

The Hanes Wine Review, June 2009 Edition

As the economy continues to “sputter” (to put it mildly), Hanes wants to comment on something rarely considered by retail wine shoppers. Of course, this is a phenomenon which occurs with any small to medium sized retailing operation of any type. But it is perhaps more acute with wine retailing where a strong personal relationship often develops between the customer and the proprietor.

To wit. Very few wine store “owners” actually own their stores. John or Sarah’s business card may *say* owner, proprietor, partner or the like. But in the basic terms of equity ownership most of these people own squat. Which is interesting for a variety of reasons, particularly during a down cycle in the economy. (“Cycle” bandied about loosely here.)

Most owners of boutique wine stores spent many years in the trade honing their skills and knowledge. It takes a long time to not only become a master of the world of wine but also develop the interpersonal skills required for successful retailing (the latter may remain a work in progress in many cases). It is also a well known fact that working in wine retail pays jack. All this time you are acquiring wine knowledge and selling skills, you sure as hell are not acquiring the kind of capital needed to open a new wine store. But the day does indeed come when the senior salesperson says, damn it, it’s time for me to *do this the right way* and go out on my own. This is usually combined with similar exhortations from friends and family. You go, girl!

Between build out costs, legal, accounting and regulatory fees, insurance, website, and – most importantly – the initial stocking of the store, it is easily high six figures to open a store, sometimes seven figures depending on location and how whiz-bang you want the operation to be. How does one save \$750,000 on \$12/hour? You don’t. But new wine stores open all the time, right?

Well, unless, the salesperson in question is also independently wealthy (a possibility), you look for capital. With virtually no savings and no real unique business plan, a bank isn’t going to loan anyone half a mil. No, selling Müller-Thurgau instead of Chardonnay is not a unique business plan. So, after the bank lends you \$50K, how do you come up with the next few hundred thou? The vast majority of the time it’s the ever-popular “silent partner,” the “money guy” who loves wine and believes in you. Man. Whether it comes from banking, advertising, the movies or professional sports, it don’t matter none. He’s got the cash, you need the cash. You run the show, he comes in once in awhile to show some friends around and pick up his case of Lafite. Same deal as with soooo many high end restaurants. It isn’t the chef’s money. And, as long as things are going good, err, things are going good. The investor(s) make a little return on investment, gets to feel good about funding the sales of good wine, and gets his trophies at cost. The “owner” gets to make the decisions, defend the rights of Zweigelt to exist, and make a better salary than he would working the sales floor for someone else.

That’s how it usually goes when times are good. When times are bad, it’s a whole other kettle of fish. Woe unto the day when the money guy actually *needs* that \$500,000 he invested in the wine store. Then the silent partner starts to get real vocal like. Which is trouble because (a) the money guy probably doesn’t know anything substantial about wine retailing and (b) probably doesn’t have a firm grasp on general retailing principles either. Which, in turn, leads to the main crux of the problem when things go bad in the economy.

Most small wine store owners aren’t really good business people. Shock, horrors, but it’s true. They get into it with a *very* open-ended expectation that they’ve arrived and this is what they will be doing until 65 or older. At the outset, there’s no thoughtful consideration of what the best “exit strategy” from the business will be for them. And there’s rarely any explicit plan to “pay off” the money guy and increase their equity in the company while decreasing his. So, maybe it’s then an issue of how one defines “ownership” – if you work 15-20 years for a company but never acquire controlling equity, are you an owner or a “favored long-term employee”?

Which kind of cascades into a similar set of questions. Most successful boutique wine shops operate along the “cult of personality” lines. The owner and/or a top salesperson or two are the people every customer wants to see and have them help with their wine selections. Over time, the store’s persona more or less translates into this person. Extract the person from the equation and what value is left in the business? Probably not a whole lot as the customer loyalty is arguably more with the person than the actual brick and mortar establishment. Which is doubly weird because finding the true value of the business becomes hard to pin down.

Is the true value in the actual person who is the “front man” owner? If so, then the money guy can’t necessarily “fire” the owner or risk injuring his financial investment in the business. However, the front man (whom everybody loves) remains unlikely to be able to translate his personal value into true equity and remains in essence an employee working for someone else, the money guy.

