

The Hanes Wine Review, August 2009 Edition

Working in the wine business on a regular basis, some things escape notice. Even from the God's Eye view of Hanes. It was just fairly recently that Hanes noticed he doesn't sell much New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc anymore. Why is that? It seems there are many likely factors. So, let's factor them in!

Back in the day, circa 2001 or so, New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc was a king of the case stack. It was cheap and tasty and different in flavor profile from domestic or French versions. You could stock 4-5 different brands and they would all sell, people just loved them. There was a great deal of value, both perceived and real. Plus, you also had the "flagship" brand of Cloudy Bay which lent some cachet to the category as being capable of "world class" wine. Then you sold the cheaper stuff as "just as good as Cloudy Bay, but half the price!" There was a period in time when New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc was on top of the heap, with brands like Villa Maria, Selaks, Babich, Brancott, Allan Scott, Nautilus, Kim Crawford, Oyster Bay, Glazebrook, Isabel, Red Hill, Omaka Springs, Grove Mill, Nobilo, Matua Valley, Spy Valley, Lawson's Dry Hills, Mud House, Coopers Creek, Saint Clair, Sileni, Cairnbrae, Drylands, Whitehaven, and Forefathers all selling well.

Has this trend stopped or leveled off? What market share trend changes are happening? Wine purchasing and enjoyment is certainly faddish in many respects, and one day's rock star is next year's dud. Did someone take the starch out of New Zealand's pants? Who are the people who continue to buy New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc and who are not? And why?

A little background information is helpful. New Zealand had 238 wineries in 1996 and 585 in 2008. The country had 6,610 hectares planted to vines in 1996, 29,310 hectares in 2008.

In 2008, of those 29,310 hectares planted, 15,915 were in Marlborough, 4,899 in Hawkes Bay. Of the 29,310 hectares, 13,988 were Sauvignon Blanc, 4,650 Pinot Noir and 3,881 Chardonnay. This makes Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc the heavyweight champ of New Zealand.

Australia, UK and the US remain New Zealand's top three export regions. The stats above give us a sense of the big time growth the wine industry has had in New Zealand over the past dozen years or so. Again, in the beginning, the largest percentage of the wines were cheap, everyday drinkers. Say, \$12 and under. Given the tropical fruit flavors, bold citrus notes, as well as cat pee and jalapeño pepper accents found in Kiwi Sauvignon Blanc it overperformed for what you paid. And everyone liked to say their wine smelled like cat pee.

In contrast, domestic Sauvignon Blanc usually cost more or was softer in profile by comparison. The only stuff cheaper on the whole were Chilean Sauvignon Blanc wines, many of which were herbaceous and nasty. South Africa Sauvignon Blanc hadn't really penetrated the buying public's consciousness yet. French Sauvignon Blanc was usually bought by people who already knew that Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé were Sauvignon Blanc and these were rarely cheap enough to case stack. OK, Maybe some Vin de Pays du Jardin de la France Sauvignons were that cheap. Be that as it may, who remembers exactly why, but the New Zealand shit was the bomb.

Over time, sure, prices started to creep up. Some producers aspired to "Cloudy Bay status." Other more "boutique" wineries finally had their wines exported in tiny numbers to the United States and these were usually close to and beyond \$20 a bottle. As with most emerging wine regions and wines, New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc wanted to be "taken seriously." But, curiously, with exports to the US seemingly increasing, the actual wines can be to be harder to find on store shelves.

If anything, the vast growth in number of wineries and hectares under vine should have helped keep prices low. Demand was there but supply was keeping up pretty well. There were some poorer vintages hurt by bad weather but these were often balanced out by bumper crop years. So, it doesn't seem like supply problems frustrated customers or contributed greatly to rising costs. The product has been consistently in the market. If anything, at this point in time there is oversupply of grapes, 2008 and 2009 both being large crops. In many instances grapes are being left on the vine to rot and contracts between growers and large corporations (e.g., Pernod-Ricard) are being bought out or renegotiated. This would usually suggest a moderation or drop in prices.

New Zealand is in the process of achieving an important landmark, this being annual exports of more than \$1 billion. This for an industry that exported only a little more than \$100 million of wine a decade ago (figures in New Zealand dollars). 2008 exports to the US of Sauvignon Blanc was reported as up 37% over the previous year. However, note that reports have total export volume of bulk wines in the same period quadrupling to nearly 20%. So, it's not like it was a 37% increase in \$20 retail bottles. In any event, the wine keeps on coming, the numbers ain't lying. Just at what price is the question.

Are there any pertinent exogenous influences which are hampering the sales of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc? The weak US dollar surely plays a role in price increases. But not enough that the normal tango of supply and demand would not have moderated this influence. International competition is another factor. When Hanes looks at all the wholesaler lists, he can't find many New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs which would retail for \$9.99 or \$10.99. There's no problem finding Sauvignon Blanc wines from South America and South Africa at these prices (and the quality of both have improved over recent years). Hell, a Californian or two might sneak in as well at that price. One might aver that this is an issue of "decoupling" where all the excess juice gets sold in bulk to make wine-in-a-box or some Trader Joe's special and the rest

stays at a "premium" level of, say, \$15.99 or more a bottle. Hmm, have to go to Trader Joe's and see what they have. Hanes can say that sales in the places where he has worked of late are flat and, anecdotally speaking, no one is asking for any special orders either.

So, it's a mystery. Thumbs up or thumbs down? The export numbers suggest a steady or increasing volume of wines being sent to the United States. But no one is asking for them in Charlotte. Maybe it's a geographical thing where back in New York City the wines are still popular but here in North Carolina they don't have the same healthy market share. In a local Total Wine's online stock list, of the 70 cheapest Sauvignon Blancs being sold, 11 are from New Zealand, or 16%. Maybe this is a solid percentage number and Hanes's personal experiences are out of step with reality. Been known to happen. On the website of Manhattan wine purveyor PJs Wine Warehouse, 42 Sauvignon Blanc-based wines are listed, 11 of which are from New Zealand or 26%. That sounds more like it.

The industry must be doing well on the whole, glut notwithstanding. California-based Foley Family Wines recently purchased the five-winery portfolio of the New Zealand Wine Fund (including Vavasour, Goldwater, Clifford Bay and these wineries' other subsidiary labels). Foley seems to know what they are doing. They make more money than Hanes. They must see a bright future for New Zealand's wine industry. But the "decoupling" argument might be really what's going on. A July 2009 article on Stuff.co.nz offers the following:

"Wine producers are concerned that heavy discounting throughout the industry is affecting the reputation of New Zealand wine, at home and abroad.

Blair Gibbs, the head of Wine Marlborough says that for the first time ever, three bottles of Marlborough sauvignon blanc can be bought in the UK for just ten pounds [NZ\$25]. [This NZ\$25 would be \$17.12 USD or \$5.71 per bottle.]

'The level of bulk exports to the UK is staggering and we are seeing our market position which has taken 30 years to build being eroded in one year.' Gibbs said.

