

Hanging with the wine geek crowd can be fun but at the same time it can be frustrating. Innocent conversations about wine devolve into ontological crises about all things vinous when the overriding goal is just to catch a good buzz. The last couple of years have seen one topic hashed, rehashed, flipped over and hashed again. Namely, the utilization of the winemaking process called micro-oxygenation, affectionately called "micro-ox."

This process has found its greatest public expression in the movie *Mondovino*. Hanes cannot comment on this as he's seen maybe ten total minutes of the movie. One day he'll see it. Promise. In the movie it appears the process is depicted as an evil technique, employed those bent on obliterating the concept of "terroir," that is, of a wine representing its place of origin, vintage conditions, grape suitability to said place of origin, all that stuff. Hey, if "terroir" is so important then how come the word isn't automatically included in Microsoft Word's dictionary? Answer that, tough guy. Hanes likes the wines he likes, duh, and he dislikes the ones he dislikes. There may be a reason for reaching either assessment but let's hope it isn't out of any tedious desire to defend the virginity of the earth. This is best left to people much more earnest and high-minded than Hanes. He just wants to get drunk, hopefully in the process scribble a tasting note and share the bottle with a winsome lass who can handle her booze, has good listening skills and an aversion to talking on the telephone for more than two minutes.

Before delving into the tempest in the teapot called the discussion of micro-oxygenation it seems commonsensical to explain what it is. Hanes is no scientist nor winemaker and holds no aspirations to either. As a result, some "facts" of the matter may be occluded, presented haphazardly or condensed because he already writes in a long-winded fashion. After 'splaining the basics, it's back to why micro-oxygenation should or should not be important to *YOU*, dear reader.

The exposure of grape juice, both as it ferments into wine and as wine proper, to oxygen is of extreme importance and plays a deciding factor in the flavor, texture, color of the wine as well as on its aromas. Ditto for freshness, timeline until drinkability and aging potential. Oxygen, it's not just for breathing anymore. The manner in which the grape juice gets exposure to oxygen and the extent to which this can be controlled by human intent is the heart of the matter. Traditionally since the Iron Age, oak barrels have been used to hold and/or age wine. Oak is preferred because it's strong, less porous than most competitor woods and has been shown to add flavors to the liquid being held, flavors which people kinda like. But the seal between the oak staves of a barrel are not perfect, oxygen does get in and come into contact with the wine. Over time people found this contact to be beneficial and alter the aforementioned flavor, texture, color of the wine in a good way. In fact, winemakers decided that in some cases, especially with sturdier red juice, even more oxygen contact was needed. Hence, the advent of winemaking procedures such as punching down the cap of fermenting grape juice, pumping juice from the bottom of the fermentation tank to the top, racking wine from one barrel to another, yadda, yadda. Among satisfying other winemaking goals, these activities were employed to get the correct amount of oxygen contact with the grape juice cum wine and make all as it should be.

Of course, historically, winemakers used the tools at their disposal. Over time, science and general advances in vinification techniques have broadened the tools at these winemakers' disposal. This particularly so in the past few decades. Ecce micro-oxygenation. As one famous dude put it well, why take the wine to the oxygen when you can take the oxygen to the wine, in the process gaining even finer control over the interactions thereof? No brainer, right? Unless you think like a wine geek. Micro-oxygenation basically bubbles oxygen through grape juice/wine in a controlled fashion, this done in a stainless steel container with very precise control over the rate of oxygen released.

An interesting component of micro-oxygenation is the addition of oak chips, oak beans, commemorative oak statuettes of Liberty into the wine as it undergoes the treatment. Because [a] the wine may spend less time in oak during fermentation and aging and [b] consumers want some oak flavors, the oak has to be added to make sure the oxygen gets their flavors into the mix. Oh yeah, and there's important chemical properties the oak wood adds to the liquid too. Wouldn't want to forget that. Science!

As the oxygen bubbles through the wine, measurements are constantly taken. Thus, a more consistent, homogenous product (*wine*, lest that seem pejorative) may be achieved, minimizing things like volatility, lot and/or bottle variation, reductive flavors or aromas. The winemaker gains immeasurable control via, err, measurements. If the winemaker and the rest of the winery team knows what will please the end consumer the most and sell the fastest, you just design the wine to meet that end. It's not such an abhorrent thing if paying your mortgage or your children's college education depends on sales figures and staying cash flow positive. And there's still lots and lots of work to do in managing micro-oxygenation (controlling rate of oxygen, temperature, length of time of oxygenation, procedures post-oxygenation, etc.). Here's most of what those little (or bigger depending on need) air bubbles do to the wine.

1. Protection of, if not deepening of, the stabilization of anthocyanins, the chemicals which impart color to wine. Ever notice how wine these days sure looks a lot darker and more luminous than ever before? Regardless of grape type or place of origin? Some dastardly sorts use coloring agents but micro-oxygenation plays a big role here too. That's why Hanes uses at least 300 words to describe a wine's color in every tasting note. Could be a sign of micro-oxygenation!

2. Elimination of many vegetal flavors or aromas which people don't like. Oxygen reacts with certain compounds to lessen vegetal or grassy elements. Also, the addition of oak parts to the wine gets the oaky flavors in there faster, all the better to mask any of these herbaceous flaws. Other chemical aspects of oak being present help in the stabilization of color as above and both firming up and smoothing out texture as below.

3. Smoothing of the wine's texture, altering the presence of tannins and how their chemical bonds are formed and thus creating a more uniform texture from start to finish, both of each sip and of the bottle as a whole. By structuring the wine better in the winery via micro-oxygenation there's less chance of the wine doing its own thing in the bottle later. Most of the pertinent chemical reactions oxygen could induce have already happened in a controlled manner via micro-oxygenation. Because the texture is so consistent throughout, the possibility for a "hollow middle" is minimized and general roundness emphasized. At times the "sense of progression" from attack through to the finish gets wiped out but, if it tasted good during the attack, why quibble?

4. Reduction of sulfide production and other chemicals which create smells most people think are nasty. You know, like "merde." This is kind of what people mean when they call a wine "reduced," the wine needs oxygen to create other compounds to then "blow off" the funkiness via further chemical interactions. Why wait until the bottle is finally opened when you can reduce the reduction in the winery? Sweet.

Beyond these effects on the wine itself there are a whole host of practical benefits to the winery (and perhaps its corporate parent and their shareholders). Because the tannins are better managed from the get-go the wine can be "tamed" and made drinkable earlier than it would be if left to its own devices. Hence, quicker release time, less money spent on warehousing and better cash flow. More importantly, there are *serious* cost savings realized through not having to buy oak barrels (instead just the oak parts dropped into the wine) which are crazy expensive as well as on labor costs for workers who would have had to rack the wines and expend more energy managing the wine as it aged into a commercially releasable state over time. Just need that one winemaker watching and pushing the buttons.

