



Bargain Wines

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The bargain brigade: Three savvy readers search for great wine deals

Stacy Finz, Chronicle Staff Writer

Friday, December 19, 2008

Readers from far and wide responded to our friendly wine competition: "Think you're a bargain-hunting master?" Around this time of year we usually blitz our readers with our bargain wine picks. Instead, we decided to let you show us the art of the deal.

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Your e-mails and letters poured in, and we sifted through them like the winos living in the alley outside the newsroom cull through our recyclables. Anyone who suggested Two-Buck Chuck was immediately tossed into the "no" pile. We wanted shoppers with imagination and a sense of adventure.

The Palo Alto woman who prefers a Joel Gott wine for less than \$10 to her husband's "overpriced Napa Chardonnay" was dear to our heart. We enjoyed the Scottish dude, who regularly scours the Grocery Outlet, looking for wines too cheap to pass up. And to the securities and equities salesman who wrote in recommending wines all more than \$12 - get a clue, financial guy, we're in a bleeping recession.

Finally we settled on Kristyl Horton, a 41-year-old mom and auditor for BART; Will Oremus, a 26-year-old journalist; and Robert "Robbie" Cook, a 76-year-old retired architect.

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We liked Horton's commitment. She spends her Friday nights, when she can break away from the kids, in the wine aisle of her neighborhood supermarket. On the way home she hits BevMo "just to see if the 'buy one get one for a nickel' sale is still going."

Being journalists ourselves, we know firsthand that all Oremus can afford is value wines. So we figured with five years of bargain hunting under his belt, he should be pretty good at it.

"Mega wine geek" is the only way to describe Cook. Instead of kicking back on some beach soaking up the sunshine, he's dedicated his retirement years to compiling an online database (*winebestbuys.com*) of bargain wines.

"I combine the ratings from all the major wine magazines with the medals awarded by over 50 wine competitions to identify the bargains as determined by wine professionals," he wrote. "I have no commercial interest in wine. My only purpose is to solve the challenge of how to always find a bargain."

Obviously, he was a no-brainer.

So we gave each \$70, assigned them a store and turned them loose. The rules: Buy at least seven bottles of wine, one for each day of the week. We told them we'd pick up the tax.

In the end they went primarily with large-production wines by big-name makers - mostly because that was what was in stock at the shops where we sent them. There were a lot of California and Washington state wines in the mix, along with a few imports. The trio seemed satisfied with their choices and excited by the fact that the Wine section staff would taste them all and report back.

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We took our three shoppers' wine picks back to the tasting room and Chronicle Wine Editor Jon Bonné and I gave them a swirl.

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We liked most of the reds. Robert "Robbie" Cook's La Vieille Ferme, a basic Cotes du Rhone, was the perfect table wine. It was light and charming, and for \$6, a steal.

Cook's Veramonte Cabernet Sauvignon was also solid. Jon found it a little too sweet, but it was just right for me.

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We definitely wanted to get in on Kristyl Horton's Menage a Trois. It was another winner, with a touch of sweetness, but not cloyingly so. Jon found it a bit minerally. I just found it delicious.

We also enjoyed Horton's Kendall-Jackson Meritage, which had hints of cassis and licorice. It was bright and

juicy with enough tannin at the end to work with a steak.

Will Oremus' reds didn't fare as well as his whites.

His Castle Rock was a bit on the green side, and frankly didn't taste much like a Pinot Noir. His Jacob's Creek Shiraz was a little too oaky for our tastes, and for the price, a bit

austere. We thought Oremus' splurge, the Seghesio Zin, was by far his best choice.

For a red wine drinker, Oremus dominated in the white department. His Campagnola Pinot Grigio kicked butt on Horton's Ecco Domani, which we found flavorless. We also thought his Chateau Ste. Michelle Riesling had more definition than Cook's Snoqualmie for the same price. Oremus' Chateau St. Jean Fumé Blanc was also a crowd-pleaser with lovely hints of fig and pear.

