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Wine Adviser

You'll find worthy Bordeaux on a budget

The wine press has been abuzz with stories about the 2005 wines from Bordeaux.

The leading pundits and opinion-makers from England and the U.S. still use Bordeaux as their fighting arena; it's the center ring of the wine circus, as it has been historically for centuries. Whether or not 2005 is another "vintage of the century" is of little importance to most folks. Debates about the weather, and whether (or not) it rained/hailed/snowed/blew more or less in '29, '47 or '82 will not be found here. But once in a while I like to sample some more normal wines from Bordeaux.

Rather than focus on the three or four dozen important classified growths, it's worth remembering that Bordeaux is home to 22,000 growers and at least 6,000 distinct chateaux (along with another several hundred co-operatives). There are some 57 appellations under the broad Bordeaux classification, many of them unknown to most Americans. Here is where the little gems can be found.

The great thing about cheap Bordeaux is that you will usually have a variety of vintages available. For all but the marquee properties, prices for the older vintages are generally lower than prices for younger vintages. Blame the changing fortunes of the dollar or the greed of the Bordelaise; either way, prices keep climbing.

Bordeaux ages well, at least for the first six or eight years, so you should have no worries about getting something tired or faded if you purchase anything under a decade old.

What is startling about the most widely available Bordeaux wines is how insipid and thin they are. Mouton Cadet, which is the budget brand of the famed Chateau Mouton Rothschild, puts out both a Blanc and a Rouge, each selling for around \$9. Are these bad wines? Certainly not. But they are almost invisible, so light as to seem like ghosts, shadow flavors flitting across the palate.

Barton & Guestier is another brand that appears ubiquitous. Tasting the **2002 B&G Saint-Émilion (\$17)**, I found it to be a small, simple, mushroomy wine; perfectly innocuous, fine for a burger, but give me a bottle of Red Truck any day.

Pick of the week

Hedges 2005 CMS White, \$12;
Hedges 2004 CMS Red, \$12. A wonderful pair of new releases from Hedges. The white is mostly C (chardonnay) and S (sauvignon blanc) with a splash of marsanne providing the M. The sauv blanc lifts it, giving it vivid acid and bright herb; the chardonnay fills in round apple and pear flavors, and the little bit of marsanne adds peach to the fruit. The red, rich and supple, tastes

Contrasting these well-known brands with some of the imports being brought in by local importer/distributors, the little guys win hands-down every time. In every wine I found more concentration, more substance, more flavor across the board.

Chateau St. Martin is an importer/distributor headquartered in Bellevue, specializing in Bordeaux. Recently, 10 of their brands were selected by the Conseil Interprofessionnel du Vin de Bordeaux (the Bordeaux Wine Bureau) to be showcased as part of a campaign to promote affordable Bordeaux. These are wines that convey a clear impression of the elegant, woody flavors that may still be found in some of the region's more modest producers.

In Seattle, Dylan Beal at Millésime is bringing in a nice mix of French wines from

like a far more expensive wine. It has a European polish to it, mixing plum, berry and cherry fruit with darker streaks of tar, coffee and smoke. (Distributed by Noble)

lesser (or simply overlooked) regions. In Bordeaux he's found some gems from the Bordeaux sub-appellations of Cotes de Blaye and Cotes de Bourg.

Some of these reds might seem austere if you are used to the flavors of California and Washington wines, but they offer interesting notes of forest and herb and earth, and they have the sort of tongue-cleaning tannins that match well with red

meat.

Recommended budget Bordeaux

Lagrave-Martillac 2003 Graves Blanc; \$23. Flavorful, flinty, lively with citrus and grapefruit, pineapple and fig.

Graves d'Ardonneau 2004 Cotes de Blaye Blanc Cuvée Prestige; \$15. Mostly sauvignon blanc, this is a juicy mix of grapefruit, green berries and stone.

Graves d'Ardonneau 2003 Cotes de Blaye Rouge Cuvée Prestige; \$16. Three quarters merlot, one quarter cabernet sauvignon; bone dry, stiff, tight. A cerebral, structured wine with fine minerality.

Ch. Les Bertrands 2003 Cotes de Blaye Rouge; \$15. Half merlot and half cabernet; dense, darkly fruited and deeply scented with wood smoke, toast and grilled meats.

Ch. Mercier 2003 Cotes de Bourg Rouge; \$12. It's got da funk (in a good way) and great color; mixed fruits, leather and tar. A lot going on for 12 bucks.

Ch. Mercier 2003 Cotes de Bourg Rouge Cuvée Prestige; \$18. Gorgeous nose; lush, mixed fruits hint at citrus, orange peel, berry and cherry. This one needs some breathing time.

Andeli 2001 Saint-Emilion Rouge; \$16. A bit rounder than most, with pleasant black olive, mushroom and leathery notes; good length.

Château Lalonde Balestard 2003 Bordeaux Rouge; \$20. Dark, leathery and tannic, shows a slight medicinal streak, flavors of mushroom and tack room.

Bunnell Family Cellar

Ron Bunnell, whose winemaking career has taken him to Beringer, Chateau Souverain, Kendall-Jackson and most recently Chateau Ste. Michelle, has introduced the first releases from his own winery, Bunnell Family Cellar.

Based in Prosser, Benton County, the winery is dedicated to producing syrah and other Rhone varietals. The vineyard and appellation wines Bunnell calls vins de l'endroit (wines of a place); the blended wines are vins de l'esprit (wines of the creative spirit).

Stunningly packaged in massive, deeply punted bottles, Bunnell's 2004 syrahs showcase three distinct appellations. The **Boushey-McPherson (Yakima Valley) Syrah (\$35)** impressed me with its elegance, its precision, and its tart, cool-climate fruit flavors. The **Horse Heaven Hills Syrah (\$40)** was more round and forward, a pleasing mix of citrus, berry and plum. Its smooth, ripe tannins left just a hint of black olive and fresh herb in the finish. The **Clifton Hill (Wahluke Slope) Syrah (\$37)**, from the warmest site, is the most forward and dense of all, with rich scents of mixed berries, spice, fresh herbs and toast.

There is also a bright, fruity country red called **Vif (\$25)** and a pair of excellent white wines, a 2005 **Evergreen Pinot Gris**, and a 2005 **Roza Berge Gewürztraminer (\$15/\$16)**. All of these wines were released last month in very limited quantities.

In Western Washington, Bunnell wines are on the list at Tulio in Seattle, Christina's and the Inn at Ship Bay on Orcas, the Met Wine Bar in Renton and Madison Cellars in Madison Park. The Washington state stores will have the gewürz on sale during Washington wine month this August. The surest way to find the wines is to call the winery (509-973-4187).

Unless noted, all Wine Adviser recommendations are currently available, though vintages may sometimes differ. All wine shops and most groceries have a wine specialist on staff. Show them this column, and if they do not have the wine in stock, they can order it for you from the local distributor.

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