Is the true value in the money guy? Well, he probably can’t sell wine on the sales floor effectively or coordinate delivery of orders or run a retail website. But he does have lots of money, very much needed money or it’s all a non-starter. On the other hand, the money guy *needs* a quality front man or the store won’t come close to maximizing revenue and return on investment. This is not to say that money guys do not sometimes churn through front men, they certainly do. Especially during tough times when, as previously noted, they need liquidity from their investment in the store and egos or visions of the business may clash. Anyway, there is a basic symbiosis in play.

Is the true value in the store itself, the wine stock, the location, the lease, the fixtures, the customer list, etc.? One might be tempted to say so but this rarely turns out to be the case. The stock could only be sold to a third party at a serious discount. The store's general reputation may be high and salable but, again, how much of this is attributable to the cult figure front man? Moreover, if both the money guy is extracting nice yearly dividends or other forms of ROI payments *and* the front man is getting a hefty salary as "owner," how much money is left over to reinvest in the business to attract a future buyer? Probably not a lot.

Which is the small business conundrum, be it selling wine or other stuff: what have you got when retirement day comes along? The front man "owner" has his yearly salary from the past 15 years, hopefully he got medical benefits along the way, and *maybe* some 401(k) money (but it's doubtful the business did any matching funding). The money guy got some basic financial payments out of the business on a regular basis – but maybe not as much as an investment in other financial instruments or opportunities. He also got wine at cost and the jazz of being an owner of a swank wine store. But neither is likely to see any great payday when the business is sold. You'll get cost of inventory, value of lease, value of customer list/relationships, value of staff (as if), and a small percentage on top for having successfully run the joint for 15 years. But it's not like building a company that makes some new computer memory chip and then you sell it for a bazillion times what you financially put in.

And that's why venture capital never touches small businesses. And why banks become increasingly leery of funding startups or extending sizeable lines of credit. The endgame value numbers don't make sense. With a chain or franchise like Bottle King, Total Wine, or Majestic in the UK, there's a scale that produces a much steadier revenue stream and more of a corporate structure which makes stability and return on investment clearer to any potential funding party. There's no great dependency on a few people to sell wine and keep the business afloat and likely no one money guy to deal with, more of a corporate hierarchy (even if comprised of same family members and such). If the funding party needs to seize assets and sell them, there's a lot better chance of getting a solid return via the sale with a chain operation than with Bob's Emporium of Unique and Rare Wines.

So, the way things are now economically, be careful who you consider to be the owner of the boutique stores you frequent. They are not quite as indispensable as you might think. Or they might start stocking stuff you never thought they would, all in the name of making a buck (for the money guy). Hanes would love it if the people we *think* are the owners actually had a plan to gain majority equity. But that's very rarely the case. And if you find a small retail store with the day-to-day operators having fully vested equity in the business, chances are the owners know jack about wine, they made their money elsewhere and just thought it would be "cool" to own a wine store...

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This month's big winners... Must be the summer, another slow month for Hanes's wine consumption. Or it's all those pesky beers. Anyway, the 2007 Yann Chave Crozes-Hermitage is a very nice example of the appellation and provides "immense drinking pleasure" for like \$30. Should improve for a couple of years in the cellar too. Also from the Rhône comes Monpertuis's 2007 Côtes-du-Rhône "Vignoble de la Ramière." Here we find a thick, fruit heavy wine that for like \$17 will likely be better in a year's time. There's stuff going on in there, just cloaked right now. Ferrando's 2007 Canavese Rosso named "La Torrazza" from Piedmont, Italy is very dry but well structured, and a very good food wine for about \$21 (80% Nebbiolo, 20% Barbera).

The best \$15 and under picks... It's getting boring for Hanes to keep recommending white wines from the Côtes de Gascogne but, screw it, it's either a ball or a strike and it's a strike. The 2008 Cassagnoles "Cuvée Gros Manseng Reserve Selection" is its usual stellar self, 100% Gros Manseng and still only \$14. The 2008 Lalanne blend is a touch less resonant but arguably a little better for hot weather sipping, costs about \$11. As with so many others you will only find the producer name in small print but the "Heavyweight Red" Cabernet Sauvignon from California is pretty decent for \$13 or so, almost a quarter of Syrah and Zin blended in, probably helps. Never had a wine from German producer Rudolf Müller before but the 2008 QbA with the "Bunny" label is really nice and crisp for about \$10 and it's no wonder it sells well down here in Charlotte. Don't think there's a lot of it made but the Brassfield Estate white blend called "Serenity" from California is a nice, pretty wine for \$14, a likely candidate for the "poor man's Conundrum" category. The exploration of North Carolinian wines continues, have to say Hanes was generally impressed with the lineup of a small operation called Buck Shoals and laid down his \$12 for a bottle of the white blend "Bryan's Legacy," which would please most sweet wine lovers. Probably getting close to the release date of the 2007, but the 2006 Bodega Tiza Malbec named "El Ganador" is a simple, straightforward expression of the grape without any caricatural aspects, all for \$11.