He said comments by several influential commentators, criticising the discounts offered by some wine producers, have damaged the New Zealand brand.

'The consumers are loving [most] of it and there's an argument to say that new consumers are being drawn into the Marlborough category.'

'The flip side is that the value has gone and the brand Marlborough is heading in the wrong direction.'"

Maybe what's happening is similar to much of what has been happening in Australia. New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc is either being sold as a bulk product to grocery store chains or discount retail chains who can then undercut independent retailers or aspiring to the fine wine arena of \$20 and up. That's not leaving a lot in the \$10 to \$15 range with the exception of some big established brands like Babich, Villa Maria, Oyster Bay, Monkey Bay, etc. Which aren't exactly "unique," meant as in delivering the same quality and diversity of flavor they did around eight years ago.

Wither Kiwi Sauvignon Blanc?

New Zealand itself is a country with wine growing regions spanning the latitudes of 36 to 45 degrees and covering the length of 1,000 miles. This includes the most southerly wine growing region in the world, Central Otago. Its temperate, maritime climate has a clear influence on local viticulture. The vines are warmed by strong, clear sunlight during the day and cooled at night by sea breezes. If bumper crops continue and growers can't get their prices or sell their grapes at all, Hanes sees the decoupling continuing, creating an absent "middle class" of wines. This, unless temporary labels pop up to act as a release valve for the excess juice, just exist while the glut lasts and then disappear.

Two factors which will also play a role in the near term as these. First, New Zealand takes great pride in maintaining "sustainable" agriculture. Evolving viticultural and vinicultural practices are supposed to ensure sustainable environmental care of the land and all the shit sprawled over it. The New Zealand wine industry seems to think that there is a growing world demand for wines that have been produced in a "clean and green" fashion. That is yet to be seen. It's a global recession and the jury is out on the production costs of maintaining sustainable viticulture. When times are tough, can the Kiwi wine industry afford to stay green?

Industry sources note that Sustainable Winegrowing New Zealand (SWN Z) has evolved to become a world-leading program with 85% of total production capacity now onboard. The general goal is 100% by 2012. It's hard for Hanes to find the relevant stats on what the cost of this program is to the participants. Being green is laudable, unless it puts you out of business. But, hey, for all Hanes knows being green may cost less than being, err, whatever not green is. Hanes's bet, though, is on more expensive. And organic winegrowing is becoming popular too. We're waiting for biodynamic principles to get a toehold. Organic and biodynamic are cheap, right?

Second, there's the still undecided factor of global warming. These days usually referred to as "climate change." The powers that be continue to debate the existence of global warming and its severity, all this framed in near term and historical horizons. Smarter people than Hanes are figuring this out. Wait, there's someone smarter than Hanes? No way.

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Anyway, temperature change, as well as increased unpredictability vintage to vintage, will have an effect on New Zealand. One could argue that due to New Zealand's unique geographical location and the configuration of its two islands and their vineyards, that global warming would effect New Zealand as much if not more than the majority of the world's winegrowing regions. If temperatures in New Zealand rise by one or two degrees, as some have predicted, wine growing could spread to other areas of the country which are currently too cold or wet to properly grow grapes. In turn, the warmer areas of Gisborne, Hawkes Bay and Marlborough would likely see more ripeness in their grapes. Which could be a good thing or a bad thing. Depending on if the weather change alters the flavor and aroma profiles of the wine as well as acidity, phenolics, etc. They say if it ain't broke don't fix it — if people like New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc as-is, maybe they'll like it less with generally warmer weather. Or the weather can simply become more unpredictable with dramatic temperature swings, unexpected frosts or heatwaves. Which could turn out to be the bogus pipeline for the wine industry.

Put climate change together with the commitment to sustainable agriculture and who knows what could be needed to keep producing Sauvignon Blanc as recognizably from New Zealand. Will adequate water be available for irrigation? Will some vineyards become unsuitable while new, perhaps higher elevation, areas become suitable? How to sustainably swap one vineyard for the other? And retain a coherent industry reputation for certain wines made in certain styles?

These industry problems discussed above are noted by Jim Deleat, Managing Director of Oyster Bay in the August/September 2009 issue of *New Zealand WineGrower*:

"For our international retailer partners, importantly, we represented a new and unique offering in a growth category balanced by a credible quality/ supply and value proposition resulting in sustained increase market share and profit generation for them. This is a most important dynamic of successful international business.

As a result of our own making, the paradigm has now shifted irrevocably with reference to the supply/demand imbalance and a perceived or real diminishment in product excellence resulting in considerable negative international press.

This also, sadly, has the yet to be felt negative impact of completely reshaping the medium to longer term global demand curve/image and value proposition of New Zealand wine and something that will affect all industry participants by way of diminishing financial returns.

The real and lasting consequence of this is that we are in danger of losing our ability to manage the sustainable quality of our future financial earnings and the benefit of reaping capital appreciation of our industry investments.

This is evidenced by the fact that in less than two years a bulk wine commodity market has established that will continue to be sustained by the growing surplus supply of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc grapes and further, grapes are now being left unharvested on the vine."

He goes on to say:

"As a result of our own circumstances we have given powerful retailers the opportunity to establish their own proprietary high volume Buyers Own Brands and secondary labels which invariably retail at considerably below required industry price points.

No new large untapped markets have being identified and existing markets do not have the potential to consume such volumes at required retail price points.

The outcome can now only be that the New Zealand wine industry is entering a period of reduced financial returns.

The obvious conclusion can only be that as a result of inadequate knowledge of the global market, poor brand, distribution planning and investment criteria driven largely by opportunistic investors over recent years has resulted in an enormous surplus of unwanted Marlborough vineyard plantings that are yet to come into full production."

Dang. That's like saying we're killing ourselves by making cheap generic (and generically branded) plonk or by pricing ourselves out of the competitive premium market.

In the same article Fabian Partigiani of Pernod Ricard NZ echoes these sentiments:

"More concerning is the dramatic growth of bulk exports which have cannibalised the growth of branded wine and put immense pressure on the NZ price premium which supports the industry."

It's hard to read between the lines and figure out just what the "sweet spot" for the industry is supposed to be. No doubt, industry leaders don't think it's a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc being sold for US \$5.71 in England. But do they desire a broad range of consumer choice in the \$10 to \$15 range here in the States? There's a big concentration of market share among a few brands \$15 and under. Anything more individually crafted creeps up into the \$20's. Hanes is saying, if these leaders of New Zealand's wine industry want to win back customers and market share, brands (and new brands) have to be built in the \$10 to \$15 range. That's where people are buying. And where the industry can avoid the margin squeezing of gluts and cheap chain brands eroding grower and winery profits. That said, creating "world class" Sauvignon Blanc doesn't mean it has to cost \$20 and up. But if it does, who will be buying?

