

Best of The Best California Values

Here are 30 can't-miss wines for \$12 and under.

QRW STAFF

It took us several months of blind tastings, adding and deleting, but now we offer our **11th Annual Best of The Best in California \$12 and Under**. There are problems associated with such a tasting. First is inflation: years ago, we used to title this column Best of The Best \$5 and Under; then \$10 and Under. Now it's \$12. The first problem feeds the second: getting wines worthy of the tasting. There are fewer good California "value" wines being sold at \$12 because producers want more money for their wines. Most of what we used to taste for this column is now \$15 and more.

As to vintage (year on the label), we try to keep current with the recent releases, but these wines sell fast and vintages quickly change. Vintages don't matter much with these wines because their success is consistency. People return to these wines because they have a good idea of what they taste like; they want the assurance that consistency offers. The difference, say, between a 2005 and 2006 will be negligible.

These wines are largely brand-based, produced by well-known vintners, and are sourced grapes (i.e., the grapes have been sought and bought from growers familiar to the producers in the various counties. Often you will see the word "California" on the label).

As usual, for the wine selections below, we don't offer tasting notes. What you need to know is this: they are solid, balanced, tasty bistro and everyday wines that marry well with food. They exhibit rounded fruit, with soft spice and some oak. In judging wine, we favor finish, and the wines below offer a smooth, fairly full and satisfying one. These wines offer easy flavors upfront and invite a second glass, one of the best recommendations any value wine can receive. The prices are right. In these inflationary times, these wines never looked so good.

We blind tasted 92 wines. Prices below are east coast retail, and may vary from region to region. Next issue: European Global Value Wines.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

- 2007 Bad Dog Ranch, Cabernet Sauvignon, California, \$10
- 2005 Forest Glen Cabernet Sauvignon, California, \$11
- 2005 ForestVille Cabernet Sauvignon, California, \$6
- 2006 Gallo Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County, \$12
- 2005 Harlow Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon, Lodi, \$10
- 2007 McManis Cabernet Sauvignon, California, \$10
- 2005 Napa Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, \$12
- 2007 Round Hill Cabernet Sauvignon, California, \$9

MERLOT

- 2006 Fat Cat Merlot, California, \$10
- 2006 Gallo Family Vineyards Merlot, Sonoma County, \$12
- 2006 Montpellier Merlot, California, \$7
- 2005 Round Hill Merlot, California, \$8

PINOT NOIR

- 2007 Harlow Ridge Pinot Noir, Lodi, \$10
- 2007 Sterling Vintners Collection, Central Coast, \$12

ZINFANDEL/SHIRAZ/BLENDS

- 2006 Bonny Doon Vineyard Syrah, Le Pousseur, Central Coast, \$10
- 2007 Coastal Ridge Shiraz, California, \$8
- 2006 ForestVille Zinfandel, California, \$6
- 2006 Montpellier Syrah, California, \$7
- 2005 Napa Ridge Syrah, Napa Valley, \$12
- 2007 Red Truck Petite Syrah, California, \$10

CHARDONNAY AND OTHER WHITES

- 2006 Fat Cat Chardonnay, California, \$10
- 2007 Gallo Family Vineyards Chardonnay, Sonoma County, \$12
- 2008 Gnarly Head Chardonnay, California, \$10
- 2007 Stag's Leap Hawk Crest, California, \$11
- 2006 Irony Chardonnay, Napa Valley, \$12
- 2007 Loredona Viognier, Lodi, \$11
- 2007 Montpellier Chardonnay, California, \$7
- 2007 Napa Ridge Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley, \$12
- 2007 Round Hill Chardonnay, California, \$9
- 2007 White Truck Sauvignon Blanc, Lake County, \$10 ☞