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Cabernet's High End Proves Merely Ordinary

A quest for deals finds no throwaway wines—but few great values, either

By DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER



As we wrote two weeks ago, we spent our summer vacation trying to find out for ourselves if it's true that there are INCREDIBLE VALUES on high-end American wines because there's such an oversupply. In terms of Chardonnay, the answer, sadly, is no, so we turned our attention to Cabernet Sauvignon.

First, let's say this: There are indeed great values on wine today. As we've been saying for a long time now, with or without a recession, the shelves are full of well-priced and well-made wines from all over the world: Malbec from Argentina, Muscadet from France, Cabernet Sauvignon from Chile, rosés from Spain and more. In addition, because of economic hard times, the prices on some wines have dropped into good-value territory. One example, which we wrote about a few weeks ago, is 2005 midrange Bordeaux.

It's also true that, if you're patient and very watchful, you might find some bargains at wine stores that are trying to move some inventory. We recently stumbled across a 1985 Warre's Port for \$27, a world-class bargain because a more-common price is about \$100.

But one reason that Port was on sale is because it's Port, which isn't terribly popular in the U.S. We have also seen very good deals on things like Gewürztraminer from Alsace, which is always a hard sell, though we love it. Even Burgundy from the fine 2005 vintage can be a good deal these days, since most Americans don't regularly shop for, say, Savigny-lès-Beaune. In other words, what we're seeing is the equivalent of a car company lowering prices on its less-popular models while holding the line on vehicles that most people actually want, or at least have wanted in the past.

The Dow Jones Expensive Cabernet Index

In a tasting of American Cabernet Sauvignon from the 2005 vintage that cost between \$50 and \$75, these were our favorites. We generally drink fine Cabernet with simple yet elegant meals, such as steak or a roast, to let the wine show off its complexity. These will generally age well for at least a few years. Prices on these wines are not nearly as flexible as we would have guessed. As we also discovered when we shopped for bargains on expensive Chardonnay, we sometimes spotted these online for low prices and then, when we ordered them, found that they weren't actually available. It reminded us of John's father, who always used to say: "Gas stations can afford to post low prices when they're closed."

Antica (Antinori Family Estate) (Napa Valley).

\$50*. *Very Good/Delicious* **Best of tasting (tie) and best value.** Looks delicious—dark and pretty—and smells delicious, too, with roasted blackberries and blueberries, minerals, plums and other very ripe, dark fruits. Even a hint of black olive. Serious wine, with good acidity, fine fruit-oak balance and a very long, blackberry finish. A wine of breeding. Could age beautifully.

Duckhorn Vineyards (Napa Valley).

\$65*. *Very Good/Delicious.* **Best of tasting (tie).** Smells crisp and structured and indeed it is. Juicy and nicely restrained. Quite elegant and beautifully made. Regal instead of brawny. Calls out for the sweet juice of a rare steak. Duckhorn's Merlot is a winner, too, and this is 25% Merlot.

B.R. Cohn Winery 'Olive Hill Estate Vineyards' (Sonoma Valley).

\$50. *Very Good.* Old favorite. Intense, tight and ageable, with good structure, a bit of tobacco on the nose and a nice hint of minerals. Ripe fruit and good balance.

Goldschmidt Vineyard 'Vyborny Vineyard' (Alexander Valley).

\$60*. *Very Good.* A big, soulful mouthful of rich, dark fruit, but then a remarkably restrained, dry finish, with minerals and some strong black tea that leaves you wanting another sip. Beautifully made and proud.

Mount Eden Vineyards (Estate Bottled, Santa Cruz Mountains).

\$54.99. *Very Good.* Sun-ripened blackberries and sage on the nose, along with some cedar and sandalwood. Classy taste, with black cherries and bittersweet chocolate and good, spiky acidity.

Barnett Vineyards (Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley).

\$54.99. *Good/Very Good.* Thoughtfully made and interesting. A highly personal wine, with big, soul-satisfying fruit. Not as complex as we'd hope, but we like the vision.