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This month's big winners... Californian wines have become a big part of what Hanes gets to taste these days, just the way it goes. That's what "they" want, that's what Hanes has to vet. This month the 2007 Edge Wines Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa made Hanes forget he's not drinking Muscadet, bringing joy into his life, albeit for like \$26 a bottle. Not that far behind is the 2006 Oberon Napa Cab, very "correct" and not badly priced at \$21. Moving on to Washington State, Sleight of Hand Cellars is a new producer to Hanes, and their 2006 red "The Spellbinder" is a very tasty Cabernet based blend. At around \$24 it might be the winery's least expensive offering which means not many tasting notes on Sleight of Hand Cellars shall be in the offing. Oregon Pinot Gris can often be tasty in a straightforward, uncomplicated manner. The 2007 Lange Pinot Gris from Willamette Valley is one example, nothing unique but easy to drink and the price is fine at about \$18. One French red slurped this month, thank goodness it was the 2007 Grand Veneur Côtes-du-Rhône Villages "Les Champavins," a tasty treat. \$21 might be pushing it though. Been awhile since high quality Greek wine passed the Hanes lips, but the 2007 Hatzidakis wine made from the Assyrtiko grape on the island of Santorini was good stuff and worth the Jackson it costs. Rarely does Hanes pony up the cash for Brunello but there was good word of mouth on Pieri's 2007 Rosso di Montepulciano so fook it, let's drink Sangiovese clones for once. Retails for about \$27, succulent and well-integrated, were it \$18 you could probably sell it by the boatloads. New, new, too is Cantina Produttori Colterenzio. Got sent their "Riserva St. Daniel" Pinot Nero instead of the cheaper normal bottling so sucked it up and sucked it down. Alto Adige makes good Pinot. Just didn't mean to buy a \$35 bottle of it.

The best \$15 and under picks... With great shame, Hanes admits he had never before tried a wine from Savoie producer Frédéric Giachino before. Don't be angry or sad. He did taste their 2006 Jacquère (that's the grape) called "Abymes Tradition" and for \$13 it had all the angles and snap one might want. A fairly obscure winery, Starry Night has a Lodi Zinfandel named "Starfire" that is not overblown and mixes in more elements for the \$15 price than many. Worth a shot if you can find it. If you have to drink Chardonnay, and are on a budget, the 2007 Rutherford Ranch version from Napa is a good bet at around \$15. Think it's widely distributed too. Having tasted their red blend before, now was the chance to taste Clif Bar's white "The Climber" and this Sauvignon Blanc based blend delivered for the \$15 price tag. Vallevò is also new to Hanes, their 2007 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo for \$9 is pretty gosh darned good and beat the immediate competition in recent personal taste-off. You go girl. In another "they'll send you whatever they have situation," asked for Bodegas Valdesil's Godello called "Monte Novo" but got sent the 2007 "Val de Sil" bottling instead. Luckily for Hanes, both bottlings of Godello seem to be decent and this one got chugged as easy as the \$15 price tag.

And the disappointments... Unlike with Sleight of Hand Cellars, a trio of Washington State wines disappointed poor Hanes. First, Novelty Hill's 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon which was just pedestrian, a wine per se. Second, Soos Creek's Artist Series red blend, a producer which is capable of doing much better work. Third, a Merlot named "The Velvet Devil" from Charles Smith Wines. Charles Smith Wines has an excellent marketing strategy. They should be applauded for that. Washington State wines on the whole have not been kind to Hanes of late. In another ongoing "taste challenge" Masi's 2007 Valpolicella "Bonacosta" was asked to leave the show. There's better out there, and for less than \$19. I guess it had been awhile since trying Castaño's Monastrell from Yecla, Spain. Hanes seemed to remember it as decent cheap Spanish plonk. However, the 2007 version, even for \$9, isn't much to write home about. So, don't write home. Not used to paying \$19 for white wines from Rueda, Spain but had Cachazo's 2007 "El Perro Verde" made 100% from the Verdejo grape. Not bad but no reason to pay the extra \$5-6 more than cheaper alternatives. It's almost hard to come by bad cheap Malbec these days but the 2007 offering from Mendoza's Arido is as blah as blah gets.

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Unlike *those other* professional reviews, Hanes only will share what he likes if it is *currently available* in stores for immediate purchase. If these wines are not to be found in some of your local stores, they suck and that's not Hanes's fault.

If you are interested in reading tasting notes by Hanes on the *older (or non-imported) wines* he has recently consumed, these notes are gathered here: <http://www.haneswinereview.com/reviews/oldervintages2009.html>

If you are interested in reading tasting notes by Hanes on *beer* he has recently consumed, these notes are gathered here: <http://www.haneswinereview.com/reviews/beer.html>

Here's the order in which Hanes humbly provides the wine review information:

- Winery/Producer Name
- Region of Origin, Appellation, Brand Name/Wine Style, Single Vineyard (if any applicable)
- Grape Type
- Vintage Year, Price Hanes Paid (if available), Alcohol Percentage (if available)
- Tasting Notes, Hanes's Numeric Score (on the traditional, yet inane, 100 point scale [which for Hanes truly begins at around 80 points and more or less ends around 94 points])

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And here's Hanes's wine reviews for August!

CALIFORNIA RED

Edge Wines

Napa Valley

Cabernet Sauvignon

2007, \$25.99, 14.4%

Although clear, somewhat dusky garnet to purple core, transparency gains nearer to the crimson red rims, has all the visual markings of a red wine. The nose possesses abundant cedar, wildflower, tobacco leaf and pine needle notes, a welcome dancing partner for the red currant, cherry, blackberry fruit scents, slight note of toasted coconut topped vanilla ice cream, however, the oak is subdued and does not detract from the overall focused demeanor. Medium-bodied, not excess weight, the acidity first apparent albeit the tannin present with each next sip. Shows you don't need thickness to possess sweetness in the blackberry, red cherry, red currant fruit, freshly sour snap at the finish too. Menthol, pine, teas leaf and sandalwood provide nuance, a bit too youthful yet for real leather or cedar notes. Orange and lemon peel element brings out more florality. The caramel, butterscotch bits hold off to the very end and, more than anything, pretty up the finish. Quite relaxed about itself and what it brings to the table. 88% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Merlot. [Synthetic Cork: Supremecork] 89

Arcadian

Santa Ynez Valley. Westerly Vineyard

Syrah

2004, \$26.99, 15.2%

Dark purple core with red-ruby inflections, not so deep that you cannot notice the overall clarity, the rims full-on ruby and well-saturated. Muscular, but loose, nose of cocoa crisp, juicy lemon to white grapefruit citrus, metallic mineral dust and a healthy portion of cherry, blackberry fruit, you get molasses glaze as well, never heavy however it does fill up your nostrils completely. Full-bodied while shedding excess weight as it progresses, ultra-smooth and filling yet, to its credit manages to achieve softness while also not coming across as lacking in tannic structure. If anything, youthfully plump. Layers of blackberry, blueberry, black cherry fruit with the same richness in the white grapefruit to lemon citrus, no bite or angles. The oak already knit in, some toast or molasses, honey but entirely in keeping with the whole. Strong floral accents but not providing much lift at the moment. Clay, damp brown soil shades more than abiding earthiness. No real gaminess but offers a suggestion of eucalyptus or pine. Not complex yet each sip is as pleasing as the last. 89

