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Getting Help With Wine Choices

By DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER



I am trying to understand what I like and don't like. Is there a guide that gives a few good recommendations of wines per category? I would like to keep my cost to under \$20 per bottle.

—Vance Banker, Cincinnati

I'm a student at UNC-Chapel Hill. How does one shop for wines on a tight budget?

—Nathaniel Haines, Chapel Hill, N.C.

We get questions along these lines pretty much every day. Fortunately, it has never been easier to learn what you like and don't like in wine, even on a tight budget. There are plenty of good books on the shelves and we certainly recommend picking one up; there are excellent classes pretty much everywhere these days, and we definitely suggest attending; and there is more information online than ever before, and we think it's a great idea to sign on. In the long run, however, the only way to truly learn about wine is to drink it—and there have never been so many fine merchants and so many great-value wines on shelves from all over the world.

When we were starting out in wine, we went to good stores with a budget of \$72 per case, an average of \$6 a bottle, and always bought 12 bottles we'd never had before. When we'd finished them about two weeks later, we bought another \$72 case. We still recommend that approach. We would suggest setting a budget of \$120. We know this might seem like a lot, especially on a limited budget, but it's cost-effective for many reasons: It's \$10 a bottle; you'll likely get a discount on the case; and you will make wiser choices when you are taking a leisurely stroll down the aisle of the store than when you are rushing to pick up a bottle on the way home.

To demonstrate the wonders that await anyone willing to do this with the help of a good wine merchant, we called three wine shops in different states and asked them what interesting case they would put together for Messrs. Banker or Haines if one of them walked into the store today. The total budget was \$120 and we told the merchants they had to choose from among bottles in the store at the time we called.

Here are their responses:

Jessica Granatiero, co-owner of the Savory Grape Wine Shop, East Greenwich, R.I.

- 1. Farnese Montepulciano (Italy).** \$9.99.
- 2. Domaine de Solitude Côtes du Rhône (France).** \$9.99.
- 3. Line 39 Sauvignon Blanc (California).** \$10.49.
- 4. Robertson Chenin Blanc (South Africa).** \$9.99.
- 5. Redtree Pinot Noir (California).** \$9.99.

- 6. Finca Flichman Malbec (Argentina).** \$8.99.
- 7. Stone Creek Unoaked Chardonnay (California).** \$10.99.
- 8. Casa Santos Arinto (Portugal).** \$8.99.
- 9. ZaZa Garnacha rosé (Spain).** \$10.49.
- 10. Undone Riesling (Germany).** \$10.99.
- 11. Cortenova Primitivo (Italy).** \$9.99.
- 12. Snoqualmie Sauvignon Blanc (Washington).** \$8.49.

Total: \$107.44, including 10% case discount.

Paul-Thierry de la Blotier, owner of the Shelburne Falls Wine Merchant, Shelburne Falls, Mass.

- 1. Blondeau Sauvignon Blanc (Loire, France).** \$9.99.
- 2. Pacific Rim Dry Riesling (Washington).** \$10.99.
- 3. Folie à Deux Winery Ménage à Trois White (California).** \$12.99.
- 4. Tapeña Tempranillo (Spain).** \$10.99.
- 5. Amaroo Shiraz (Australia).** \$9.99.
- 6. Red Heads Studio Yard Dog Red (Australia).** \$11.99.
- 7. Jelu Malbec (Argentina).** \$13.99.
- 8. Colonia las Liebres Bonarda (Argentina).** \$9.99.
- 9. Messapicus Salice Salentino (Italy).** \$10.99.
- 10. Gran Sasso Sauvignon Blanc (Italy).** \$11.99.
- 11. Huber Grüner Veltliner (Austria).** \$11.99.
- 12. Château de Jau Côtes du Roussillon (France).** \$12.99.

Total: \$118.05, including 15% case discount.

Pete Marczyk, grocer and wine merchant, Marczyk Fine Wines, Denver.

- 1. Château des Chapelains Bordeaux Clairet rosé (France).** \$9.99.
- 2. Diego Murillo Torrontés (Argentina).** \$9.99.
- 3. Chateau Haut Sarthes Montravel White Bordeaux (France).** \$9.99.
- 4. Charles Smith Wines Holy Cow Chardonnay (Washington).** \$9.99
- 5. Aveleda Charamba Vino Tinto (Portugal).** \$9.99.
- 6. Château Jeanguillon Bordeaux Supérieur (France).** \$9.99.
- 7. Belpoggio Rosso Piceno (Italy).** \$9.99.
- 8. Famega Vinho Verde (Portugal).** \$8.99.
- 9. Gran Sarao Brut Cava (Spain).** \$12.99.

10. Pierre Olivier Côtes du Rhône Blanc (France). \$9.99.

11. Infinite Monkey Theorem Sauvignon Blanc/Sémillon (Colorado). \$19.99

12. Parducci Sustainable Red (California). \$9.99.

Total: \$112.09, including 15% case discount.

Our point here isn't to rush out to buy any of those specific wines or to try to replicate any of these exact cases, but that there are so many interesting, different, affordable wines on shelves today from all over the world (note that only five of the 36 wines are from California) that you can afford—literally—to experiment. Each of these cases sounds like so much fun to us. Drink up, maybe take a note or two (just “Liked this one,” “Hated this one” is a good start) and head back to the wine shop for another case. Enjoy the journey.

MAKING THE MOST OF MEAD

I recently received a bottle of mead from a dinner guest. While the bottle has some suggestions on the label about possible uses, I wondered if you could provide more information. Does one actually drink it and under what circumstances?

—Virginia L. Butterworth, Tiverton, R.I.

Mead is wine made from honey and it's not something we often drink, so, for advice, we called Gordon Hull, proprietor of Heidrun Meadery of Arcata, Calif. Mr. Hull's meadery specializes in sparkling mead, but he had some suggestions on how to enjoy a still mead. He says how you serve it depends on how sweet it is, if it is made with a varietal honey (such as orange blossom) or if it comes with a spice bag (those should be prepared like a mulled wine). Mr. Hull recommends first chilling it to about 45 to 50 degrees. “For a sweet mead,” says Mr. Hull, “you'd probably have it for a dessert wine, with some fruit or maybe some cheese. If it is a dry mead, then you have some more options.” For drier-style meads, Mr. Hull recommends pairing it with foods the same way you would a sweeter Gewürztraminer or Riesling. We like the suggestion of serving it with a cheese platter since you so often see nice restaurants serving fancy cheeses with honey.

—Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column.

Write to John Brecher and Dorothy Gaiter at wine@wsj.com