--Note: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at stores in California, Illinois, New Jersey and New York. *We paid \$59.99 for Antica and Duckhorn and \$57.59 for Goldschmidt, but these prices appear more representative. Prices vary widely.

Despite big gains for imported wines over the past decade, about three-fifths of wine drunk by Americans is made in California. Americans are comfortable with the tastes, the names and the pronunciation, not to mention that it's nice to support a wonderful, home-grown industry. What this has meant, though, is that American wines—and especially California wines and especially the most popular varieties, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot—are generally not priced to move. They move anyway. But we keep reading that the higher end of the market is dead and that Americans are only buying cheaper stuff.

That should mean bargains. So we went searching for value in the high-end Cabernet aisle. After scouring shelves both in person and online, we decided to focus on the very good 2005 vintage because it's widely available even though many 2006 wines have been released. It would seem to us that wineries would have worked to keep prices in check and that stores would be eager to sell the 2005s. We set our price target at \$50 to \$75, with an idea that we should be able to find Cabernets at that price, which isn't inexpensive by any means, that were really worth more, perfect for a special occasion.

Cabernet Sauvignon is the world's classic red-wine grape, the grape of great Bordeaux and America's most famous wines. Top American wineries generally want to be judged by their best Cabernet or, in some cases, their Cabernet-based proprietary blend. It wasn't that long ago—though it sure seems long ago—that even wineries with no track record priced their Cabernets above \$100 for fear that the wines wouldn't be taken seriously otherwise. Back then, we found few that were actually worth \$100. But with today's economy, we wondered if maybe that \$100 wine is \$50 now and worth every penny. To find out, we collected more than 50 Cabernets from four states. We bought wines from well-known names and more-obscure wineries. Inevitably, most were from California and most of those were from Napa and Sonoma. We tasted them in blind flights over several nights. After our initial tasting and discussion of each, we rated it and then returned a while later to retaste and revisit our ratings, since these are still young wines.

As always, we were not looking to declare "America's best Cabernet" or to make a list of wines to look for or avoid at the store. Rather, we were trying to frame a big picture: If you spend big bucks on a Cabernet these days, are you likely to find good value?

Overall, they were pretty good. We were angry after our tasting of Chardonnay, because we found too many of those wines stupid and insulting—bad, thoughtless wines made for profit, not passion. We felt that way about few of the Cabernets. Whether we liked them or not, it was clear that they were not throwaway wines. American wineries clearly still hold Cabernet in the esteem it deserves and don't feel they can make a mockery of this grape as they have done too often with Chardonnay, and with lower-end Cabernet, for that matter.

But we found few good values. The wines were technically fine and we were pleased with the fruit and minerality of many of them, but they were not, overall, exciting. What they lacked, over and over, was that amazing combination of focus, structure and balance that makes Cabernet great. We expect more-expensive Cabernet to have the brightness of sunshine streaming through a window and tastes that are as complex as a potable puzzle. That requires not just expertise but vision and risk. These were, on the whole, not wines of vision and risk.

We tasted too few Cabernets that would move us to gush, "Wow, if we paid \$70 for this, we'd be happy because it's special and worth every penny." But there were a handful. One of our best of tasting, Antica, is owned by Italy's Antinori family. The winery made about 2,000 cases, which were distributed nationwide. Our other favorite, Duckhorn, is made in relatively large quantities: 11,782 cases, which were distributed nationwide. Both of these wines had us talking all night about their complexity, from hints of black olives on the nose to blackberries and earth on the finish. That's what fine Cabernet should do.

Bargains? Well, after weeks of shopping and tasting, we have to tell you that we wouldn't be looking for them in the aisles of high-end American Chardonnay and Cabernet. But there are plenty of values in many good wine shops. If you don't already have a trusted wine merchant, now is a fine time to find one because the best bargains today require a guide. But they are out there.

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