Turley

Napa Valley, Atlas Peak, Mead Ranch

Zinfandel

2007, \$35.00, 16.2%

Although a dusky opaque purple at the core, a red patina shows there which extends to the crimson rims, these in turn lightened by flecks of red ruby. Floral notes and orange spice in the nose not quite able to break up the monolithic plum, cherry, blackberry fruit block in the nose, the vanilla fudge and caramel acts as glue, adhering the fruit to your nostril walls, the eucalyptus gets blown away with ease, doesn't lift as much as hover and some alcoholic fumes do show through. It's really medium-bodied but its innate density creates an initial appearance of

greater weight and downward pressure on the palate. White grapefruit to orange citrus sour enough to brighten the mouth entry and create an impression of minerality. Barrel chested fullness to the raspberry, cherry, plum fruit, not a lot of sugar yet fruit always seems at the forefront. Moves towards pine led mountain bramble notes, just doesn't have the airiness to create flow. Not tannic in an arch way but dries out some before you'd like towards the end. The citrus interplay with the whole the most interesting part. 88

Starry Night Winery

Central Valley, Lodi, Starfire

Zinfandel

2006, \$14.99, 14.2%

Strong brick red influence in the light purple core, close to full transparency, bright red rims with more orange than ruby, glossy surface. Sweet berry filled nose, strawberry, blueberry, raspberry along with a touch of watermelon and apple, chocolate powder, eucalyptus and mountain earth and grasses, ends with a growing vanilla custard richness. Medium-bodied, if that, the dustiness of the tannins help to soak about the candied sweetness of the red cherry, strawberry, raspberry, watermelon fruit, so, even while sweet, it's not heavy or overly concentrated. Nice touch of sourness in the orange, lemon citrus. More pine and garden herbs here than oak derived toast or chocolate flavors. The texture is very smooth and fluid, glides through almost too fast to wrap your tongue around the sweet fruit. Again, shows an "outdoorsy" character even if not really earthy or grassy. Given its relative light weight, manages the alcohol level nicely. 88

Oberon

Napa Valley

Cabernet Sauvignon

2006, \$20.99, 13.7%

Deep purple bruise of a color, verging on black, very shiny and unblemished, the rims a touch duller brick red than true ruby or scarlet. Compact nose of currant, black cherry fruit, cedar, tea leaves and sandalwood, not a trace of greenness nor underripeness, the toffee, coffee hard candy notes barely make the oak stand out, overall it ends punctually but not prematurely. Medium-bodied, not a lot of flash but, as in the nose, not demure either. More like it wants to prove there's adequate ripeness in the blackberry, cherry, currant fruit and then bring more cedar, leather, fresh tobacco or tea leaves to the fore. The tannin is lively, more spicy than drying, acts with a gentle hand, this aided by palate activating acidity. Mint, a suggestion of eucalyptus pairs with the lowgrade oak toast and caramel. Nice white citrus embellishments as well. Moderate chewiness through the finish extends the whole well. Imagine it would be very food friendly as well, Hanes drinks the hootch on its own. 96.9% Cabernet Sauvignon, 0.5% Cabernet Franc, 0.3% Petit Verdot, 0.2% Zinfandel, 0.2% Syrah, 1.9% other unspecified grapes. [Synthetic Cork] 88

Tulocay

Napa Valley, Haynes Vineyard

Pinot Noir

2006, \$34.99, 13.5%

Purple but with a red bricking from the core through to the rims, the latter a slightly dull crimson. Strong oak cream, butterscotch and caramel in the nose, ginger spice, roasted cherry and blackberry scents, grassy but

not in a biting herbaceous manner, once you get past the oak it displays an "outdoorsy" ruggedness. In the mouth it's medium-bodied, the acidity up and active from the start to keep it chewy and dusty in spite of its lighter heft. The oak here more like wood smoke, butterscotch hard candy and a little touch of dill. Tart cherry, strawberry, raspberry fruit, does nicely sweeten past the mid-palate. Less ginger and cinnamon, more mesquite smoke. Lemon and orange citrus supports the tang in the fruit. Plenty of scrubbing sensations on the tongue at the end. Kind of a low impact workout. 87

OneHope
Regional Blend, California
Merlot

2007, \$12.99, 13.5%

Straightforward red ruby to purple core, unblemished, more of a red magenta at the rims, halfway between opacity and transparency, depends how close you want to look at it. Dense plum, black cherry fruit the major component of the nose, consistent gingerbread to clove spice there, touch of orange zest, not much else to note but you never really expected more in any event. Medium-bodied, achieves a measure of fullness without giving up smoothness and, as far as dumbed down fruit bombs go, it's not hard to pound. As in the nose the spiciness helps to break up the homogeneity of the plum, cherry, blackberry fruit. Not too sweet and the oak stays within generally accepted limits. Keeps its weight to the end, finishes competently enough. As with so many others, nothing really wrong with it, just couldn't point it out in a police lineup. [Composite Cork] 86

Clautiere Vineyard
San Luis Obispo County, Paso Robles, 2 Cockey Sisters Lot 9

Blend
NV, \$14.99, 16.0%

More of a scarlet ruby throughout, has a slightly burnt edge to it bringing out tinges of orange and red brick, the liquid is unblemished and possessed of uncommon transparency for its sort of wine. The alcohol comes through loud and clear in the nose, then jammy raspberry, red cherry, plum fruit with more herbaceous grass, lavender, scrub brush, because the oak scents are creamy and soft they only peek through at the end, after the alcoholic fumes have evaporated. Full-bodied, super-sweet and sugary, here the alcohol just gets you drunk so it's a free path for the butterscotch, popcorn, caramel, baking spices to run amok. Powdered sugar generally poured over the raspberry, blackberry, cherry fruit, really sweet enough that the fruit flavors start to merge into an undifferentiated mass. If the booziness doesn't faze you, it's actually smoothly textured and close to silky. Nothing else than fruit and oak so stopping typing here. Unspecified percentages of Cunoise, Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre. 84

CALIFORNIA WHITE

Grey Stack Cellars
Bennett Valley, Dry Stack Vineyard, Rosemarie's Block
Sauvignon Blanc

2008, \$28.99, 13.8%

Very light green to white straw in color, completely transparent a little sparkle across the surface. Slowly penetrating nose, takes great pains to remain friendly and open, sweet lemon, lime with a touch of grapefruit, not

much zest, blends in a pungent floral dimension alongside ripe apricot, peach, nectarine fruit scents, while soft in texture does linger very well. Full-bodied, very similar feel to the nose but here even creamier and softer. The acidity has no cut but can sort of keep things dryish. Pink grapefruit, tangerine and lime citrus possesses more zip here but by stretch sour or tart. Freshly picked spring to the step of the apricot, peach, nectarine, pineapple fruit, falls short of any tropicality. Tends to cling to the tongue more than lift, a trace of tacky residue left on the palate at the end. Very enjoyable as wine, not quite sold on as Sauvignon Blanc. (Glass Stopper) 89