These practical facts become even more important when factoring the scale of production. If one is making a 300 case cult Cabernet you can deal with added cost as it will simply be passed along to the end consumer (and then some!). But if you're playing in the value or even sub-\$20 segments of the market, any cost savings may be able to help you price better to achieve wider market share. If you owned stock in any company in any other industry you'd be happy about cost savings boosting your yearly dividends, huh? Why not so with wine?

In summary, there are arguably good reasons for a winery to employ micro-oxygenation to achieve consistency of product at a higher quality level (quality as measured by the broadest customer satisfaction which, duh, is sales) as well as to realize significant cost reductions and bolster the bottom line. There is the possibility to use it selectively to address isolated, specific problems (either during and/or after fermentation) or as a general methodology. Given these "facts," the utilization of micro-oxygenation *is* going to rise over the years to come, whether this is publicly owned up to or not.

So, now we basically know what micro-oxygenation is and why winemakers employ it. But why should we care? For many participants in the debate it's because it's a battle over the "very soul of wine." Lame. The term "wine" no longer has a center that holds unless one wants to stick to the dry textbook sense of fermented grape juice. From a practical, real world perspective what we need is to find a new term to accompany "wine" without being confused with it. Naturally, capitalistic market forces being what they are, "wine" will remain the descriptor for the *industry* which depends on name and brand recognition. An organic farmer in Chablis is not going to beat out a multi-billion dollar industry for the rights to "wine." But we need to stop making the "category mistake" of comparing mass market beverages and/or beverages which aim at a predictable consistency with other beverages which have as their goal expressing the vagaries of place, grape type and whatever the calendar throws at us this year, warts and all. Yeah, if this happened it would make the wine chat boards and blogs boring places to visit but maybe this is for the better [the bastards]. Most of the righteous defenders of terroir here in the U.S. are coastal urban types. You don't see people in Wichita or Scottsdale getting all lathered up about whether their Riesling has been acidified or their Cabernet Sauvignon micro-oxygenated. Geez, enough with the paternalism already. You buy into being a member of capitalist society when it favors you, your job and your wallet, come to grips with the fact that if there's a market for "non-interventionist" winemaking, non-interventionists will make wine for it. It may not uplift and edify the masses but, you know, we'll all manage to live anyway. People like micro-oxygenated wine, who cares if they could like natural wine *better*? Let 'em stew in their own juices, Hanes says.

Seriously, we need to stop talking about "wine" across the board as if we're discussing the same substance. If we're talking about books or cinema we all know what we mean when we say "literature" versus a "beach book." It's not a slam against the latter to say that's what it is. What is gained by discussing the relative merits of James Joyce and John Grisham? To Hanes, not a lot. He'd pass on that conversation just as he'd pass on discussing why Kendall-Jackson's Pinot Noir differs from that of Cheillon. Freaking boring, that's why and a prime example of a category confusion. The gray area between high and low will always be the gray area, just as in literature, cinema, painting, and so on. How many angels *do* dance on the head of a pin? Defenders of Vinous Virginity need to grow up and not feel their passions or preferences are tainted by association to other fermented grape juice and thus try to "educate" those who like mass market wines. Taken from the view of humanity as a whole, nobody gives a shit.

In passing Hanes would like to point out that *he* likes natural wines better on the whole. But why should humanity give a flying frak (cf. Battlestar Galactica)? In reading up on what people had to say on the topic, one quote stood out for Hanes and he wants to share it with you: "They call it MOX, inside-wine speak for micro-oxygenation, and those in the know don't want you to know too much about it because they're afraid that you won't understand it. Worse yet, they're concerned that you'll think they're making Franken-wine." Dude, Franken wine ROCKS! Long live the Bocksbeutel!

* * * * *

This month's big winners... This month there was some good luck with Loire Cabernet Franc experimentation, Grosbois's 2005 Chinon Vieilles Vignes ["old vines" to you and me] being a quite satisfying chug for around \$22. The name "Domaine Alfred" is incredibly cheesy but their 2005 Chardonnay "Goss Creek" from California's Edna Valley represents a pretty good buy at \$19 or so. If you go for that kind of shit. Never had a wine from Italian producer Casalfarneto before but their 2005 Verdicchio "Fontevicchia" ain't all that bad and at \$16 just misses being a real steal. The "Buddy" was correct in blowing a gasket over the Kingston Family "Tobiano" Syrah from Chile, it's pretty good and more or less fairly priced at \$20. But calm down, Buddy. Aubry's non-vintage Brut Rosé [disgorged June 2006] is a definite try for those who want their Champagne very dry and linear and, these days, not poorly priced at \$42.

The best \$15 and under picks... The rumors are true. Vissoux's basic Beaujolais bottling, the 2005 "Cuvée Traditionnelle" is a fantastic, "buy by the case" wine for \$15. Beautiful Gamay fruit, pureness, freshness, everything you want at half the calories. Same can be said for Jean-Paul Brun's 2005 basic Beaujolais bottling, the "Terres Dorées l'Ancien Vieilles Vignes" for a couple bucks less. Tasting these two made Hanes go out and buy even more 2005 Beaujolais wines to drink in the weeks to come. Gosh darn it, when will the wines of Bergerac, France's Montravel département ever get the recognition they deserve? Where does Asimov stand on this matter??? Anyway, Calabre's 2005 blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon is a tasty lil sumptin'-sumptin' for \$13 and recommended near and far. Other than these, Hanes didn't do too well on high quality cheap wines this month. Hurm.

And the disappointments... Some so-called "friends" really don't like Hanes and bring him wines to taste they know will anger him. Not that he is hard to anger, but still. The 2004 Flor de Pingus from Ribera in Spain is just not worthy of all the accolades it has received even if it, ahem, "opens up with time" as the guilty party tried to put it. \$80? No way, José. Err, Peter. The maliciousness continued with the infliction of the 2005 Shirvington Shiraz on Hanes's delicate and refined palate. For \$70, Hanes coulda had a Cornas or something! But god bless those who buy these wines, maybe they will leave the other less fruity, more high acid stuff for snooty Hanes to consume. "Buddy" went nuts over this but, even though Hanes loves Howell Mountain fruit the 2004 Zinfandel from Black Sears Vineyards was just OK, particularly given its exorbitant \$48 price tag. Sorry about that, yo. Alesia is the "negotiant" label for new Californian producer Rhys, which is the newest, most hottest, most "I'm gonna make it like Burgundy" Californian Pinot producer to hit the set in, why, months. Got to try their 2004 Syrah and it was OK but not all that [if it matters, others agree on this "score"]. The assumption is Hanes will eventually try some of their Pinot Noirs via friends on the mailing list, he isn't cool enough to buy them himself. Wine geeks like to make fun of Piedmontese producer La Spinetta as being "spooofulated" and why not? Tried a Tuscan Sangiovese they produce, Piedmont's borders not being big enough for The Spinesters, and just glad it was a free sample. Oudin seems to be one of those weird new Chablis producers that are becoming larger in number. Still the current release, their 2002 "Vaugiraut" didn't float Hanes's boat but maybe it will do it for others, especially those who find the wines of De Moor to be the shiznit.