And the disappointments... Not a disappointment "per se" but when a bottle is like \$140, you expect more than what Hanes found in the 2006 Hourglass Napa Cab. Naturally, one has to filter for Hanes's lack of interest in these sort of wines, but still. Hanes is sure Hourglass moves the product at a decent rate so no blood spilled here. Liking their straight up Cabernet as well as the wines of their second label, Wall, Hanes was mildly enthused to try the 2006 Twenty Rows "The Grappler" blend. However, there's nothing there you can't get for \$10 cheaper elsewhere. Wasn't sure what to make of the Montand sparkler from the Jura but Jura wines usually rock and it was only \$15. That said, this concoction of Ugni Blanc and Airen is pretty much a pass unless you're going to mix it with some other liquid. Don't really get the love for the cheap wines of Catena Zapata these days, the prices aren't that great and the competition has more than caught up to the 800 pound gorilla of Argentinean wine. Their 2007 Chardonnay "Tupungato" is ehh and for \$17 can easily be beaten by a plethora of other choices.

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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 June!

CALIFORNIA RED

Hourglass
Napa Valley
Cabernet Sauvignon
2006, \$139.99, 14.2%
Inky black core, incredibly dark, the rims are razor thin fresh blood red, has a very shiny surface. The nose busts out humongous butterscotch, caramel, vanilla fudge, mint oak scents, somehow even the blackberry, plum, cherry fruit gets lost in the nostrils, can't ever right itself to attain much lift. Medium to full-bodied, again spotlights sweet caramel, butterscotch, vanilla notes but here not as sugary, same can be said for the blackberry, blueberry, cherry fruit. Seems like it spent time in a blender to achieve a smooth, planed down consistency. Offers some eucalyptus and mint. Keeps its weight fully through the finish. Increasing flavors of coconut custard at the end as well as some more noticeable alcoholic burn. 88

X Winery
Napa Valley, Carneros, Truchard Vineyard
Pinot Noir
2007, \$26.99, 14.5%
Trim red ruby to light violet in color, betrays minimal extraction of color, the rims barely shift into a garnet red, even right out of the shoot as here has a middle-aged look about it. Sharp-edged cranberry, raspberry, red cherry scents blend with cola and mocha powder to create a mixed message in the nose, the lemon citrus, flowers and a light herbaceousness cannot decide between erect and jolly bearing. Medium-bodied, has a sort of fizzy mouth texture, percolates throughout. through the mid-palate finally settles on the tongue. The cranberry, pomegranate, cherry, raspberry fruit here too sweet and sour. Cola, flowers are there, the oak displays tact. That said, for a wine that isn't flashy per se, it still makes you think it's trying too hard to be something it's not rather than accept the fact it's a humbler wine at base. Too much hang time?

Dunno. Less fruit, less alcohol would make this a better and more balanced wine. 87

McPrice Myers Wine Company
Santa Barbara County, Altas Viñas
Blend
2006, \$36.00, 15.8%
Just crosses the border into full opacity, the garnet tinged purple core gives way to thick brick red hues around the rims, very concentrated color wise. The nose is extremely dense and bursting with sweet blackberry, raspberry, black cherry fruit scents, almost met in power by brush fire smoke and tanned horsehide, very little oak presence, when you draw in deeply a cleansing mentholated breeze sets in. Full-bodied, soft and inviting in texture. That said, does take on a slight graininess through the finish, this finish being a touch short. The sugary blueberry, blackberry, boysenberry fruit stays on the dark side of red. Smattering of lemon, tangerine to pink grapefruit citrus gives pause to pucker, also buttressing any floral notes. Not as gamey nor earthy here, pretty much leans on the fruit to get by. Slightly below average tannic punch. No heat but you feel the alcohol during the first glass. 75% Grenache, 25% Mourvèdre. 87

