENTS and disagreements rage over styles, tastes and preferences, but I think everybody can agree on one thing about wine: The less spent, the better.

Yet it's the rare wine lover who hasn't blown a budget. Let's not even quibble about the reasons: an unexpected sale, a had-to-have bottle, a case too good to pass up. In not so rare instances, passion gives way to excess and possibly even to mania, and from there you may as well take a corkscrew to the bank account. I've known more than a few wine lovers who've had to conceal purchases from their more practical spouses.

That's when times were good. Nowadays, the economy threatens from every possible angle, but the government has bigger things to bail out than our wine bills. Sure, a few financially invulnerable types may be left standing for whom the price is irrelevant, but for most people, price and value are especially important now.

I've thought a lot recently about the intersection of price and value in the context of everyday wines, and I've opened a lot of bottles in search of that sweet spot. Despite the economy, it's still easy to find bottles under \$10. But for me, the promised land with the best ratio of quality and value to price is \$10 to \$20. To put it another way, in this price range I found the greatest amount of pleasure and excitement for the least amount of money.

In the future, I'll be looking at other wine regions, but today I want to focus on France. Even with the pitiful exchange rate, France is the greatest source of wine bargains in the world.

Price and value are, of course, two entirely different things. Price is simple. It is the amount of money that you are willing to pay for a bottle of wine. Value is dependent on price, and far more complicated. It brings us back to those subjective, flashpoint issues of style, taste and preference, and it forces people to ask themselves what they want out of a wine.

Nowadays, most \$10 wines are decent, by which I mean palatable, without obvious flaws or problems. For many people, these wines are entirely satisfying. Others might wish for something better but are not willing to pay more, so they settle for wines like these.

I wouldn't argue with either group. But I no more want to drink boring wines than eat dull food. I want intrigue and discovery, excitement and the sort of pleasure that compels me to drink, drink again and pour another glass.

Have I ever found a wine like this for \$10 and under? Sure. But I haven't found very many recently. For \$5 or \$10 more, though, the possibilities abound.

It more or less comes down to status and economics. These days, wines under \$10 are generally the result of mass production and economies of scale. Wines made in that manner can be decent but are rarely exciting. Wines made on a smaller scale by vignerons have far greater potential to excel. Of course, they

cost more to make, which rules out most of the higher status regions. I did find a very good 2005 red Bourgogne from Jérôme Chezeaux, but I think it was a fluke.

It's much easier to find cheap wine from Bordeaux than Burgundy, but I didn't find a lot to recommend. The real treasures lie in areas thought to be of lesser status.

Let's take Beaujolais, for example, the definitive cheap French red wine. For many people Beaujolais means Georges Duboeuf, the producer who dominates the market. But even Duboeuf's flower label series, entry wines to the cru villages of Beaujolais like Brouilly, Fleurie or Morgon, are now \$10 to \$15. They can be solid, enjoyable wines, though I often find them too sweet. But, oh, what a difference a few more dollars makes!

Pierre Chermette of Domaine du Vissoux makes some great cru Beaujolais that are, alas, more than \$20. But his plain Beaujolais 2007, the lowest-level appellation, is a captivating, absolutely refreshing wine that I found for \$14.99. I don't think I would ever get tired of drinking it, or other Beaujolais wines, like a light, juicy 2006 Côte de Brouilly from Jean-Paul Brun (\$15.99) or a graceful, complex 2006 Morgon Vieilles Vignes from Daniel Bouland (\$19.99).

Beaujolais is made with the gamay grape, which is grown in few other places in the world. One area with a small amount of gamay is the Loire Valley, which may be France's greatest region for wine bargains. For the past few years my Thanksgiving red for the big crowd at our family celebrations has been the Touraine gamay from Clos Roche Blanche. The 2007 gamay, which I found for \$15.99 (it was around \$10 three or four years ago) is exhilarating to drink, with its earthy, minerally flavors and great gamay fruit.

The Loire is so versatile, and so blessedly undervalued. One of the most exciting wines I've had in the last month was the 2006 Touraine KO from Thierry Puzelat, which also goes by the punnish name In Côt We Trust. In the Loire, côt is the name for malbec, the grape that has become so popular in Argentina. But it's the rare Argentine malbec that's as light, floral, complex and resolutely dry as the Puzelat, which is at the high end of our budget at \$19.99.

Another malbec option is the 2005 Clos Siguier from Cahors, the grape's home region. Cahors is known for heavy, somewhat stolid wines, but the Clos Siguier, at \$12.99, is a far cry from that, light and perfumed yet juicy and refreshing.

But back to the Loire. The most prevalent red grape there is the cabernet franc, and the 2006 Chinon les Granges (\$17.99), from Bernard Baudry, is a great example: smoky and earthy with tangy fruit and a rasp of tannin for structure.