* * * * *

All contents of this electronic mail are copyright 2007 by Marc Hanes. All rights reserved. Reproduction in any format without written prior permission is prohibited.

Unlike *those other* professional reviews, Hanes only will share what he likes if it is *currently available* in stores for immediate purchase. If these wines are not to be found in some of your local stores, they suck and that's not Hanes's fault.

If you are interested in reading tasting notes by Hanes on the older (or non-imported) wines he has recently consumed, these notes are gathered here: <http://www.haneswinereview.com/reviews/oldervintages2007.html>

The challenge. Each month Hanes will try out a new "tagline" for *The Hanes Wine Review* empire. The goal is to sum up and represent The Hanes Brand. This month's entry is...

Tagline #30: "The only wine review that spends more on Google ads than it makes in revenue from them!"

Here's the order in which Hanes humbly provides the wine review information:

Winery/Producer Name
Region of Origin, Appellation, Brand Name/Wine Style, Single Vineyard (if any applicable)
Grape Varietal
Vintage Year, Price Hanes Paid (if available), Alcohol Percentage (if available)
Tasting Notes, Hanes's Numeric Score (on the traditional, yet inane, 100 point scale [which for Hanes truly begins at around 80 points and more or less ends around 94 points])

* * * * *

And here's Hanes's wine reviews for April!

CALIFORNIA RED

Turley

Napa Valley, Hayne Vineyard

Zinfandel

2004, \$75.00, 16.2%

Dense purple core without looking like it's trying real hard to get all opaque and shit, moderate thickness to the red-ruby rims, has all the color you'd need. Caramel flan and crème brûlée fill up the nose, sprig of mint on top, orange blossom and a mix of salt and earth next, given the high level of oak scents one might expect the raspberry, blueberry, cherry fruit scents to be sweeter than they turn out to be. Full-bodied and bottom heavy, rolls like a soggy balled up towel across the tongue. Black licorice, mint, eucalyptus, candied orange peel and fresh garden herbs swirl through the first half, as in the nose you always know the raspberry, watermelon, blackberry, blueberry fruit is there but it doesn't get cloyingly sweet nor too blurry. The vanilla ice cream, caramel, coconut custard flavors play nicer here and blend in with the whole. No acidity, the tannins are so-so yet manage to do something, right? Capable of thought just not interested by the prospect. 90

Alfred, Domaine

Edna Valley, Chamisal Vineyards

Syrah

2003, \$31.99, 14.5%

Vivid glow in the ruby-violet core, teeters between opacity and cleaner transparency, the rims come alive with bright red-magenta to ruby hues. The bodacious oak toast in the nose slowly run down by the juicy white grapefruit and hothouse flower scents, enjoyable amount of beef blood and glazed ham too, very much in a primary youthful state. Medium-bodied with a sappy grip which helps it last well and spread its weight evenly over the palate. Here it spotlights the white grapefruit/lemon citrus and floral musk too. The acidity helps to sharpen the flavors, not overly tannic but on the whole it's dry once you acclimate to the initially sweeter citrus and currant, blackberry, pomegranate fruit. Spicy finish, echoes of clove, cedar, ginger alongside that element of baked ham. Pleasing inner mouth perfume. 89

Loring Wine Company

Santa Maria Valley, Rancho Ontiveros Vineyard

Pinot Noir

2004, \$52.99, 15.1%

Immaculate without a hint of cloudiness, any purple in the core torn between black and blood red influences, the red definitely wins out across the wide crimson to brick rims. Big, powerful slugger of a nose, all cola, menthol, wet earth and heavy cream in addition to aggressively ripe cranberry, blackberry, black cherry fruit scents, never gets unduly alcoholic, what is there probably prevents any syrupy nostril texture. Full-bodied, here the syrupy grip is in full force, every mouth pore gets a good squeeze. Lemon drop, cola, cocoa, eucalyptus all get their shots in. Again, not especially noticeable, yet, by the same token, you feel the booze level. Borderline plummy character to the cherry, blackberry fruit, thick without becoming immobile. Has a relentlessness which may please some and dismay others, but hard not to respect its singlemindedness. 88

Alesia

Sonoma County, Sonoma Coast, Chileno Valley Vineyard

Syrah

2004, \$40.00, 14.1%

Extremely dark black purple, soak it any longer and it would be a black hole, that said it has a good sense of cleanliness and certainly possesses uncommon glow along the red-magenta rims, coloration not an issue here. At first there's some merde and grilled wild game scents in the nose which can throw you a bit off balance but it rights itself with a quick burst of more familiar toasted oak as well as smoky plum, cherry, blackberry fruit albeit neither overdone at all, on the tight side at present, showing more promise than actual delivery. In the mouth it's full-bodied with a steel beam sort of density, quietly impassive while at the same time not to be ignored. Because of the wound up feel in the currant black cherry, blackberry fruit and white grapefruit citrus, there's more presence in the mocha, burnt toast notes as they at least move freely. More acidic than tannic, though the latter no slouch. The former brings out some cut grass, olive pit and tilled earth elements, subdued enough to appear clean and stay out of the spotlight. Given its relative inability to stretch out wide, fashions acceptable length on the finish. Even more of a "snapshot" than definitive statement of a tasting note. 88

Black Sears Vineyards

Napa Valley, Howell Mountain

Zinfandel

2004, \$47.99, 14.5%

Crystal clear red-ruby with only the mildest suggestion of violet, entirely consistent from the core to the rims, surface catches the light very well. Abundant white pepper and white grapefruit pith swirls through the nose, bright red fruit of strawberry, raspberry, watermelon, red cherry, the herbaceous dimension like burning dried grass. Light to medium-bodied, smooth yet the relative lack of body does slightly elevate the perception of the alcohol. Here the white grapefruit and lemon citrus has both the zip and sweetness to be the first flavors you notice, the peppery quality a thorough second. Caramel and vanilla cream soak up a large part of the youthful freshness in the strawberry, red cherry, raspberry fruit. Even with above average acidity, it is that oak which takes over the spotlight past the mid-palate. No rough spots nor nails sticking out, has a good deal of verve yet not as much of the "brambly" mountain profile as one might desire. 87