Blue Moon Wines
Regional Blend, California, Heavyweight Red
Cabernet Sauvignon
2005, \$12.99, 13.9%
The core is mostly purple with some red brick to garnet inflections, segues to a more straightforward blood red close to the rims, on the whole dark and unblemished. The nose is more dry and erect than juicy, however, the plum, black cherry, blackberry scents burst through with little opposition, ginger, clove and cinnamon offer mucho spiciness, cocoa powder and coffee not to be neglected, a serving of eucalyptus too, sticky texture keeps it around for some time. In the mouth it's full-bodied with good fluidity so that it does not prematurely congeal on the tongue. Loads up on the plum, cherry, blackberry, fruit through the entry and flirts with sugariness. The orange and lemon citrus waits to decide but then picks sweet over sour too. Comes

close to cola at times. Trace of menthol and sweet garden herbs. Suggestion of dried fruit keeps it afloat through the finish. Chug-a-lug. 76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Syrah, 10% Zinfandel. [Grape sources unspecified.] 87

Twenty Rows

Regional Blend, The Grappler

Blend

2006, \$25.99, 14.8%

Straightforward ruby-purple color of very good clarity and cleanliness, surface shine extends through to the red ruby, garnet hued rims. Mesquite smoke and grill fat in the nose throw you off a bit, menthol too lifts it before the black currant, cherry, boysenberry scents can settle in, mixes in orange peel and dried potpourri notes, remains high in the register and doesn't sink in much. Full-bodied, stiff and unyielding like it has too much starch in its shirt, just doesn't flow. This said, nothing inadequate about the level of blackberry, boysenberry, cherry, blueberry fruit, decent juiciness, no sugariness per se. Eucalyptus, mint, orange blossom, molasses and wood smoke fill in most of the empty spaces, nothing here evokes any substantial oakiness. A touch tannic for what it wants to be, contributes to its slightly offputting demeanor. Should either go more for approachability or for layered complexity. 60% Zinfandel (Amador County), 28% Syrah (Central Coast), 12% Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley). 86

X Winery

Regional Blend, X3 Tri-County

Cabernet Sauvignon

2006, \$16.99, 14.5%

Rich purple to ruby-magenta at its core, negligibly lightens into dark ruby around the rims. More than adequate depth to the plum, blackberry fruit scents but not dense enough to thwart the alcoholic fumes, a little cedar or leather but it's quite simple and guileless, lacks movement to make it easier to find what it has. Full-bodied, mostly on the bottom, deja vu all over again with an emphasis on plum, cherry, blackberry fruit that truly never gets juicy enough to warrant the attention. No tannic yet there's a gritty, tacky drying texture to it, reaching the mouth roof by the finish. Orange peel, cedar, leather, tea leaf, all undistinguished. Passable but just. Sourced 69% Lake County, 17% Sonoma County, 14% Napa County. 85

CALIFORNIA WHITE

Brassfield Estate Winery

High Valley, High Serenity Ranch, Serenity

Blend

2006, \$13.99, 13.5%

Light yellow hay color, although not strongly hued has a pleasing glow to it, close to full transparency, has some distortion, unassuming visual presence. The nose both openly knit and with solid bottom, very perfumey with flower petals, lemon and lime zest, some uncooked nuttiness, fresh cream, more fresh snap to the pear, apple, apricot, melon fruit scents than sweet juiciness, much more aromatic as it warms. Medium-bodied, solidly constructed with equal attention exerted on lift and soaking in. Light powdered sugar quality sweetens the pink grapefruit, orange, lime citrus while not adding excess sense of ripeness to the pear, apricot, green melon, peach, banana fruit. Trace of mineral water grounds the florality, not too dewy. Doesn't get bitter per se near the end but does create a pucker, for the better. A very good

natured wine, uses its charms without attempting to over adorn them. Unspecified percentages of Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, Gewürztraminer, Sémillon. 87

X Winery

Regional Blend, Carneros

Chardonnay

2007, \$20.99, 14.5%

Very clean and spotless light golden yellow color, above average surface shine with a soft distortion of light below. Curiously mute nose, simple peach and pear fruit scents, cinnamon, lemon juice and mint leaf and that's about it. Medium-bodied, spicy without detracting from the overall soft contour and reclined position across the tongue. This ginger, clove pairs with orange, lemon citrus and negligibly teases out additional florality. Same straightforward appeal to the peach, apricot fruit, no overt ripeness nor thinness. The oak flavors are minimal, a brush of butterscotch or caramel at best/worst. There's nothing wrong with it, just displays no meaningful personality. 54% Truchard Vineyard, 46% Sangiacomo. (Screwcap: Stelvin) 86

