

## VINTAGE TIPS

# Quality local wines for under \$8

***Cheap but good Bronco Wine Co. labels an alternative to imports.***

By PEG MELNIK

Can you find tasty local wines for \$5 a bottle?

It's a quandary, according to local retailers, who say most domestic wine begins in the \$8 range while you can find tasty imports from Spain, Chile and Australia at \$5 a bottle.

### **BARGAIN BOTTLINGS**

Options in the \$5-a-bottle range

#### **Bronco Wine Company**

Crane Lake Cellars 2005 Petite Sirah

Crane Lake Cellars 2006 Sangiovese

"I'm not saying it's right," said Ben Pearson, wine buyer of Santa Rosa's Bottle Barn wine and liquor store. "It's just the way it is."

Of course, Pearson said, some domestic bottlings priced under \$8 are thriving, and leading the pack are brands from the Bronco Wine Co., headquartered in Ceres, with its bottling facility in Napa. Pearson said these brands — which include Napa Ridge, Napa Creek and Laurier — aren't getting 90-point ratings, but many have won medals in competitions.

Other domestic wines faring well are from other megabrands like Clos du Bois and Geysler Peak, both of Geyserville, he added. When the quality is the same and the price is the same, Pearson said people do tend to buy local.

"There's no reason that California cannot compete with any wines of the world on our own turf," said

Bronco founder Fred Franzia, famed for his wildly successful Charles Shaw "Two-Buck Chuck" wines.

How can Franzia afford to price his wines so reasonably?

Harvey Posert, a Bronco spokesman, said they are able to produce inexpensive wine because the Franzia Family is the largest grape grower in California, with 35,000-plus acres.

"Bronco is also one of the largest wineries in the country and it has enormous efficiencies of scale," Posert added, "and Fred runs a tight ship. ... Fred's goal is to have an inexpensive wine that everybody in the U.S. can afford."

Traverso's Gourmet Foods & Liquors in Santa Rosa sells Bronco's Crane Lake Cellars 2005 petite sirah and 2006 sangiovese for \$3.99. It also carries Bronco's Harlow Ridge 2007 sauvignon blanc for \$5.99.

"These wines go well with food and could compete with wines in the \$10 category," according to co-owner Michael Traverso.

Here are some other tips from retailers for finding that \$5 winner:

Shop for big-format bottles. Whether they're jug wines like Carlo Rossi or Cribari Vineyards, or magnums like James Arthur Field wine or Gallo's Barefoot, they're roughly the equivalent of \$5 a bottle.

Scout for bottlings with fruit from the Central Valley, most notably Lodi, and/or look for discontinued or "close-out" bottlings. Producers are just looking to move these wines, not necessarily make a profit.