Vina Robles

San Luis Obispo County, Paso Robles

Cabernet Sauvignon

2002, \$19.99, 14.0%

Good clarity in the crimson-purple core, maintains richness as it sucks the light into its depths, brightens a lot at the rims to a youthful garnet, brick red hue. There's a twiggy, tree bark kind of herbaceousness to the nose, the oak toast is lowkey, beginning of some cedar notes, has a "dust bowl" kind of earthiness, hasn't rained in awhile, little bit of white grapefruit and evanescent red cherry, currant fruit scents. Medium to full-bodied, the tannins easily able to prevent slouching or poor posture. Actually, though, the acidity is what lends freshness to the red cherry, currant, blackberry fruit. Less herbaceous here, but the earthiness is higher, making it feel inert at times. Cedar and something like orange or lemon peel show up but decidedly lacking in non-fruit flavors. Tightens up some on the finish, not short, just clenches. 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, 5% Petite Sirah. 86

Vina Robles

San Luis Obispo County, Paso Robles, Huerhuero Red4 Blend

2004, \$19.99, 14.3%

No lack of darkness in the black purple core, warmed in a welcome fashion by scarlet red, which in turn darkens the more ruby rims. Heavy toast to the nose, oodles of coffee, coconut, mocha scents, crispens things to the point where there's minimal spreading out in the raspberry, strawberry, red cherry scents and naught but the suggestion of leather, tar nor animal hide. Full-bodied, its super-ripeness makes certain that the plum, blackberry, cherry fruit will be the first thing you notice. Elevated floral touches lessen the earthiness or animality and also holds off the oak toast, cocoa flavors until the mid-palate. Minor grade acidity or tannins at best, one of those wines "structured" by its weight. While the combination of grapes sounds cool at first, the whole is not more than the sum of its parts. 60% Syrah, 28% Petite Sirah, 9% Touriga Nacional, 3% Tannat. 86

Teatown Cellars

Napa Valley

Merlot

2004, \$23.99, 14.5%

Trim and consistent red-garnet to purple core, not especially saturated, fully blood red through the wide rims. Swiftly running river of mint, vanillin oak and toasted coconut in the nose, overshadows much any else to sniff, the raspberry, strawberry, red cherry fruit does hold its own. Medium-bodied, here it possesses the acidic and tannic structure to at least corral the oaky creaminess and caramel, then rationalize it into a corner. Possesses some sweet tea leaf and bay leaf/rosemary led herb notes to pair with the lighter earthiness and provide counterbalance to the hard candy like, sweet red cherry, strawberry, raspberry fruit, the latter not sloppily sugary, more so concentrated so that you have to massage the juice out. At the finish it's still the caramel, oak cream holding sway, a homogenizing force. 86

CALIFORNIA WHITE

Alfred, Domaine

Edna Valley, Goss Creek

Chardonnay

2005, \$18.99, 14.5%

Mild brownish tinge in the yellow straw core, good hue depth, made all the more noticeable by the draining of color nearing the rims. The nose bubbles over with orange sherbet, mint leaf, whipped cream, poached peach and apricot fruit, does a nice job of being thick while not unduly heavy, broadens more as it sits. Full-bodied, exuberantly flirtatious, has all the curves the fellas want and wears the clothes to highlight the fact. Orange to lemon citrus, toasty oak, burnt butter, crème brûlée, mint oil, gives you the full nine yards. Limber richness in the apricot, nectarine, peach, pineapple fruit, tart but way too sugary for that to persist. Hard to gauge the full acidity given the crispness of the toast. Lively, and better than many in its immediate peer group, particularly at the price. [Screwcap] 87

James Henry Cellars

Russian River Valley, Woolsey Road

Chardonnay

2004, \$39.99, 14.9%

Has a cloudy, unfiltered look to it, like the gold of a well-worn ring, not a lot of hue to lose so rims fairly full. Real

toasty nose, burnt butter, clove, fried lime peels, hard toffee, to the point where starts to evoke salted beef jerky, the peach, apricot fruit scents restrained, if not chained, kind of a non-starter. In the mouth it's full-bodied with a velvety grip, stains the palate like glue. No less overt oaking here, probably even more dominant with crisply burnt wood, caramel, toffee, butterscotch flavors followed on by lime and tangerine citrus. The oak flavors turn to fumes and really fills the finish up big. Acidity plus along, better than expected but not necessarily adding life nor a refreshing quality. The peach, apricot, nectarine fruit has the sweetness of dried fruit but not the complete concentration to maintain momentum past the mid-palate. More or less a celebration of the wonders of how fermented grape juice absorbs flavors from oak wood. 85

WASHINGTON RED

Apex Cellars

Columbia Valley

Cabernet Sauvignon

2002, \$29.99, 13.9%

Warm glow in the ruby-purple core breathes life into its opacity, nice surface sheen throughout, the red-ruby rims full and lively. An ice cream sundae swirl of caramel, chocolate and vanilla drives the nose, toasted coconut sprinkled on top, behind that covers a smidge of florality and fully ripened cherry, blackberry, black currant scents. Full-bodied, soft and lush, soaks in swiftly with only token resistance from any tannins or acidity. Blends in touches of orange zest, flower petals and cedar to provide moments of seriousness contra the consistent oak throb of vanilla, carob, cocoa and the like. No denying the friendliness of the raspberry, blackberry, red cherry fruit, sweet, juicy and ready to smooch. Could do a lot worse but also probably at a lower price too. Includes small unspecified amounts of Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec. 87

Apex Cellars

Columbia Valley, Apex II

Cabernet Sauvignon

2004, \$12.99, 13.6%

Fairly clear ruby-violet core, lightens appreciably to garnet and ruby along the wide rims, fully unblemished. There's a floral and minty lift to the nose, lessens any weight in the chocolate, toffee, vanilla, ginger oak scents, the cherry, raspberry scents flighty enough on their own that really there's not much to anchor it, hence it floats away into the blue sky above. In the mouth it's medium-bodied and the oak influences of vanilla, dark chocolate, fried butter are heavy enough to keep the liquid grazing the tongue, aided by the above average concentration in the blueberry, blackberry, raspberry fruit, which avoids excess sugary and syrupy qualities. Very primary, all but devoid of tobacco leaf, tea leaf, cedar touches. The oak dominates the finish and aftertaste. Contains small unspecified amounts of Merlot, Cabernet Franc. [Synthetic cork] 86