WASHINGTON WHITE

Milbrandt Vineyards

Columbia Valley, Traditions

Riesling

2006, \$11.99, 12.5%

White to gold straw in color, not very deep, transparent without crystalline clarity, sits somewhat impassively in the glass. Floral nose with applesauce demeanor to the pear, peach scents, like cinnamon swirled in, vaguely creamy texture helps extend presence, at times there's something like Vick's VapoRub menthol in there which, as such, has it sinking in as much as lifting. Medium-bodied, pleasing breadth and fullness in the peach, pear, red apple fruit, more dry than sweet. At the same time, clearly honeyed side sweetens, as does the lemon pulp/peel shades. The acidity is average and does enough to avoid complaint. Stays dense through to the finish, even as the fruit trails off. Easily consumable middle of the road Riesling. 86

NORTH CAROLINA WHITE

Buck Shoals Vineyard

Yadkin Valley, Bryan's Legacy

Blend

2006, \$12.00, 12.5%

Mild yellow hue, neither watery nor especially dense, some diminishing around the rims, semi-dull surface shine. Bakery level caramel and honeyed pie dough in the nose, candied orange peels, glazed nuts and floral musk fit in just fine, a sweet smokiness permeates the apricot, peach, green melon fruit scents. Full-bodied, not necessarily "round" per se but plump enough that there's not many angles to be had. Lots of tangerine, pink grapefruit, lime citrus around the apricot, nectarine, pineapple, red apple fruit, none of which pushes the juiciness into sugariness. The caramel and honey have a steady, bright presence, matched in good part by the surprisingly active acidity. The floral dimension is there, if overshadowed by the rest. Enjoyable "guilty pleasure" style wine. Unspecified percentages of Chardonnay, Traminette. 88

FRANCE RED

Chave, Yann
Rhône, Crozes Hermitage
Syrah
2007, \$29.99, 13.0%

Pure black core, youthfully spotless, features super-saturated dark ruby rims of moderate width, visually impressive. Balanced nose of white grapefruit pith, merde, leather, mocha powder, coriander, anise seed with sweet blueberry, raspberry, red cherry scents and equally sweet molasses barbecue smokiness. Medium-bodied, sort of fluffy texture even with its strong tannic and acidic structure. Herbal, possesses orange to grapefruit juice, pine needle, minerals and horsehide, overall manages to carve out a semi-rustic profile while also throwing its full weight behind the blackberry, raspberry, blueberry fruit. Does show at times some peanut shell and other mildly reductive notes. 89

Monpertuis, Domaine
Rhône, Côtes-du-Rhône, Vignoble de la Ramière
Blend
2007, \$16.99, 13.5%

Neither truly clear nor gauzy, level of opacity suggests the latter, dark ruby-purple core, integrates fully into the broad garnet to red magenta rims, strong saturation. Produces abundant strawberry, red raspberry, red cherry fruit in the nose, juiciness plays well with the milk chocolate powder, some lemon wedge, wet and fresh forest breeze, meaty at times but never solidifies. Full-bodied with some polish, glides decently for its weight. As in the nose, no paucity of raspberry, strawberry, blueberry fruit, real juicy and sweet. Which is not to say it is devoid of tannin, does dry up credibly by the finish. Orange and lemon citrus, mocha and chocolate, mint and to a lesser extent flowers must be obvious. Not much earth, game, herbal qualities, however, some bark or fallen forest matter exists. Relies heavily on the fruit now, even at its price makes you think it would be a seriously different wine in 2-3 years. 85% Grenache, 15% Syrah. 88

FRANCE WHITE

Cassagnoles, Domaine des
Southwest France, Vin de Pays des Côtes de Gascogne,
Cuvée Gros Manseng Reserve Selection
Gros Manseng
2008, \$13.99, 13.5%