Cook's Geyser Peak Sauvignon Blanc is always consistently good - a total go-to wine.

In all, it was a good lot of wine. Our value-hunting team certainly had a good nose for a deal.

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Bargain shopping with Robert Cook

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Robert Cook was already at the San Rafael Beverages & More when I got there at 10 a.m. sharp.

Unlike the others, who deliberated in the store over every one of their choices, he brought a list. Each wine had been priced out, cross-referenced with professional reviews and labeled with whatever awards or medals it had won in the last few years. He had also called ahead to make sure they were all in stock. Why was I not surprised?

Clearly, his strategy was to plan ahead, make lists and more lists.

The manager and clerks all seemed to know Cook. Apparently, you get to be a regular when you're developing a buying guide of 35,000 bargain wines, which Cook does three to four hours a day, seven days a week, just for fun. He loads all his data onto his Web site and keeps hard copies in a binder, just in case.

"It was a system that had to be conquered," says Cook, who has been a wine lover most of his life and found that his scientific and analytical skills as an architect were useful in organizing a hefty list of value wines.

He also writes a weekly wine newsletter, which he'll send to anyone who wants it for free (info@winebestbuys.com).

Cook's philosophy is simple: "I won't drink wine that costs more than \$20. Anything over that isn't worth it."



Craig Lee / The Chronicle



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So he's been drinking his way through bargain wines, rating them and comparing them to what the professionals have to say. Like Will Oremus, Cook decided that one splurge, a \$20 Rioja, was in order. He had given the wine 89 points out of 100. The professional critics all came in at about 90.

He also went with the 2007 Edna Valley Chardonnay for \$9.49. He had rated it an 88. The 2006 had won rave reviews, including being named "one of the 15 best bargains" by none other than The Chronicle.

His least expensive wine was a \$5.99 French red, which he had given 88 points, compared to Wine Spectator's 87. The wine publication had classified it as a "Best Value."

By the time he rang out at the cash register his purchase came in at \$1.57 under the \$70 mark. We say next time you go shopping for bargain wines, check out his Web site (winebestbuys.com).

Then make a list, check it twice and call ahead to ensure your choices are available.

Cook's choices

Purchased at BevMo in San Rafael:

2001 Campo Viejo Gran Reserva Rioja (\$19.99)

2006 Columbia Crest Grand Estates Columbia Valley Shiraz (\$6.99)

2007 Edna Valley Vineyard Paragon San Luis Obispo County Chardonnay (\$9.49)

2007 Geyser Peak Winery California Sauvignon Blanc (\$8.99)

2006 La Vieille Ferme Cotes du Ventoux Rouge (\$5.99)

2007 Snoqualmie Columbia Valley Riesling (\$7.99)

2006 Veramonte Colchagua Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$8.99)

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Bargain shopping with Kristyl Horton

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Kristyl Horton's eyes lit up as the Costco greeter handed her a booklet of wine coupons.

"No, no, no," I admonished. "You can't use them."

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Club cards are OK, I continued, because they're forever. Coupons come and go.

We grabbed a cart and headed to the back of the Richmond store. Horton usually shops at the Danville Costco, close to where she lives. But Richmond is closer to where she works in Oakland, so we opted for that one.

As Horton got the lay of the land, she explained that her interest in wine is only a few years old. She caught the bug four years ago, when she married her husband.

"He's really in to it," she said.

After much experimentation, Horton has come to appreciate wines that tend to be heavy in viscosity, such as Cabernet Sauvignon. Her husband, she said, likes

spicy Zinfandels. So Horton's first stop was a row of reds. She eyed an Australian Shiraz for \$9.59.

The description, spicy and fruity, was just up her alley. One of the prominent wine publications gave it 91 points. But she had never tried it, so it was risky. She whipped out her Blackberry and did a little research.

"It normally retails for \$13.99," she said. "So it's a good deal."

