



Bargain-buying strategies

With gas prices still hovering around the \$4 mark, more and more customers have been asking me how to find better value in their wine selections. I thought that I would take this opportunity to discuss some tips on finding those wines that over-deliver for their price.

Take the road less travelled, don't rely on familiar brands.

Many popular labels aren't so successful with lower-priced brand extensions. Name recognition may pay off when buying in the \$30-\$40 range, but I find it to be less reliable in bargain aisles.

Many smaller family owned wineries are a great place to look for value. You may not have heard of them because they don't spend money on advertising. They tend to all believe that it is what is in the bottle that matters.

It is difficult to make everything excellent. Look for producers who specialize in a particular variety or blend of wine.

Embrace obscurity.

In much of the world, everyday wines are made with native grapes, from Gruner Veltliner to Bonarda, which require little manipulation. Invest in a solid guide to varieties (Jancis Robinson's book "How to Taste" covers it well) and practice your pronunciation.

Sometimes you don't even have to choose an obscure grape to make a great find - just something a little atypical. The Zantho Muscat 2005 is a wonderful example of this. Most people will read see the varietal Muscat and assume that this is a sweet wine. Not so. This wine drinks more like a Sauvignon Blanc from Sancerre and has quite a tang to the finish.

Another trail off the beaten path is the type of wines known as "field blends." These types of wines are very common in European countries, while relatively new here in the United States.

Change is constant.

Occasionally we have wines marked "Special Buy". These wines are one-time-only offers, buyouts from wholesalers, stock that needs to be cleared and so on. Wait too long and they'll vanish. Given these shifting sands, don't dally when you find a winner. Buy more soon.

Think far afield.

The lack of California wines in the mix isn't just sommelier stubbornness. With a few exceptions (and not just the ubiquitous Mr. Charles Shaw and his "Two Buck Chuck") the economics of making wine here rarely favor the under-\$10 category. If you really want homegrown wines, remember such domestic labels as Delicato. Or mix it up: An \$8 import, from Spain or South America, and a \$12 domestic bottle still yield an average of 10 bucks.

Bigger can be better.

Packaging is a major cost factor for bargain wines, and you can save big by purchasing more in one package. Many bag-in-boxes cut the per-bottle cost down below \$6, with the equivalent of 4 bottles in each box.