Apex Cellars

Yakima Valley, Apex II

Merlot

2003, \$15.99, 13.9%

Minor red-ruby influences through the mainly dark purple core, the ruby inner rims give way along the outer edges to more brick red to garnet hues. The nose is fairly mute, densely packed earth, leather, tobacco barely stretch out, same for the plum, black currant fruit scents, about the

longed lasting notes belong to the heavy cream and vanilla powder. Full-bodied, again has the density to come off as homogeneous, little movement to be found in the plum, cherry, currant fruit, any brightness comes from the tomato skin, herbs and orange/lemon citrus. The tannins have some flow, not much to say about the acidity. The cocoa, chocolate, vanilla flavorings not annoyingly obtrusive but never go away either. Moderate length on the finish. Tastes just about what it is. Contains small unspecified amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc. (Synthetic cork: Diam) 85

Apex Cellars
Yakima Valley
Merlot
2001, \$24.99, 13.7%

The core is black purple, possesses enough surface reflectivity appear bright and highlight the transition to the brick red rims where flecks of orange appear to be growing in depth. The nose attempts to focus on the overripe plum, black currant, blackberry fruit, however, the stemmy qualities, tomato skin and tobacco leaf aspects not to be so easily dismissed, has some cedar and saddlesoap notes too, just too roasted to flow well. Full-bodied, milk chocolate, grill smoke and burnt toast frame the mouth entry. The tannins have a light grit to them, lack inner strength and suggest as much wood tannin as natural tannin. The cherry, plum, currant fruit more restrained here, not as sweet but just as roasted, turns sour on the back half. Grass, tree leaves, bark, earth there bit not truly knit into the whole. Sweet spices, orange peel and cedar smooth out the finish some. Something's messed up. 84

WASHINGTON WHITE

Apex Cellars
Yakima Valley, Apex II
Sauvignon Blanc
2005, \$11.99, 12.9%

Light yellow hues flit in and out of the basic white hay base, not gauzy but there's a mild translucency with provides the appearance of depth at the cost of shine, what it's got lasts through the rims. Ripe nose with enough sturdiness to draw inside the lines, the melon, apple, nectarine, apricot, pineapple fruit scents blend into a coherent whole that doesn't try too hard, makes the ensuing grassy burst welcome as a pinch to wake up, dissolves with lemon juice and a hint of mint oil. In the mouth it's full-bodied with an infectiously gregarious demeanor which disarms attempts to critique. The acidity is round yet able to lend enough dryness to the flowers, lemon citrus, mint as well as peach, pear, green melon fruit. Not a great deal of minerality nor, for that matter, herbaceousness. Hits the right notes for the price, not a wine to ponder when you can just down it. (Synthetic cork) 88

WASHINGTON DESSERT

Apex Cellars
Yakima Valley, Apex II Late Harvest
Sémillon
2003, \$11.99, 10.7%

Just crossing the threshold into deeper gold to amber coloration, aided by a mild translucency, perceptible loss of hue intensity along the rims. Nose sweet enough to almost throw you back on your heels, brown sugar, honey, candied tangerine and orange peels, floral musk, dried fruit apricot,

peach, nectarine, pineapple, scents, not really heavy per se in the nostrils but everything has been boiled down to its essence. In the mouth its medium to full-bodied, thick but still possessed of a certain fluidity. Sugary and cloyingly sweet is indeed one way of putting it. Attempts some burnt, caramelized notes but really driven by fresher cane sugar, honey, pie glaze aspects. The apricot, peach, pear, apple, melon fruit glides through to the finish. Not a wine of great finesse but holds up its end of the conversation just fine. Sweet, literally and figuratively. 375 ml bottle. (Synthetic cork) 87

FRANCE RED

Vissoix, Domaine du
Beaujolais, Cuvée Traditionnelle Vieilles Vignes
Gamay Noir
2005, \$14.99, 12.0%

From a distance the red-violet core takes on a rich depth, however, the clarity rings through from up close, barely any hue change at the rims, presents a razor thin outer aura of pink-magenta. Steadily unfolding nose of unambiguously direct cranberry, strawberry, red cherry fruit, just squeezed lemon juice, wet stream stones and limestone, gets smokier as it opens and comes with minimal herbal scents, soaks in authoritatively. Full-bodied, spreads its weight out with utmost balance, you almost don't feel it unless you're looking for it. The earthiness and stony qualities are round, firm yet not hard-nosed. The lemon to white grapefruit citrus is sweetly tangy, the floral side gets pushed down some, as in the nose remarkably fresh without a trace of herbaceousness, the acidity plays nice and swoops in without its claws bared. Consistent presentation of the sappy, sweet 'n' sour red cherry, raspberry, strawberry fruit. You really suck if you don't like this. 91

Chevillon, Domaine Robert
Burgundy, Nuits-Saint-Georges, Les Saint-Georges
Pinot Noir
2004, \$79.99, 13.5%

Crystal clear scarlet red to violet colored core, like pretty cough syrup, lightens appreciably through the red-ruby rims, no paucity of surface shine. The nose is both clean and muscular, forward earthiness with dried mushrooms and lemon peel also prominent, has a scrubbing mountain pine-like aspect, creates enough rawness to semi-mask away florality as well as the cherry, red raspberry, watermelon fruit scents. Medium to full-bodied, displays sappy grip through the attack which slowly releases to more zesty lemon, white grapefruit citrus, mineral dust and finely powdered grass. There's attractive natural density to the tannins and some prickle to the acidity yet in no way too structured. Merde, potpourri and brown earth coat the tongue and pair admirably with the sharpness in the raspberry, cranberry, red cherry fruit. Hard to stop drinking. 91

Brun, Jean-Paul
Beaujolais, Terres Dorées l'Ancien Vieilles Vignes
Gamay Noir
2005, \$12.99, 12.0%

Seamless interplay between the red-ruby and violet hues, pin-magenta tinge rules the roost along the rims, full saturation anywhere you care to look. Cuttingly sour cherry, cranberry, strawberry fruit infuses the nose alongside lemon zest, cut grass, tree leaves and bark, hard granite, even the flower petals angular, an exercise in

eliminating the unnecessary, when it says it, it means it. Medium-bodied, no messing around with the acidity, you answer yes sir, no sir. Or, ma'am as the case may be. Lemon peel, stone and chalk, dried herbal matter, earth, might seem hard if one didn't know the care behind the façade. The cherry, raspberry, strawberry fruit sleek and gets right down to brass tacks, pushes forward until it's a good few yards beyond the finish line. Its linear nature does not allow for many points of relaxation, at the same time you'd want it to have your back in an unexpected fight. Bright and savory to the last, a serious wine without making a fuss of the fact. 91

