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## Wine

By Ben Gibbon

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Somebody up there must love red wines, because lately, he or she has been making so many of them. Terrific bargains from France, Spain and California continue to be sent our way, with many selling in the \$10 to \$15 range. Ours is not to reason why, but merely to give thanks as we load up our shopping carts and restock our wine cellars.

Little of this largesse hails from familiar places. Big-name wines from Napa, Bordeaux, Tuscany and other prestigious addresses are still overpriced, often shockingly so. This is a terrible shame. How will beginning wine drinkers learn about the intricacies of Bordeaux, the terroirs of Burgundy and the taste of Rutherford (California) "dust" if they can't afford to buy the wines? From the producers' standpoint, it is also short-sighted. Who will buy these wines when today's graying clients decide they have enough in their collars to buy a lifetime (speaking actuarially)?

Fortunately, the vacuum created by the departure of these wines has encouraged newer regions to upgrade their stock-in-trade to woo new customers. As a result, retailer's shelves are filled by wines that are as delectable as the famous names they replace, and far more affordable.

Listed below are a bevy of impressive new red wines. Telephone numbers are provided to help find retail shops that carry the wine in your area. Prices are approximate.

**Diego de Almagro 1991 Gran Reserva Valdepenas (\$14-\$18; Spain):** Although the sun-baked soil of Valdepenas (meaning "Valley of Stones") is dry and hard, its wines are lush and silky. Few 1991 Burgundies or Bordeaux would show as splendidly as this ripe, spicy wine, which has a first-rate bouquet of red berries and soft vanilla, and velvety fineness on the palate, without a trace of herbaceous oxidation. Spain is one of the last regions to hold back its best wines for later release, making it the first place to look for reasonably priced, mellow wines aged under perfect conditions in the bodega. Drink now or hold one to two years. (Gemmex International; 703-893-9601)

**Hope Estate 1999 Shiraz "Hunter Valley" (\$13; Australia):** Many Australian and California Shiraz (called Shiraz in Australia) are excessively jammy and one dimensional, but not this. It is a generous, complex wine filled out by a roasted (or "rokie," as the French would say, as they relieve you of \$40 for a bottle of Syrah-based Cote Rotie), vanilla bouquet and subtle mineral notes that linger on the palate through the finish. Unlike the many Australian wineries that rely on purchased agribiz-grown grapes, Hope uses only its own estate-grown grapes, which allows it full control over irrigation, canopy management and yields. Their Shiraz grapes for this wine come from low-yielding 40-year-old vines from the Broke Foröwich sub-region of the Hunter Valley, located about two hours north of Sydney. In this warm region, the grapes could easily overripen, producing clammy, alcoholic wines. However, Hope picks for optimal flavor, regardless of sugar levels, leading to wines with an excellent balance of fruit, acidity and alcohol. (Franklin Selections; 410-880-4790)

**Castelmaure 1998 Corbieres Grande Cuvée (\$11; France):** Centuries ago, logging and fires destroyed the Mediterranean forest that originally grew in Corbieres. Its limestone hills were soon covered with what the locals call garrigue, a bushy thicket of juniper, wild thyme, rosemary and lavender. These flavors from this natural spice rack suffuse the wines of Corbieres, giving them a unique and notably food-friendly character. This is a superb Corbieres, loaded with ripe black

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fruit and garrigue notes, with a fine balance of fruit and tannins at the finish. Excellent with the meal, but supple enough to be sipped enjoyably with cheeses afterward. (Kyselá Pere et Fils, 540-722-9228)

## CELLAR SELECTION

Thomas Fogarty 1996 Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountains Estate Reserve (\$35; Bay Area/Central Coast California): As the great Pinot Noirs from David Bruce, Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard (owned by Ken Burnap) and Thomas Fogarty Winery and Vineyards have shown, the Santa Cruz Mountain region produces outstanding Pinot Noir. While not resembling their alleged model, French red Burgundy, these wines reveal a side to Pinot Noir that is quite extraordinary—blacker, denser and deeper than, say, Gevrey-Chambertin, but also possessing impeccable balance and a well-naked, hedonistic Pinot Noir bouquet. Given that Grand Cru Burgundy is typically twice as expensive as this wine, this fine 1996 offers excellent value to serious collectors. While Santa Cruz Mountain Pinot Noirs age beautifully, do try at least a bottle or two of this in its vibrant youth. (Winery, 800-247-4165)

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