Rutherford Ranch
Napa Valley

Chardonnay
2007, \$14.99, 13.5%

Spotless golden color of above average depth, good shine as well, its overall darkness helps bolster the rims. The nose has weight while also moving around with a light foot, pretty florality with sweetish lime, tangerine citrus accents, there's a vanilla ice cream, butterscotch swirl thing going on, however, not super-oaky, the apricot, pear, yellow apple scents fresh and lively, not sugary. In the mouth it's sweeter with boosted butterscotch, toffee notes as well as a generalized powdery sugar aspect, but gotta say again, it holds back on the oak more than most of its immediate competition. The lime, orange citrus zesty and not sour, the pineapple, nectarine, apricot, apple fruit flavorful while cleaning up credibly by the finish. The florality adds sweetness and overall prettiness. Whether natural or not, even presents a little acidic zip. Could easily be a "split the difference" choice for a group who has oak lovers and oak haters among it. (Synthetic Cork) 88

OneHope
Regional Blend, California
Sauvignon Blanc

2007, \$12.99, 13.5%

Semi-flat yellow straw coloration, close to full transparency, some dilution at the rims but not much to drop off from, nothing really out of place visually. Very sweet nose, a carton of pink grapefruit juice must be in there, licorice, violets, the swift lift might have you not fully registering the apricot, pear, apple fruit scents, very pretty even given the mild sugariness. Medium-bodied, close to a carbon copy in the mouth where pink grapefruit, orange and lime citrus dominates the entry. Slightly higher tropical feel to the apricot, pineapple, nectarine, peach fruit. But here you mix in the presence of acidity which likely adds to the tang and tempers the sweetness. Conversely, the dryness reminds you of the consistency of powdered sugar. Mint, licorice, flowers, no herbal notes at all although every once in awhile you might get some chili pepper. No problem with this juice. [Composite Cork] 88

Clif Bar Family Winery
Regional Blend, California, The Climber
Blend

2007, \$14.99, 13.5%

Basic golden straw color of adequate depth, medium grade layering which draws the surface plane into the whole below, usual diminishment at the rims. Highly respectable cut to the nose, tart tropical scents of pineapple, papaya, nectarine, passion fruit with an able footman in the white grapefruit, lemon zest, piquant with jalapeño and mineral smoke touches, has a muscular lift to it which always reminds you it's there swirling about your

nostrils. Medium-bodied, sparkly personality yet there's no problem with it anchoring itself in the palate, not flighty at all. The acidity nips at your tongue, comes to heel when the sweet and sour apricot, nectarine, pineapple, papaya fruit turns up the lights. Floral, but not aggressively so, more of the white grapefruit, orange, lemon citrus creating the inner mouth perfume. Mint and some anise seed. Very pretty, enough so that you can ignore how dry and tacky your mouth feels at the end. Which is a good thing. 81% Sauvignon Blanc, 12% Pinot Blanc, 4% Chenin Blanc, 3% Muscat. (Screwcap: Stelvin+) 88

WASHINGTON RED

Sleight of Hand Cellars
Columbia Valley, The Spellbinder
Blend
2006, \$23.99, 13.9%

Palpable brick red influence through the purple core, clear but has a dusk time sort of feel, like the lights slowly dimming, the rims a pretty burnt red crimson and without oversaturation. Sweet, almost powdered sugar, character to the nose, adds to the sparkle of the raspberry, strawberry, blackberry, red cherry fruit as well as lemon juice and tobacco leaf, there's some grill smoke but not a lot of oakiness, more fresh garden herb and floral scrub notes. Medium-bodied, while it has a slight pepperiness to the tannins, the grit just adds to the grip through the attack and it's real smooth thereafter. A bit more leather or game edge to the smokiness here, as well as noticeable oak toast (albeit rightsized). Similar bright sugariness in the raspberry, cherry, strawberry, even watermelon or apple at times, fruit, like listening to 60's bubblegum pop music. Lemon to lime citrus a curious presence. The tea leaf or herbs pop in and out. Sheds some weight at the end but the base flavors last well and it does impress for its smoothness and fluidity. 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Cabernet Franc, 10% Malbec, 10% Sangiovese. (Screwcap) 89

Novelty Hill
Columbia Valley
Cabernet Sauvignon
2006, \$26.99, 14.4%

Moderately dense purple core, depending on the angle it's opaque or you can just see through, the garnet red to scarlet rims reach far into the core, well-hued without crazy saturated glow. The nose has a stable solidity to it, butterscotch, fresh butter, mint and caramel provide an oak derived foundation, however, it does not spread far as the wiry quality of the black currant, cherry, blackberry scents stiffens the nostril presence, the alcohol is more obvious than desired, a vague forest breeze nature but no that complex. Medium to full-bodied, it is heavysset and unmoving enough to appear heavier at times. The tannins add a mild grit but, really, it wants to show how smooth it is so structure is something it wants waiting in the wings if needed. Nothing falls out of place, at once a good and a bad thing. The vanilla cream, toffee, butterscotch present most through the attack then melds into the standard array of currant, cherry, blackberry fruit. Weighed out portions of cedar, flowers, citrus and tea leaves remind you that secondary flavors are to be expected. Tastes fine, it's just a kinda exercise in winemaking by the numbers. So, you can't find fault but it leaves you forgetting it was there. 89% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Merlot, 2% Cabernet Franc. 87

Soos Creek Wine Cellars
Columbia Valley, Artist Series #6 Red Wine
Blend

2006, \$30.99, 14.1%

Completely opaque black purple, dusky brick red to crimson hued rims, on the dull side, just too dense to hold your vision. Lots of oak toast and vanillin cream in the nose, mint and floral musk, sweetly sugared raspberry, red cherry and even strawberry scents, not that much complexity and tends to clog up in your nostrils, sticks close to the its initial script. Medium-bodied, sort of smooth but grinds into the tongue enough that it doesn't really flow too well. The toast is like wet wood, mint and herbs rather than softer toffee. Bell pepper and cut grass abound, never quite develops a true earthiness. The tannin a combination of natural and wood, dries out the currant, cherry, blackberry fruit before the finish. Uneven ending can't redeem. Lacks polish and a certain grace of touch. 52% Cabernet Sauvignon, 48% Cabernet Franc. 85

Smith Wines, Charles
Columbia Valley, The Velvet Devil
Merlot

2007, \$13.99, 13.5%

Strong red influence in the purple core, clear enough that the scarlet, bright brick red colors predominate far from the rims, were it not for the general brightness it might look as if an older wine. Sugary cherry, red currant, raspberry fruit saturates the nose, sweet wood smoke and toffee fill up most of the rest, there's a small trace of grass and earth clumps but nothing major. Medium to full-bodied, more of the former as it starts out broad and juicy and trails off steadily from there. ginger and cinnamon spice, honey, caramel and that sweet smokiness let you know it's bringing the wood, as sweet as the cherry, blackberry, raspberry fruit is, it's so confectionary that it may be a primary reasons things dissolve so quickly. Everything is so many allusions or suggestions there's no sense in recording them. Nothing happening in the acidity or tannin departments. Kind of comes across as semi-concentrated sugar water. [44% Milbrandt Vineyards, 36% Alder Ridge Vineyard, 20% various Yakima Valley vineyards] (Screwcap) 85