But she couldn't commit, pushing her cart to the next label, a 2005 Alexander Valley Cabernet for \$13.99. The price tag was a little steep this early in the game.

"I'm finding lots of good deals," she said, while comparing prices on the Blackberry. "But they're still a little too pricey for the budget."

She finally settled on a Folie a Deux Menage a Trois red for \$6.99

"It's an old friend," she said. "It's our follow-up wine when we've had a really nice wine. It also makes a great gift - because of the name and all."

When she ran out of wines she'd tasted, she searched for appellations that were familiar. She and her husband particularly like wines from the Russian River Valley. She also paid attention to the tasting notes posted with many of the wines. If the description fit her taste and the price was right, the wine went into the basket.

By the time she was done, she had five reds, two whites and went 3 cents over the \$70. We could live with that.

Horton's choices

Purchased at Costco in Richmond:

2007 Chateau St. Jean Sonoma County Chardonnay (\$8.99)

2006 Ecco Domani Delle Venezie Pinot Grigio (\$7.69)

2007 Folie a Deux Menage a Trois California Red Wine (\$6.99)

2005 Foppiano Vineyard Estate Bottled Russian River Valley Petite Sirah (\$11.99)

2004 Kendall-Jackson California Meritage (\$10.49)

2005 Rodney Strong Sonoma County Cabernet Sauvignon (\$11.99)

2005 Venta Mazzaron Tierra del Vino de Zamora Tempranillo (\$11.89)



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Bargain shopping with Will Oremus

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Will Oremus was definitely going to get carded. The Palo Alto Daily News reporter looks more like 20 than 26.

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He talked his editor into letting him disappear for a few hours, raced up the Peninsula to the Belmont Safeway, where he met me to do a little wine shopping. Seventy bucks was burning a hole in our pockets.

Oremus shares a place in San Francisco's Mission District with four roommates. They cook him dinner and he supplies the wine. He's got the bargain thing down to a science. Unfortunately his preference - full-flavored reds - tend to be pricey.

So his strategy was to buy one "really nice wine" that would deliver, and cheap out for the rest of the week.

He knew his best values would be in the import section.

"They don't have as good a selection as BevMo," he complained while perusing the shelves. "There are values in American wine, but they are harder to come by.

In other countries there are more wines that are inexpensive, but serious in their intentions."

He said Argentine Malbecs are his typical go-to wines. But he couldn't find one that fit the bill, so he settled for a 2005 Australian Shiraz for \$10.98. He initially selected a Rosemount Estate Shiraz for \$6.98, but nixed it for the pricer one.

It looked like the bargains would be American after all. He pushed the cart over to the Riesling section. He likes it with spicy food.

"We get takeout a lot," he said.

He plucked a \$7.99 Washington state Riesling off the shelf and put it in his basket. A Merlot he likes from the same state was only \$5.99, so he took that too. A Monterey County Pinot Noir for \$8.99 and he was ready to move to the top shelf, where they keep the good stuff - or at least the double-digit wines.

For his headliner, he settled on a Seghesio Sonoma County Zinfandel for \$19.49, an old favorite when he can afford it. If he was lucky, and his roommates didn't get hold of it, Oremus could probably stretch the bottle over a couple of days.

When we got to the cash register, I took over. No one would mistake me for 20. The total: \$69.44. We had 56 cents to spare.

Oremus' choices

Purchased at Safeway in Belmont:

2007 Campagnola Veneto Pinot Grigio (\$6.02)

2007 Castle Rock Monterey County Pinot Noir (\$8.99)

2007 Chateau Ste. Michelle Columbia Valley Riesling (\$7.99)

2007 Chateau St. Jean Sonoma County Fumé Blanc (\$9.98)

2004 Columbia Crest Two Vines Washington State Merlot (\$5.99)

2005 Jacob's Creek Reserve South Australia Shiraz (\$10.98)

2007 Seghesio Sonoma County Zinfandel (\$19.49)

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