Gauzy luminescence in the pale yellow color, slight green tinge at times, average shine. Pine oil, sweetly tangy pink grapefruit, lime, tangerine citrus, good smokiness as well with a white mineral dust quality, equally crisp pear, melon, apple fruit scents with plenty of snap. Medium-bodied with, not fat, but a solid girth about the middle. The acidity keen like a saber, thick blade but cuts more than effectively. The white to pink grapefruit, lime citrus amps up the wattage as does the minerality and a shade of something like chili peppers. The floral swipes present nice thickness and help extend the finish. It has apricot, apple, pear, pineapple fruit but close to no juiciness so it doesn't become a deciding factor. Keeps twisting and turning through the end, hard to lose interest in it. (Screwcap: Kapvins) 89

Lalanne, Domaine
Southwest France, Vin de Pays des Côtes de Gascogne
Blend
2008, \$10.99, 11.5%

As much brown straw as yellow to its coloration, pale and dull, looks kind of like water that came out of an old, semi-rusty pipe. Intensely appley nose, like inhaling a Granny Smith, closely followed on by sharp lemon zest and black licorice notes, then white mineral bite and sauna smoke, manages to leave a freshly scrubbed impression on your nostril pores even at its accelerated speed. Medium-bodied, even more intense in the mouth with brine, pickle juice and jalapeño accents framing the attack, eventually handing off to tart white grapefruit, lemon citrus and bitters. The minerals remain on the metallic side and cut more than evoke solid stone. Dry and refreshing because you really don't have a choice, keep it heavily chilled or it might rip your heart out and show it to you while it's still beating. 40% Colombard, 30% Ugni Blanc, 30% Gros Manseng. (Synthetic Cork) 88

FRANCE SPARKLING

Montand, François
Jura, Méthode Traditionnelle Brut Blanc de Blancs
Blend
NV, \$14.99, 11.5%

Quite pale yellow in hue, thick beads of large bubbles, very active mousse, bubbles keep coming even some time after the pour. The nose is mainly comprised of lemon Pledge, ground up grass and straw, slight florality and a truncated burst of apricot, apple, pear fruit scents, not much there. Light-bodied, this makes it come across as somewhat foamy given that abundant fizz. Lemon, white stone powder, stream water and a light herbaceous quality give it a dry and, at times, bitter, profile. Vague leesy creaminess once in awhile, the peach, apricot, apple fruit not quite attenuated but not exactly looking to showcase itself either. As dry as it is, more blunt than keenly edged in profile. While your palate acclimates to the bitterness over time, it's still best suited for mimosas. Unspecified percentages of Ugni Blanc, Airen. 85

ITALY RED

Ferrando, Azienda Vitivinicola Luigi
Piedmont, Canavese Rosso, La Torrazza
Blend
2007, \$20.99, 13.0%

Pure ruby-violet throughout, unblemished clarity does not impede richness of hue, slight pinkish cast at the outermost rims. Surprisingly thick nose that just about drips of plum, blackberry, cherry fruit, moments of cranberry or tart apple, more fresh orange spritz than peel, mutter of flowers or anise, too heavy to develop noticeable lift. Full-bodied, equally broad in the mouth while retaining balance and a sense of proportion. The tannic/acidic structure forceful and keeps everyone on the same page. Same lean towards darker plum, cherry, blackberry fruit, a sour edge to the orange, lemon citrus helps in staunching any sugary qualities. At times, gets a little herbaceous or leafy, but not a bad thing as earthier, plain woodier notes arise. Dry finish, not parching, just makes you want to throw back more liquid as soon as possible. 80% Nebbiolo, 20% Barbera. 89

ITALY WHITE

Benvolio

Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Grave del Friuli

Pinot Grigio

2007, \$10.99, 12.0%

Light golden brown in hue, straw or hay-like, dilute rims, the pour fizz visible for some time thereafter, average reflectivity at best. Little bit of smokiness and minerality helps the nose lift and tease out more lemon and lime citrus notes, the pear, apricot, apple scents thin and never quite develop a meaningful center. Medium-bodied, as in the nose kind of flat and uninspiring, the acidity is not a real presence. Honey accents add bulk to the pear, apple fruit but it would be hard not to, the lemon and lime trails off through the mid-palate. The minerality tries to win the day but, in the end, it's mostly a dried flower residue at the end. Not bitter nor particularly flawed, just comes across as dilute or overcropped or the like. 84

