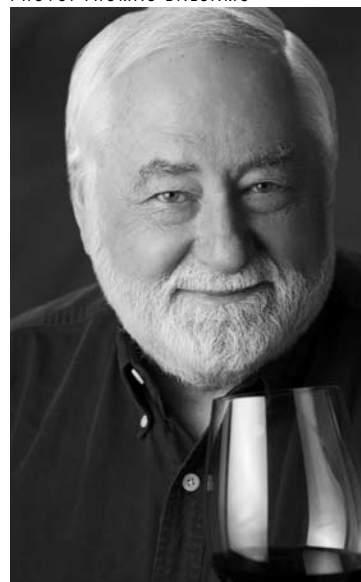


# Vintage Values

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



From the perspective of wine heights, I think it is largely true that the greatest wines are expensive. However, as with food, personal tastes in wine often dictate preferences as much or more than the price. Many wine aficionados are able to justify discretionary spending on long-lived items such as houses, cars, yachts, and great bottles of wine, especially when these items are associated prominently with the owner's status in the community at large. But because it takes a lot of time and hard work to build a database of favorite wines, others prefer not to invest the time in researching their options. Ergo, most wine buyers are looking for great values – low prices at high ratings.

There are many wine publications, and almost all publish an annual issue dedicated to value wines. In almost all cases, these wines are large in volume and enjoyable as entry-level examples of their type. I would like to share a few of my

favorites, which are low in price but high in quality. Most are in the \$10–\$20 range.

Regarding white wines, Muscadet, from the melon grape, comes from the western Loire Valley. It is great with lighter seafoods – both fish and crustaceans. Muscadet costs less than \$20 and is the best wine for oysters, regardless of price. Sauvignon Blanc-based wines are, with few exceptions, under \$30, and many from New Zealand are under \$20 (the best example is Bedford Road Estate). In blind tastings, this wine often beats Cloudy Bay, New Zealand's most famous Sauvignon Blanc – at half the cost.

My greatest white wine find last year was Jacques & François Lurton's Les Fumées Blanches – a Sauvignon Blanc from the south of France. This wine is available in this area, priced from \$6–\$9. Both the 2005 and 2006 are terrific wines whose brisk acidity, nose, and taste seem to combine the best of both New Zealand and France.

Sauvignon Blanc is my choice with chévre and any relatively firm white fish, especially halibut. I should add that one of my very favorite wines last year was the Robert Mondavi Fumé Blanc from the To Kalon Vineyard. Although this Sauvignon Blanc was approximately \$30, it was better than almost any white under \$100 and therefore a great value.

Two very food-friendly white wines are those from the Albariño and Verdelho grapes. These wines are almost all from Spain and Portugal, with a few from Australia. The best values are the Holly's Blend, a Verdelho from Marquis-Philips (around \$10), and two great wines from Spain: Naiades (a Verdelho under \$30) and Pazo de Señorans (under \$25) from the Albariño grape.

Although the Riesling grape remains largely out of favor throughout the world, it is a noble grape that is very affordable. Many examples are available from Germany. Some of my favorites are from Australia, where they are generally produced in a drier style in the Clare and Eden Valleys. A particularly great buy is the Leasingham Bin 7 and the Leasingham Magnus.

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Turning to reds, my greatest find last year was the 2005 Grego Garnacha Centenaria from Vinos Jeromin S.L. This wine comes from an unheralded wine area near Madrid. I asked many people who bought multiple cases of it what they thought it was worth. Even though they paid \$10 for it, they said they felt it was worth \$30–\$40. This was obviously a great deal, and this wine continues to improve with each bottle I open. Grenache is one of the most food-friendly grapes available, and it makes another appearance in the Cotes du Rhone: Belleruche from Michel Chapoutier. Any time you can buy a wine for \$10 from one of the greatest winemakers in the world (one whose wines usually average \$100–\$200), give it a try.

I personally drink more Sangiovese and Tempranillo than other varietals. 2004 was a great year in both Tuscany and Spain. Frescobaldi Nipozzano Riserva Chianti is a great buy under \$20, and the 2004 Zamaya Tempranillo (under \$10) is astounding. I find Tempranillo the grape of choice

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