Lafouge, Jean et Gilles
Burgundy, Auxey-Duresses, Climat du Val
Pinot Noir

2004, \$25.99, 13.0%

As much brick red in the core as violet, clear and almost mature in appearance, hue remains the same nearer the rims, just lightens, spotless throughout. The nose smells like the first time you till the backyard garden earth in spring, all cold dampness and wet ground herbal matter, the mud clumps to the overturned stones, old orange and lemon rinds, tobacco ash, the red cherry, raspberry scents have a decidedly sour sting to them. Light to medium-bodied, takes on a very firm mouth feel due to the high octane tannins and acidity, these also creating a pulsing dry sensation from start to finish. Stonier and earthier here with a mild drop in the grassiness, leather and a sort of Vicks like perfume drift in at times. Good clarity in the cherry, raspberry, blackberry fruit flavors, however, not a great deal of length due to the wine's inherent structure. Smoky and dustily spicy finish, clove and dried meat fat. Knows the streets. 90

Grosbois, Domaine Jacques
Loire, Chinon, Cuvée Vieilles Vignes
Cabernet Franc

2005, \$21.99, 12.5%

The ruby-purple core easily achieves opacity, moves with slow confidence towards the well-saturated red-magenta rims. The nose doesn't begin to show much leather, ashen earth nor bell pepper until after a lot of air time, at first it's all fresh flowers and robust blackberry, black cherry fruit, the first sniff tells you how young it is. Full-bodied, borderline velvety in texture as the fruit patiently layers itself on the tongue, the cherry, currant, blackberry fruit long and consistent. As in the nose, requires some time to build up a head of steam in the tobacco ash, earth, rawhide, stone and bell pepper flavors. The tannins provide very nice shape and steady things without impairing flow. Curious caramel notes appear near the finish, incongruous yet not more than momentary. A smooth operator which has the approachability to initiate Loire Cabernet Franc neophytes. 89

Champs-Grillés, Domaine des
Beaujolais, Saint-Amour
Gamay Noir

2005, \$19.99, 13.0%

Red-magenta tint flows through and lightens the naturally violet core, transparent without sacrificing hue density, the rims take on a warm pink to magenta cast. Chalky, dusty stone nose with a counter-expression of cocoa powder, easy to sense the fatness in the tart raspberry, strawberry, red cherry fruit scents, minor grade florality, not very complex but sticks around as long as you'd want. Medium-bodied, the juiciness in the raspberry, red cherry,

strawberry fruit wants to flow but it possesses enough tannic backbone to put a cap on any excess ripeness. That said, not especially elegant, more muscular than expected. The flower petals, lemon juice and even the stoniness seem held back, as if they have to break a sweat to get out into the open. Dried tobacco, grass and tree bark most prominent as it finishes. 88

Deux Ânes, Domaine des
Languedoc/Roussillon, Corbières, L'Enclos
Blend

2003, \$19.99, 14.5%

Standard, if still attractive purple core, dark and possessed of very nice clarity as well, the bright ruby rims possess above average width. Ripe and juicy nose of plum, black currant and black cherry fruit, spritz of violet dew across it, light waft of merde and earth but really not much else going on in the nose, not overripe nor overdone but lacks scope. Full-bodied, follows the template established by the nose in that it keeps the black currant, black cherry, boysenberry fruit front and center ushers much else quickly offstage. Still, has some floral notes to it and a certain vague earthy and stony qualities. OK, maybe some lemon zest too. The tannins have a mild roughness to them, not suave while not too distracting either. Good enough length, nothing too weak as it comes to a close. A good effort yet you still feel the stuff is there to have done a little better. 50% Grenache, 25% Carignan, 15% Mourvèdre, 10% Syrah. 87

Montpezat, Domaine de
Languedoc/Roussillon, Vin de Pays d'Oc, Les Enclos
Merlot Prestige
Merlot

2004, \$15.99, 14.0%

Powerful glow in the crimson to blood red color, there's a bit more purple in the core but mostly red throughout, fully unblemished. Good penetration in the nose, the bell pepper, leather, animal hide and olive pit notes jut forward, underneath the cherry, currant fruit has a lot of disguised juiciness, really almost two unrelated halves. Full-bodied, as in the nose presents a natural density, doesn't feel forced nor crafted. Peppery sort of tannins, adds a dimpled texture in addition to spicy bite, not too dry. Even flow in the moderately ripe red cherry, red currant, blackberry fruit. Not green at all, maybe earthy, notable for the absence of complementary flavors. Good erect bearing, however, not the deepest of conversationalists. (Synthetic cork: Supreme Corq) 86

Tour du Bon, Domaine de la
Provence, Bandol
Blend

2003, \$24.99, 14.0%

There's a rust red influence through the deep violet core, a solid point of introduction through the more scarlet rims, well-hued yet already suggesting color changes to come. Fox fur, leather, merde and mildewed mineral earth represent the majority of the nose, behind all that savageness lies juicily ripe raspberry, blackberry fruit which may never get to solo. Full-bodied, here there's a decided sugary, roasted quality to the plum, blackberry, black cherry fruit, ends up front loading the flavors. After that, you get dried spices, leather, twigs and tree leaves and a whole boatload of green, dusty tannins. Gets so grainy that the whole show slows to a crawl by the mid-palate. Never quite gets out-and-out green but grassiness and olive pits its final calling card. Hard to imagine it

improving much over time. 90% Mourvèdre, remainder unspecified percentages of Grenache, Cinsault, Carignan, etc. 85

Bobinet, Sébastien
Loire, Saumur-Champigny, Amatéüs
Cabernet Franc
2003, \$27.99, 13.0%

Has an unfiltered kind of filminess through the glowing red ruby to violet core, minimal shift to fuller ruby with a light orange tinge but the hue lost around the outer rims. The ripeness of the nose bursts forth with juicy currant, cherry, blackberry fruit scents and wet tobacco and sandalwood, not especially herbaceous, gets more of its snap from earth and stone aspects, not much lift nor inner mouth perfume. Medium-bodied, however, so juicy that it turns fluffy in texture and expands in such a way as to fill larger volume. The sourness as well as the shape thus lessened in the raspberry, red cherry, blackberry fruit. More floral with sweeter lemon to orange citrus too. Even lower herbal notes here, creates more space for the craggy earth foundation. The lack of tannins and acidity contribute to its softness. Easy enough to throw back but without character. 85

