

Pocketbook Picks
California's Best Wines
for \$15 and Under

*Our 15th annual value tasting served up
a host of good bottles.*

QRW TASTING TEAM

It must be the economy or consumers' frustration with wine prices, but we continue to get the old question: Know any good wines cheap? To this we say, plenty! It took us a few months to collect nearly eight dozen wines and several sessions of blind tasting these volume wines, but we found them, and herein our results.

But first a few comments. We only taste those wines that are readily available nationally at the retail level. We try to concentrate on major varietals — Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Zinfandel, Chardonnay, etc. We usually do not taste Pinot Noir because at this price level good Pinot is hard to come by, but this time we're glad we did, and can recommend a few. The Cabs are very good, and the Chards are generous. Merlot, which had fallen from grace, is back on our list. And for the first time, we offer a numerical rating, but only for volume wines, which are more accessible to numbers precisely because they lack the nuances and subtleties of great wines, which are otherwise nearly impossible to quantify. You can't put a number to a nuance, no matter what the Parkerites claim. Volume wines, on the other hand, are fun, exhibiting some gusto, immediacy, and easy fruit forward flavors.

When it comes to volume value wines, vintage dates are not as important as they would be to higher priced, single vineyard wines. Volume wines usually are sourced wines from the general California growing regions; they're well

blended, and made to be consumed immediately. In fact, some of the vintages we list below may already be unavailable. This is not a problem. They were made to be swept off the shelves. Consumers who specialize in volume wine purchases want value and generally know what to expect. They're not interested in vintages and extensive wine notes. They know the label and go for it.

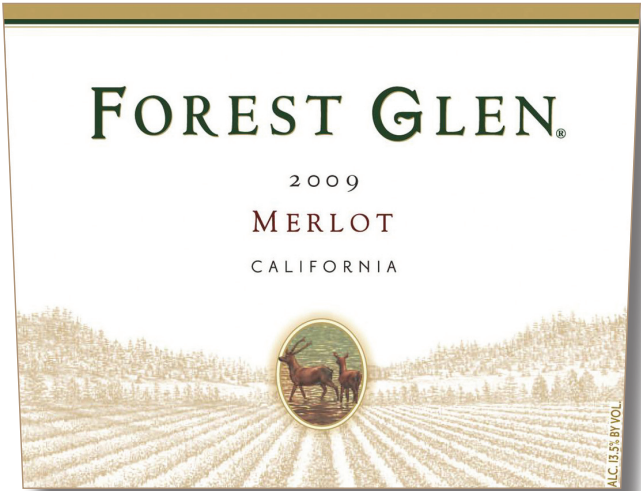
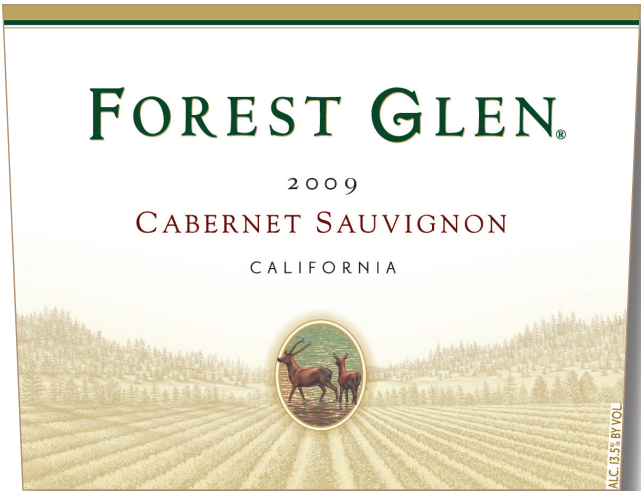
It's getting harder to do these tastings because so many volume wineries have changed hands, making the wine temporarily unavailable or under some new brand which we've yet to taste. Thus, we stick to tried and true selections which come from volume based producers, like Bronco, DFV Wines, Gallo, Round Hill, and The Other Guys. They've been producing solid value wines for years and these producers know what they're doing. They know how to source wines; they have their favorite growers; they know the vineyards; and they know the market. If value is your goal, it's folly to ignore them.

We never offer tasting notes for this column. All you need to know is that they are balanced bistro "everyday wines"; they have rounded fruit, some spice and a touch of oak. There are no fruit bombs on our lists, nor any oak bombs. In judging these wines, we concentrate on aroma, taste, and finish; however, we place greater emphasis on finish, and the wines below offer a smooth, fairly full and satisfying one. Also, they have easy upfront flavors that invite you to a second glass.