OREGON WHITE

Lange
Willamette Valley
Pinot Gris

2007, \$17.99, 12.4%

Clear, resplendent green gold color, very light but the shininess overcomes the complete transparency to make its presence in the glass known. Firm pear, yellow apple, apricot scents combine in the nose with lemon and lime zest to keep it very active, gentle floral aspect as well, shows just a slight touch of stoniness. Medium-bodied, the acidity keeps it smooth and fluid without any drying sensation nor undue tackiness on the tongue. There's a slight reticence in the apricot, peach, pear fruit but it cruises at a steady level from start to finish. You get more orange citrus here than lime, the lemon about the same. The floral dimension seems sweet, like it's powdered candy or something. Glimmer of honey at the end, no herbal notes at all. It's very solid, if undistinguished, and easy to plow through a bottle lickety split. (Screwcap: Stelvin+) 88

FRANCE RED

Grand Veneur, Domaine
Rhône, Côtes-du-Rhône Villages, Les Champavins
Blend
2007, \$20.99, 15.0%
Deep ruby-purple core, very clean and spotless, bright ruby rims with a little pinkish cast. Taut sweetness in the raspberry, red cherry, strawberry fruit scents, pretty citrus lift emphasizing orange and lemon spritz, rose petals, blends in some wild herbs and scrub notes, thin patina of cocoa powder too. Light to medium-bodied, has a gossamer touch and stays openly knit without ever appearing short. Very floral here with stronger milk chocolate nuances. The tannin is pretty strong for its slight frame but doesn't throw things off. This in large part to the sweetness of the strawberry, raspberry, blueberry, cherry flavors. Overall, lots of inner mouth perfume and lift, pushes against the mouth roof. Admirable cleanliness and balance, not out to impress and better for it. 70% Grenache, 20% Syrah, 10% Mourvèdre. 89

FRANCE WHITE

Giachino, Frédéric
Savoie, Abymes Tradition
Jacquère
2006, \$12.99, 11.0%
Simple yellow gold color, block like solidity, clear with a slight visual distortion, mild loss around the rims, pleasant enough. Honeyed aspect to the nose does not prevent the mineral dust and dry lemon to lime zest from bursting forth, good tight focus, floral notes outlast the apricot, pear, apple scents, admirable lift given its tautness. Medium-bodied, sour mouth entry evocative of chili peppers, warm metallic flakes and stone dust. Which is yummy, of course. Good mix of white grapefruit and lemon with sweeter lime citrus. Lilacs and violets lend a softer touch without changing the overall dryness. As one would expect, the acidity no slouch and charges forward like a muscular bull. Pit/skin aspect to the apricot, peach, apple, pear fruit, by no stretch underfruited, simply wiry and compact. Ends with a certain borderline fizzy mouth feel which heightens the overall cleansing character. Given the above, you can chug it pretty darn fast. (Synthetic Cork: Nomacorc) 89

Roustan, Château
Rhône, Costières de Nîmes
Blend
2008, \$10.99, 13.0%
Pale gold color, has a good glimmer to it, flattens out some under the surface, rims diminish to full transparency. Fresh pear, apple, peach driven nose without much crisp snap, just settles in like the game is about to start on TV, cinnamon spice and the nuttiness on the sweeter side, the orange blossom notes help it rise up just a little bit more. Full-bodied in a round manner, keeps pushing outwards leaving an unoccupied center rather than seems hollow per se. Admirable fullness in the apricot, peach, pear fruit, comes with a slight honey glazed character. Same dose of cinnamon, nutmeg spice, very much in keeping with this whole. The acidity clocks in above average, in turn brings out more almond and brazil nut notes. Ends on a bright note, relieves a good deal of its weight. 60% Roussanne, 30% Grenache Blanc, 10% Viognier. (Screwcap) 88

ITALY RED

Vallevò
Abruzzi, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo
Montepulciano
2007, \$8.99, 13.0%
The purple core has sufficient depth for opacity, when viewed at an angle there's more reddish tint and the clarity more apparent, the rims take on more of a pinkish magenta glow. The nose comes up with an earthy stoniness which grounds the dryish plum, black cherry scents, ripe without the sweetness, nice pressed flowers element, a dusting of cocoa powder, even a touch of lemon spritz, not showy but impressive nonetheless. Medium-bodied, fills up the mouth quite well without feeling tiring, has more than enough tannin to keep a steady gait and good posture. The cherry, blackberry, black raspberry fruit savory and firm. Same softening effect from the flowers and orange, lemon citrus, avoids simplicity while offering approachability. Stoniness holds off to back half, some tea or brown tobacco leaf notes too. Hard to imagine not liking it. Although some jerk probably won't. 89

Pieri, Azienda Agricola Agostina
Tuscany, Rosso di Montepulciano
Sangiovese
2007, \$26.99, 13.5%
Very clear and transparent, mostly red-ruby to garnet in color, some violet accrual at differing angles, the rims wash out some but still retain that garnet hue. The nose has a pleasing compactness to it in spite of the candied nature in the raspberry, red cherry scents, tightens up via pine, garden herb and wet tobacco leaf elements, some mixed white citrus in there and sauna smoke, not horribly complex but impresses with its sinewy feel. Medium-bodied, you sense the acidity and tannin percolating below the surface which helps to take the edge of the sweetness in the raspberry, strawberry, red cherry fruit. Here you get a soft caramel candy touch albeit nothing screams oakiness. Flowers, lemon peel, pine needle, basil and mint at times all drift in and out. Keeps both a steady weight and pacing, no real highs nor lows. It's a little too fruit dependent to represent old school Sangiovese but there's no problem tossing in back in gulps. 89

Colterenzio, Cantina Produttori
Alto Adige/Südtirol, Pinot Nero Riserva St. Daniel
Pinot Noir
2005, \$34.99, 13.5%
Clear burnt red to dried blood red color, almost medicinal in appearance, major difference from core to rims is the orange rust hues at the outermost reaches. Big, billowy presence in the nose, like a warm rain cloud before release, spongy cherry, raspberry fruit scents leaning towards hard candy nature, fat floral musk, dense cinnamon and clove rather than powdery, fresh lemon peel, anise, stays broad and doesn't shrink an inch throughout. Full-bodied, it might come off at first as soft simply because it occupies so much space there's none left to stand up at attention. Its sheer massiveness structures it, acidity is light and the tannin adequate at best. Juicy raspberry, red cherry, strawberry fruit gets a sour pucker from cranberry note and grapefruit to lemon citrus. Seems served on a bed of fresh garden herbs, wildflowers and forest brush. Curiously, no real mineral nor stone presence. There's a woodiness to it like used oak rather than more familiar oak flavors. Interesting,

viscerally pleasurable, however, seems like a drink it now kind of wine without any discernible aging upside. 89