GERMANY WHITE

Müller, Rudolf

Pfalz, Bunny QbA AP #5

Riesling

2008, \$9.99, 10.0%

Light white straw color base with a faint yellow-green tinge, transparent, slightly below average surface luster. Strong floral perfume to the nose, mixes in banana, bubblegum, limeade, apricot, pear, yellow apple and melon fruit scents present a sweetly laidback profile, overall there's sufficient zesty "crinkle" to keep things balanced and light enough to lift and swirl. Medium-bodied, has a firm character to it which let's the square-shouldered acidity set the tone without being so dry as to detract. Chalk with some quartz-like sharp minerality, at times suggests chili pepper, has a certain powdered sugar quality which can confuse some into thinking it's really a sweet wine. Peach and apricot meet up with pineapple, nectarine, green apple fruit, alternates between juicy and tart. Stays floral to the end, continues the good cop/bad cop routine like it's second nature. [Screwcap] 89

CHILE WHITE

Sombras del Sol (Foster's Wine Estates Chile)

Regional Blend

Sauvignon Blanc

2008, \$8.99, 13.2%

Pale, faded yellow color, quite clear with a slight bending of light, not much to fade off from at the rims. The nose is minty at first then gets a dose of chili pepper and sour herbaceousness and oil slick on asphalt, there's even a muscularity to the floral lift, focused pineapple, apricot, guava fruit, not juicy enough to be truly "tropical" per se. Medium-bodied, razor sharp acidity teams up with a good dose of salinity and minerality, in addition to piquant lemon, grapefruit citrus to flash serious wattage into the mouth. The mint and flowers do what they can, this primarily being dressing up the apricot, nectarine, pineapple, persimmon fruit flavors. The peppery and herbal notes get synthesized into the whole. If you're into aggressively styled Sauvignon Blanc, you don't get verve at this price often. Grapes sourced from Casablanca, Curicó Valleys. [Synthetic Cork] 87

ARGENTINA RED

Tiza, Bodega

Mendoza, El Ganador

Malbec

2006, \$10.99, 13.5%

Deeply saturated ruby-purple in hue, just this side of opaque, turns to a pinkish magenta at the rims, vivid throughout. Super-ripe nose, drips with plum, cherry juice as well as dense milk chocolate notes, honey and orange blossom too, you get some green apple before it dissolves. Medium-bodied, thickly layered and slow of pace, languidly fills your mouth pores. Underneath the avalanche of sweet plum, cherry, blackberry, cassis fruit there's some fine tannins, a fair amount likely wood tannin. Retains that noticeable floral side in addition to the sweet and juicy orange, lemon citrus. Molasses, chocolate and honey again. For all of this, it's not stupidly sweet just totally geared towards pleasuring you. In this it's hard to fault it, take it at face value. [Synthetic Cork] 88

Valle Escondido, Bodegas y Viñedos

Mendoza, Valle Escondido, Gouguenheim

Syrah

2006, \$11.99, 13.5%

Deep purple core, the dark ruby hues hold off into the broad rims, some warm red magenta in there too, plenty of color with a clean surface too. Heavy plum, blackberry scents in the nose, like ankle weights, thankfully the mocha crisp, orange peel and pressed flower notes agree in principle so it all falls together well, just wants to slather your nostrils in fruit, again doesn't get too sugary so it's all good. Full-bodied, displays nice acidic verve in the mouth which activates the orange, grapefruit citrus as well as buttresses the floral side of things. Chocolate and toffee gently massage themselves into the plum, cherry, blackberry fruit, comes across more as ripe than sweet. Has alight herbaceous side which helps add erectness. Otherwise, it's kind of monochrome and, while not so bad as a chugger, doesn't make it a wine that drinks like a more expensive wine. [Synthetic Cork] 86

ARGENTINA WHITE

Catena Zapata, Bodega

Mendoza, Tupungato

Chardonnay

2007, \$16.99, 13.9%

Fair amount of depth to the yellow glow at the core, holds together decently towards the rims, semi-fuzzy transparency. Toast, fried butter, butterscotch, toffee and confectionary sugar make for a consumer-friendly nose, factor in the tropical pineapple, guava, nectarine, peach fruit and it's doubly so, mix of lime and lemon close to Sprite, slightly acid before it finally dissolves. Medium-bodied, leaden of foot and shuffles forward at the pace of someone in ankle chains. The pineapple, nectarine, papaya, guava fruit casts aside any other traditional fruit flavors. Good char to the oak, toasty without negating any butterscotch or crème brûlée flavors, brings out strongly piquant lime as well. Almost achieves a certain salinity. And in doing so, you get a good dose of pucker at the end and a truncated finish. 85