Like the other reds I'm recommending it is properly dry. Too many red wines nowadays, at all price ranges, seem to have a little bit of residual sugar in them, which can plump them up and make them seem attractive on first sip. But wines like these often do not go well with food and are fatiguing because they don't perform the essential function of wine, to refresh the palate.

I've only spoken about red wines so far, but the Loire is a great source for whites as well. Vouvray is a famous name in wine that is often compromised by indifferent winemaking, but Bernard Fouquet's Domaine des Aubuisières makes terrific Vouvrays. His 2007 Cuvée de Silex (\$16.99) is rich and lively with a floral edge that can seem like a touch of honey.

If this wine is hard to find, Château de Montfort is a solid mainstream producer of very good Vouvrais. I recently spotted the 2006 Montfort Vouvray for \$10.95.

Even in the context of the Loire, Muscadet is an undervalued wine, given lip service in the annual “which wine to drink with oysters” article but otherwise ignored. What I love about a good Muscadet is the texture and the almost yeasty flavors, slightly reminiscent of [Champagne](#).

Forget about Muscadet if you insist on extravagant fruit flavors. The 2007 Domaine de la Pépière from Marc Ollivier (\$12.99) won't give you those, but it will offer unending tangy refreshment.

While I'm not a fan of residual sugar in red wines, white wines can be another matter. Semi-sweet Vouvrais — labeled demi-sec — can be wonderful with food, so long as they are balanced. Same with spätlese rieslings from Germany.

Whites from Alsace can be another matter. Unless they are lusciously sweet, for cheese or dessert, I find lightly sweet Alsace whites to be unbalanced and cloying. But dry rieslings from Alsace can be exceptional, like the 2006 Bollenberg riesling from Château d'Orschwihr (\$18.99), which has plenty of mineral and floral flavors but no discernable sweetness. Binner is another source for good, dry rieslings, as is Paul Blanck.

Prices are going up in the Rhone, but you can still find excellent values in reds like the 2005 Costières de Nîmes Perrières from Marc Kreydenweiss (\$15.99), the Alsace producer, who bought property in the Rhone a few years ago. This is a fruity, funky earthy delight.

Fine values can also be plucked from the ocean of wine pouring forth from the south of France, like the juicy, floral 2007 St.-Chinian les Travers de Marceau from Domaine Rimbert (\$13.99), or the big, meaty and tannic 2005 St.-Chinian Plein Grès from Mas de Cynanque.

For [chardonnay](#) lovers, the Mâconnais remains a great source for wines like the lively, fresh 2006 Domaine Sainte Barbe (\$15.99) or the ripe, minerally 2006 La Roche Vineuse from Olivier Merlin (\$17.99).

In a pinch one could do a lot worse than settle for the Macon-Lugny les Charmes from Cave de Lugny, which will set you back \$10 or so.

I know. It's been a whirlwind tour, yet we've barely scratched the surface. France has so much more to offer in this price range, but I leave the rest of this not-so-costly world for you to explore. Think what you'll be saving on plane tickets.

For the Bon Vivant on a Budget

Here are Eric Asimov's French treasures under \$20, listed alphabetically.

1. Domaine des Aubuisières/Bernard Fouquet Vouvray Cuvée de Silex 2007, \$16.99. Rich and lively with minerals and a touch of honey. (Importer: Weygandt-Metzler, Unionville, Pa.)
2. Bernard Baudry Chinon Les Granges 2006, \$17.99. Pliant and fruity with a healthy dollop of earth. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

3. Pierre Chermette Domaine du Vissoux Beaujolais 2007, \$14.99. Pale, pure, absolutely dry and refreshing. Textbook Beaujolais. (Weygandt-Metzler)
4. Clos Roche Blanche Touraine Cuvée Gamay 2007, \$15.99. Juicy and minerally; my Thanksgiving wine for crowds. (Louis/Dressner Selections)
5. Marc Kreydenweiss Costières de Nîmes Perrières 2005, \$15.99. Felicitous combination of fruit, funk and earth. (Wilson Daniels, St. Helena, Calif.)
6. Marc Ollivier Domaine de la Pépière Muscadet Sèvre et Maine 2007, \$12.99. All texture and tanginess, not extravagant fruit. (Louis/Dressner Selections)
7. Château d'Orschwihr Alsace Riesling Bollenberg 2006, \$18.99. A dry Alsace nod to earth and flowers. (T. Edward Wines, New York)
8. Thierry Puzelat Touraine KO In Côt We Trust 2006, \$19.99. Loire malbec, gorgeous, pure and delicious. (Louis/Dressner Selections)
9. Domaine Rimbert St.-Chinian Les Travers de Marceau 2006, \$13.99. Light, juicy, floral and tangy. (Jenny & François/U.S.A. Wine Imports, New York)
10. Domaine Sainte Barbe Mâcon L'Expression du Chardonnay 2006, \$15.99. Lively and fresh, with minerals and citrus. (A Becky Wasserman Selection/Willette Wines, New York)