Pégau, Domaine du
Languedoc/Roussillon, Vin de Pays d'Oc, Plume Bleue
Grenache/Syrah
Blend
2005, \$14.99, 13.5%

Attractively shiny ruby-violet core, effortlessly segues to red-magenta to ruby along the rims, youthfully saturated. The nose first shows sour cherry, raspberry, cranberry fruit, lasts long enough to distract you from the considerably deep herbaceousness, ashen stone and pickle juice blips, kind of lurches at you awkwardly. Light to medium-bodied, diffuse mouth entry which should not be confused for airiness, just lacks a center. Herbal matter, lemon peel, cocoa, dried violets, stone shards, throws it all at you without much rhyme nor reason. adequate degree of cranberry, red cherry, raspberry fruit, not much weight, perhaps attributable to the acidity, which is definitely there throughout. Right past the mid-palate it starts to fall off. Very clean, no questioning that. 50% Syrah, 50% Grenache. 84

FRANCE WHITE

Calabre, Château
Bergerac, Montravel
Blend
2005, \$12.99, 13.0%

Extremely shiny and reflective white gold, if not for this it would be completely transparent, truly dances in the glass. Light breeze of a nose, more like a mist than a real presence, lemon zest, licorice, mint, apricot and peach fuzz, snappy pear and apple too, for its lightness it lasts admirably well. Light-bodied, clean, the sharp acidity is like a flood light turned on during the attack, delays the appearance of the friendly peach, pear, melon, apricot fruit. Mint here but less licorice, you get more wildflowers and fresh honey, though. The herbal twists hold off until well into the finish. Luckily, the powdery stoniness comes on quicker. Very refreshing and openly knit, dissolves smoothly and with no residue. 60% Sauvignon Blanc, 40% Sémillon. 89

Moor, Domaine Alice et Olivier De
Burgundy, Bourgogne-Chitry
Chardonnay
2004, \$22.99, 12.5%

Virtually colorless yet possessed of a cloudy murkiness which gives it added presence in the glass, vague yellow hay hues flit in and out. Intriguing nose which blends chili pepper oil with more oxidized pie dough, honey shades, has a sort of syrupy, fruit cocktail aspect to the peach, pear, cherry fruit scents, OK degree of lemony notes, smells like it was at times left to its own devices without a babysitter. Medium-bodied, sleeker and more focused than the nose would suggest, raw dough and honey glaze persists, however, plenty of absorption power in the acidity to stop it dead in its tracks. Lean and wiry pear, green apple, peach fruit, knows how to struggle to survive. The lemon, lime dimension grows the more you sip and eventually steadies and centers the rest. As always, an intriguing drop which serves as an intellectual workout. 88

Roblin, Matthias
Loire, Sancerre
Sauvignon Blanc
2005, \$24.99, 12.5%

Lightly pooling white to light golden straw color, unblemished and transparently clear, however, not necessarily that reflective. The abundant white grapefruit pith scents have their juiciness staunchly by equally large minerality and smokiness, any grassy parts pushed below the surface along with the pear, yellow apple, pomegranate fruit scents. Medium-bodied, very vibrant mouth entry, rattles your teeth even if the acidity isn't truly overpowering. It's just that the combination of the chalk, minerals, dried grass and sour lemon, white grapefruit citrus rushes at you so that there's not much chance to react. Smooths out to a steady tingle by the mid-palate yet the peach, apple, pear, pineapple fruit can't truly settle in. In your face style, even after you apologize. 87

Gournier, Domaine de
Provence, Vin de Pays de Cévannes
Viognier
2005, \$8.99, 13.0%

Glassy yellow straw color, clear without becoming watery, the hue does diminish around the rims. Intense lemonade/limeade nose, more citrus blossoms than other flowers, touch of chalkiness and moderate peach, pear fruit, basically 99.9% citrus scents. Medium-bodied, sleek and smooth with a healthy amount of acidity, this element perhaps seemingly more present due that same citrus parade of lime, lemon, tangerine flavors. Sticks close to the tongue more than achieve flight, a slow and steady mover. Possesses more thrust in the apricot, peach, pear fruit but still wouldn't call it abundantly fruited. The stony or chalky components also more evident in the mouth, particularly nearer the finish where the wine becomes noticeably drier. Good, crisp wine albeit if short on things to say. (Screwcap) 87

Oudin, Domaine Christiane et Jean-Claude
Burgundy, Chablis, Vaugiraut
Chardonnay
2002, \$28.99, 13.0%

A dull filminess saps most of the shine out of it, straightforward and what yellow straw hue there is sticks around to the rims. Lilacs, mint, honeysuckle and orange sorbet give the nose a casual blowsiness, caramelized brown sugar combine with the peach, apricot cobbler and

pie dough elements to convince you you're standing in a bakery when the pies come out of the oven. Medium-bodied, on the oxidized side, sacrifices freshness and cut to its jib for tactile richness and expansiveness across the palate. Hard to notice the acidity, leaves the orange to lemon citrus flat-footed. Less floral in the mouth, more pronounced stoniness, nowhere near the sweetness in the peach, apricot, pear, nectarine fruit as found in the nose. Loses its focus as it passes the mid-palate. Better to keep sniffing than swallowing. 85

FRANCE SPARKLING

Aubry Fils, L.
Champagne, Premier Cru Brut Rosé
Blend

NV, \$41.99, 12.5%

Fairly large bubbles and widely spaced, can't really say it's beads, move slow and steady, there's a soft orange cast to the watermelon pink color base, major drop off in hue at the rims. Pronounced minerality and stoniness in the nose, saltlick, dried orange zest, hardly any breadiness to help soften the semi-angular cherry, raspberry scents, lots of weight and presence but not scent richness. Medium-bodied with very keen acidity, the foaminess on the attack has a prickly feel of a thousand tiny pins. The lemon and tangerine citrus is quite bright, elevates over the formidable foundation of stone, chalk, mineral dust and parched earth. Exceedingly dry, to the point where it loses some elegance and becomes more brutish, the cherry, strawberry, raspberry fruit more or less strangled in the crib. An industrial grade mouth cleanser. All 2002, and 40% Chardonnay, 45% a mix of Meunier and Pinot Noir, with 15% still red in part from 60-year-old Meunier vines. (Disgorged June 2006) 90