Gioiosa, La
Abruzzi, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, La Villa
Montepulciano
2005, \$11.99, 12.0%

The core based in purple but there's a strong red/brown influence, this very apparent around the rims where it's basically a red to orange brick hue, visibly aging. Heavy nose, the plum to prune and candied cherry fruit plops in there, orange juice and floral musk too, light muster of herbs or twigs but nothing major. Full-bodied, quite on the sweet side and leans heavily on the same plum/prune, blackberry, black cherry fruit for effect. The orange to grapefruit citrus sweet and tangy as well, somewhat low acidity and tannin doesn't get in the way of powdered sugar accruing. More twig and leaf herbal notes but nothing close to threatening the fruit. It manages to dry out a little through the finish, however, in the final analysis it's a basic fruity Montepulciano that's friendly but not a standout from the pack. (Screwcap) 87

Masi, Agricola
Veneto, Valpolicella Classico, Bonacosta
Blend
2007, \$18.99, 12.0%

Clear with a good deal of transparency given the satisfactory depth of the purple core as well as rims, the latter more straight-up red than ruby and well-hued. Ripe cherry, plum, blackberry scents sweet yet avoid unnecessary prune or raisin notes, twigs, pine and fresh straw give it a drier profile, takes time but the white grapefruit and orange citrus does get it going, overall not an active participant in the table patter. Medium-bodied, possesses a round mouth feel albeit not that soft as there's a respectable degree of tannin left to amble about. The dryness does shorten the presence of the cherry, raspberry, red currant fruit, however, this may just as well be a product of less than optimal ripeness or overcropping. Same grapefruit to orange edge enlivens the show. And same twiggy, barky, non-grassy herbaceousness. Dull finish, simply runs out of things to say. Serviceable. 70% Corvina, 25% Rondinella, 5% Molinara. (Synthetic Cork: Supremecork) 86

ITALY WHITE

Terredora di Paolo
Campania, Irpinia
Falanghina
2007, \$17.99, 13.0%

Rich golden honey color, the surface brilliance does not diminish the layered density below, does curiously bleach out around the rims. Spicy nose, if somewhat maderized in an intentional manner, dried apples and peaches, more cinnamon and nutmeg than lemon zest, wet floral dew, sweet tea, leaves with an impression of heaviness and more sweetness than complexity. Full-bodied, deceptive here in that the acidity has the muscle to shape things up, hence you get more flow than in the nose, also more dryness. Still has that dried fruit nature in the apple, pear, peach fruit but more snap as well. In turn the lemon citrus has more pep and the floral dimension presents more rise. Touch of bitter raw nuttiness. Finishes with a grainy, almost dusty feel. Much, much better when just lightly chilled than fully chilled. (Synthetic Cork: Nomacorc) 88

Mosolo Gleni, Azienda Agricola
Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Delle Venezie, Monte Maria
Pinot Grigio
2008, \$8.99, 12.0%

Light brownish cast to the golden straw hue, average surface shine and some diminishing around the rims. Apple, pear scents combine with lemon zest in the nose to give it good erectness, floral with a little minerality as well, noting unusual here, pleasing in its relative anonymity. Light-bodied, as firm and taut as crisp, sits solidly in the mouth. Mineral water, stone dust in equal portion to the flowers and orange, lemon peel. The acidity drying, without a razor's edge, more a blunt blow. More than adequate pear, apple, peach fruit but fruit per se not foremost on the mind. Begins to take on a grainy texture as it warms, however, avoids any herbaceous notes. Offers solid delivery at its price and maybe a tick more. (Synthetic Cork) 87

Nistri
Tuscany, Maremma
Vermentino
2007, \$13.99, 12.5%

Very rich golden hue, close to light amber at times, remains dens towards the rims, there's some surface shine but this can easily be missed due to the density of the colors below. The nose reveals a doughy, semi-oxidized quality, dry in spite of the spicy pineapple, nectarine, apricot fruit scents, quiet notes of pine and flowers at best, presents more of a steam from heated stones kind of thing, not quite smokiness. In the mouth it's medium-bodied with that same oxidized feel, it's not that the acidity lacks strength. Nor that the white grapefruit and lemon citrus doesn't provide puckering tang. Can't even fault the pineapple, papaya, nectarine, pear fruit. It's more that, taken as a whole, it's hard to get it to move, prefers to stay as inert as possible. The doughy, powdery character dominates the finish, preventing much lift. Not bad by any stretch, simply leaving you a bit wanting. 86

GREECE WHITE

Hatzidakis
Santorini
Assyrtiko
2007, \$19.99, 13.5%

The dull surface masks some of the richness of the dark yellow gold to amber hues, layers nicely below, minimal dropoff towards the rims. There's a saline sea breeze quality to the nose, draws out more straightforward minerally smokiness, lots of muscular lift as opposed to airy perfume, mint leaf touch sweetens the pineapple, nectarine, peach scents, minor swipe of mixed white citrus, stays rugged throughout. Medium-bodied and super-firm with dense acidity, more a blunt instrument than sharp knife. This helps things stay on the dry side in spite of the ripe tropicality of that pineapple, nectarine, guava, star fruit flavors, more concentration of flavor than outright sweetness. Here it's more like a cilantro edge than mint, the salinity more knit into regular mineral and stone notes. Additional clarity in the white grapefruit citrus as well. Never quite "unwinds" in the mouth, however, it does fill it. Latent energy, a snake at repose rather than in strike mode. 90% Assyrtiko, 5% Aidani, 5% Athiri. 89

SPAIN RED

Piqueras, Bodegas

Almansa, Valcanto

Monastrell

2006, \$11.99, 14.0%

Dense black core, not much real color, burnt brick red rims with good clarity there, above average reflectivity. Soft, juicy, unassuming nose of herbs, lemon zest and blackberry, raspberry scents, flowers met in large part but fresh grass notes, has surprising lift and openness for its type. Medium-bodied, presents just the right amount of tannin and acidity to frame the raspberry, blackberry, blueberry, cherry fruit without interrupting the juiciness. Sweet lemon and white grapefruit citrus, floral and sugary in a powdery, not to sweet fashion. At times you might get a touch of prune but nothing major. Not especially complex but it never annoys you and avoids bitterness and unfortunate herbal bite. Fits right into the middle of the pack, plus. (Synthetic Cork: Nomacorc) 87

Artadi

Rioja, Orobio

Tempranillo

2006, \$16.99, 13.0%

While dark, the purple core offers enough ruby to knit into the wide ruby to red magenta rims, simple, pretty red wine in the glass. Ripe cherry, blackberry, black raspberry fruit scents and a lavender like florality swirl through the nose, some quieter cedar and sweet tea leaf notes, not particularly complex but lifts nicely and nothing out of place or annoying. Medium-bodied, as in the nose smooth and innocuous, a perfectly mannered guest who smiles more than shares in table talk. Plum, cherry, blackberry fruit strides forward slowly with minimal opposition from any tannin or acid. Orange zest, pressed flowers and sandalwood, all demure as well. Very difficult to assess since it really takes so few expressive chances that you can't really praise nor fault it. 87