CALIFORNIA'S BEST WINES
\$15 and Under

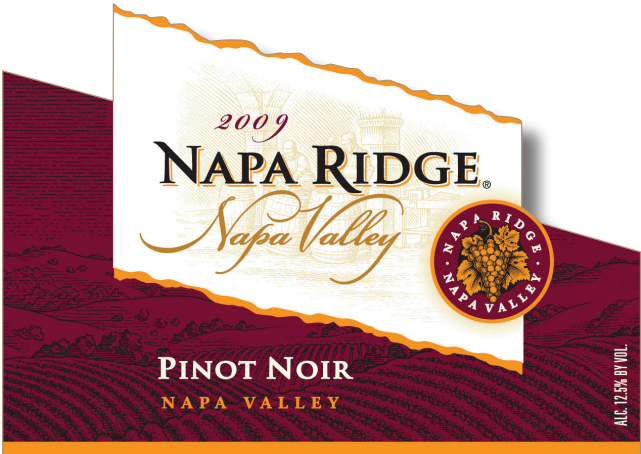
CABERNET SAUVIGNON (90 points)

- 2009 FAT CAT CABERNET SAUVIGNON, California, \$11
- 2009 FORESTVILLE CABERNET SAUVIGNON, California, \$7
- 2009 FOREST GLEN CABERNET SAUVIGNON, California, \$11
- 2009 GNARLY HEAD CABERNET SAUVIGNON, California, \$11
- 2009 MASKED RIDER CABERNET SAUVIGNON, California, \$10
- 2009 ROCK HOLLOW VINTNER'S SELECTION CABERNET SAUVIGNON, Paso Robles, \$10
- 2009 ROUND HILL CABERNET SAUVIGNON, California, \$8
- 2008 TURNING LEAF CABERNET SAUVIGNON, California, \$10



MERLOT (89 points)

- 2009 COASTAL RIDGE MERLOT, California, \$8
- 2009 FAT CAT MERLOT, California, \$11
- 2009 FOREST GLEN MERLOT, California, \$11
- 2009 GNARLY HEAD MERLOT, California, \$11
- 2009 MONTPELLIER MERLOT, California, \$8
- 2007 NAPA RIDGE MERLOT, Napa Valley, \$10
- 2009 ROUND HILL MERLOT, California, \$8
- 2007 RUTHERFORD VINTNERS MERLOT, Napa Valley, \$10
- 2008 TURNING LEAF MERLOT, California, \$10



PINOT NOIR (89 points)

- 2009 FOREST GLEN PINOT NOIR, California, \$11
- 2009 GNARLY HEAD PINOT NOIR, California, \$11
- 2009 IRONY PINOT NOIR, California, \$11
- 2008 MIRASSOU, California, \$12
- 2008 MOOBUZZ PINOT NOIR, California, \$15
- 2009 NAPA RIDGE PINOT NOIR, Napa Valley, \$12

CALIFORNIA'S BEST WINES
\$15 and Under

ZINFANDEL (90 points)

- 2008 DANCING BULL ZINFANDEL, California, \$12
- 2009 GNARLY HEAD ZINFANDEL, California, \$11
- **2009 GREEN TRUCK ZINFANDEL (made with organic grapes), Mendocino, \$10**
- **2007 MASKED RIDER ZINFANDEL, California, \$10**
- 2008 PLUNGERHEAD ZINFANDEL, Lodi, \$15

SHIRAZ/SYRAH (91 points)

- **2009 MONTPELLIER SHIRAZ, Lodi, \$9**
- **2007 NAPA RIDGE SYRAH, Napa Valley, \$10**

CHARDONNAY, SAUVIGNON BLANC, AND OTHER WHITES

Chardonnay (89 points)

- **2009 CARMENET RESERVE CHARDONNAY, California, \$12**
- 2009 FOG HEAD CHARDONNAY, Monterey, \$14
- 2009 GNARLY HEAD CHARDONNAY, California, \$11
- **2009 HACIENDA CLAIRE DE LUNE CHARDONNAY, California, \$10**
- 2009 IRONY CHARDONNAY, Napa Valley, \$13
- 2009 LANDER-JENKINS CHARDONNAY, Napa Valley, \$15
- **2009 MONTPELLIER CHARDONNAY, California, \$8**
- **2008 MOTOS LIBERTY CHARDONNAY, California, \$10**
- **2009 NAPA RIDGE CHARDONNAY, Napa Valley, \$12**
- **2009 ROCK HOLLOW VINTNERS SELECTION CHARDONNAY, Santa Barbara County, \$12**
- 2009 ROUND HILL CHARDONNAY, California, \$8

Sauvignon Blanc (88 points)

- **2008 SILVER RIDGE SAUVIGNON BLANC, California, \$12**
- 2009 RUTHERFORD RANCH SAUVIGNON BLANC, Napa Valley, \$15

Pinot Grigio and Viognier (88 points)

- **2010 FOREST GLEN PINOT GRIGIO (Tehachapi Clone), \$10**
- 2009 LOREDONA VIOGNIER, Lodi, \$9

SPARKLING WINE (87 points)

- **DOMAINE LAURIER (Méthode Champenoise), California, \$14** ♀