Pablo, Viñedos y Bodegas

Cariñena, Menguante Old Vines

Garnacha

2007, \$11.99, 13.5%

Deep ruby tinged purple core, very good clarity which is evident as it falls just short of opacity, the ruby rims have a pink cast and lack not for saturation. There's an odd stiffness to the nose, particularly as it is mainly comprised of plum, blackberry, boysenberry scents, a little room left for the orange peel, ginger root, flower petals, not that earthy nor grassy, you'd expect something with a likely drying quality given that stiffness. In the mouth it's medium-bodied and here it's pretty damn dry, although it would be a stretch to finger acidity for the reason. This leaves tannin, and it seems like this is there but not in a consistent, framing manner. There's a liquid juiciness in that plum, cherry, apple fruit but then here comes the "quicker picker upper" to wipe it all away and impede flow through the mid-palate. Dusty without any peppery or grassy notes. The orange to lemon peels feel as if left out in the sun. And one suspects that, too, the flowery dimension might lift more in a different setting. It's not a bad wine, however, it feels "backwards" and that's usually not what you want at its "pop and pour" price range. (Synthetic Cork: ExcellentCork) 86

Castaño, Bodegas

Yecla

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Monastrell

2007, \$8.99, 13.5%

Fully opaque purple core, more of a scarlet than black tinge, the rims well-saturated crimson to brick red, good surface reflectivity. Roasted game, meat fat and grill smoke infuse the nose, dense and mostly immobile plum, black currant fruit scents, any florality struggles to be heard, over time some white grapefruit and orange citrus can be discerned, otherwise it's gamey funk and fruit. Medium-bodied, sour and acidic mouth entry which plays up herbaceousness and earthiness. The game fat and cooking smoke persists, however, not as pronounced as in the nose. Tannins build up with each additional sip, the plum, cherry fruit obviously ripe to survive that battle. Some low level percolating flowers and white citrus. Dense and only slightly unwinds, you could categorize this as a food wine but that's just a nice way of saying it doesn't gush immediate pleasure when the cap is unscrewed. (Screwcap) 86

SPAIN WHITE

Valdesil, Bodegas

Valdeorras, Val de Sil

Godello

2007, \$14.99, 13.5%

Light, gauzy straw gold color, distorts sufficiently that it's not exactly transparent, what hue is there lost at the rims. Lemony nose, no snickets but some lime, some mineral punch as well as smokiness, maybe even the vaguest note of jalapeño, well-contoured apricot, peach fruit scents, nothing extra, sinewy dissolve, waits to be asked a second time to leave. Medium-bodied, without becoming hollow pushes outwards against your cheeks to increase its presence. Presents that same smoky stone and mineral dimension while the lemon, orange lime citrus shows even more tang and zip. Florality more evident here, lilacs and sweeter blossoms. More resonance in the apricot, pear, peach, melon fruit, not juicier per se, more verve, yet with a honeyed aspect. The acidity does clamp down at the end and truncate the finish a touch. Not much to complain about here. 89

Cachazo, Bodegas y Viñedos Angel Lorenzo

Rueda, El Perro Verde

Verdejo

2007, \$18.99, 12.5%

Moderately deep yellow gold color, very consistent from core through rims, neither shiny nor dull, solid block in the glass. Smoky, almost crinkly, nose of mineral and white stone powder, lemon peels, floral water, completely acceptable core of apricot, peach fruit scents, could verge on pineapple at times, punches in there well, more thrust than spreading power hence dissolves at a good clip. In the mouth it's medium-bodied with a firm exterior contour and musculature, sinewy feel as you chew on the apricot, pineapple, guava, nectarine fruit. The floral side too delicate here and gets lost in the mix. The acidity has a ruggedness to it, hacks albeit in even strokes. Dry enough that the minerality becomes a focus past the mid-palate, which makes for a more zesty finish. Agreeable wine that does not merit its price. (Synthetic Cork: Supremecork) 87

CHILE RED

Montes
Colchagua Valley, Apalta Vineyard, Limited Selection
Cabernet Sauvignon-Carménère
Blend
2007, \$14.99, 14.5%

Resonant glow to the purple core, equally fat ruby-magenta rims, falls short of opacity and probably better for it, draws you in visually rather than deflect your gaze. There's a dusty cedar to tobacco edge to the nose, milk chocolate powder, orange zest and mutter of pressed flowers, cherry, Italian plum, blackberry scents juicy and heavily perfumed, good staying power. Medium to full-bodied, there's a certain spiciness to the attack which gets peppery and kind of evokes raw oak toast, even if overall the oak seems proportionate to the whole. Not shy about spotlighting the cherry, red currant, blackberry fruit, decent amount of polish and flow, ripe but not overripe. The orange to pink grapefruit an able complement to the fruit, sweet tea leaf and maduro tobacco wrapper, kindling smoke appear past the mid-palate. That said, does a credible job of drying out through the end and not leaving a sugary stain behind in your mouth. Has what you could call approachable complexity. 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Carménère. 87

ARGENTINA RED

Tiza, Bodega
Mendoza
Malbec
2006, \$19.99, 14.5%

Impenetrably opaque core, rich purple without blackness, creates a striking contrast with the saturated ruby-magenta rims, clean surface reflects light well. The nose is dense enough to impede movement and lift, layers of borderline overripe plum, cassis, blackberry fruit combine with formidable vanilla and butterscotch oak notes to accrete quickly, still does retain a toasty edge, not much room for the flowers or orange zest nuances to bloom. Full-bodied for sure, however, here it moves with greater ease and while it doesn't display much tannin, there's sufficient structural greasing to channel things forward. Again, you can't justifiably ask for riper plum, cherry, currant, blackberry fruit without just asking for prunes. The oak even cowers in its midst, mild butterscotch, toffee flavors sweet but a generalized toastiness most present. Mint, flowers, orange zest gain more market share, especially towards the end of each sip. Nothing profound but an honorable guilty pleasure type of wine. 89

Árido
Mendoza
Malbec
2007, \$9.99, 13.5%

Vivid purple core with a great deal of saturation, the violet reaches strongly into the rims and deepens the ruby-magenta there, fair degree of surface shine as well. Sugary plum, black cherry, blackberry scents rise through the nose, aided and abetted by caramel and toffee nuances, the floral perfume an without much lift, minor note of orange zest and then it all gets quiet. Medium-bodied and thins out a little too quickly for one's taste, gone just past the mid-palate. As a result the acidity more present than otherwise, the drop off in the cherry, blackberry lends it a somewhat plastic like texture at the end. The flowers and orange persist, the oak toast more

watery and not as much caramel. There aren't any truly bad flaws here, it's just not delivering at the level of most of the competition. No reason to dip into this stream twice. (Screwcap) 84