ITALY RED

Montevervine
Tuscany, Pian del Ciampolo
Blend

2004, \$22.99, 12.5%

Cough syrup red trumps the purple in the core, fades to a softer brick red around the rims, diffuse outer edges, quite clear throughout. The nose highly influenced by pine needle scents, as well as salt, earth, old roses, herbs and dried orange peels, while there's a maraschino cherry kind of sweetness going on, the cherry, raspberry, strawberry scents not all that expressive. Medium-bodied, the mouth entry framed admirably by taut acidity which heightens the bite in the lemon/orange citrus as well as the pine, herb and tobacco elements. Fairly earthy too but without any accompanying funkiness, very clean. Wound-up spring feel impels the cherry, raspberry fruit, has more zip and forward momentum than juiciness or specific fruit flavor. Very dry finish, doesn't shorten things yet it does ensure there's no indulgent lingering. Crisp and direct, no wasted movement. 90% Sangiovese, 5% Canaiolo, 5% Colorino. 89

Monte Faustino, Azienda Agricola
Veneto, Valpolicella Classico Superiore, La Traversagna
Blend

2000, \$25.99, 13.0%

There's flat, older crimson influence through the purple core, overall on the light side and certainly clear, the rims have shed most of the ruby in favor of flatter brick red with an orange-brown patina. A lot of cough syrup scents in the

nose, wet straw, horse hide, sea salt, merde and damp earth, just this side of getting truly funky, the cherry, blackberry and raisin scents on the mellow tip, not many words to share. Medium-bodied, the strong acidity heightens the sense that it's dried out a bit, even by now. Dried grass, parched earth and cracked leather most noticeable on the mouth entry, then dried lemon and orange peels. There's a dried meat aspect as well but it has weaker grip. The cherry, blackberry, raspberry fruit too has a tenuous grip on things, fades in and out. It's not overbearing, give it credit for that. Since it's not a big wine to begin with, the finish doesn't come off as short. For traditionalists it seems. Unspecified percentages of Corvina, Molinara, Rondinella. 86

Casanova della Spinetta (La Spinetta)
Tuscany, Il Nero di Casanova
Sangiovese

2005, \$17.99, 13.5%

Has attractive surface reflectivity which helps brighten the trim if visually uninteresting black purple core, gains more attractiveness along the still very violet rims, light pink ruby tinge. The nose offers a sweetly concentrated plum, cherry, raspberry fruit explosion that lacks the dimension to persist fully, gives up yardage to the dried grass, sour herbs, lemon peel and earth although these parts don't necessarily grab the brass ring authoritatively either, needs a conductor in the orchestra pit. Medium-bodied, the tannins dry things out somewhat more than may be desired, saps the vitality out of the florality and citrus. The cherry, plum, blackberry fruit also suddenly grinds to a halt a little past the mid-palate, abrupt for sure. Gets more twiggy and stemmy as it proceeds through the mouth, as if it's trying to get these flavors to act as part of the overall structure. Lacks natural flow and a sense of ease with itself. Then the oak toast makes itself the last flavor to vacate the mouth. Did it try too hard or not hard enough? 95% Sangiovese, 5% Colorino. 85

ITALY WHITE

Casalfarneto, Azienda Agricola
Marche, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore,
Fontevicchia
Verdicchio

2005, \$15.99, 12.5%

Both shines and pools deeply at once in the glass, richer golden hue at the core with some diminution along the rims, visually pleasing. The nose displays good density and length, nothing weak in the lemon to lime citrus, stone chunks, pressed wildflowers, solid grip in the peach, red apple, nectarine scents yet very dry and semi-immobile, the lack of lift fits its character. Full-bodied, dry and coating, lays down a layer of primer and three of paint. Lemon, lime reduction, again any flowers or herbal matter fully dried out, as if ready to burn. The acidity has no real blade to speak of, adds to both its dryness and blanketing feel. The textural intensity more or less sends the peach, apricot, nectarine fruit running for the hills. Absolutely crafted to be a "serious wine" and both benefits and suffers for it. 89

SPAIN RED

Pingus, Dominio de
Ribera del Duero, Flor de Pingus
Tempranillo

2004, \$79.99, 14.5%

Jet black core, surrounded by thin, heavily concentrated red-magenta rims, textbook saturation. Coconut custard, butter oil, caramel and grapey to plummy cherry, blackberry jam to fill up the nose, accompanied by cinnamon, clove and as it opens more grass and flowers, couldn't squeeze more out of it if you tried. Full-bodied, coffee bean, toasted coconut, butter toffee, rose petal, mint, licorice, all this pretty makeup next to the dusty texture of heavily massaged and artificial feeling tannins. Slightly meaty, some game and leather but not much going on otherwise. Syrupy cherry, raspberry, blackberry, plum fruit, thick slabs piled on the tongue. Big, broad, chewy finish that may impress until you notice it lacks graceful movement and any semblance of clarity. 87

SPAIN WHITE

Laxas, Bodegas AS
Rías Baixas, Vinte
Albariño

2005, \$16.99, 12.5%

Even yellow to brown straw color, attractive surface shine, accompanied by enough translucent shimmer below to add to its visual depth. Sugary lemonade/limeade nose, comes close to cotton candy, floral dew and a swipe of mint, indeed sweet enough that as ripe as it is, most of the apricot, pear, melon scents escape you. Full-bodied, soft and juicy with a citric cavalcade of pink grapefruit, tangerine, lime and lemon. Not especially acidic, however, there's a great deal of powdery residue left behind on the tongue. Less thrust in the apricot, nectarine, apple, pear fruit, the juice is there, it's just not moving forward with ease. Less florality-dominated than the nose while still being a major player. Makes an impression for its size and weight but still too clumsy for its own good. 87

Clos Mogador
Priorat, Nelin
Blend

2004, \$28.99, 14.0%

The light golden brown straw hue gains immeasurable depth from the intense cloudiness, looks like pond water which hasn't felt a breeze in a month, all but impossible to gauge any loss around the rims. The nose is ultra-crispy, seemingly from oak, all vanilla, clove, ginger and butter, doesn't have the soft roundness and dewy floral notes one expects from Viognier albeit the tangerine bite is attractive, curiously subdued peach and apricot fruit scents. Medium-bodied, has acidity and something akin to wood tannin, sleekens it but it doesn't really have the body to support this. The tangerine pales before white grapefruit citrus here, the floral dimension remains at a soft purr. Toasty and lean, no real oak-derived creaminess. Fairly durable if lowkey pear, apple, peach fruit. Not a bad wine but has to be taken at face value as "wine per se" to maximize enjoyment. Mostly Grenache Blanc with small amounts of Viognier, Pinot Noir. 86

AUSTRALIA RED

Willows Vineyard (Scholz Vintners), The
South Australia, Barossa Valley
Shiraz

2003, \$34.99, 14.5%

Pure black core, no chance for any purple shades to show up, rims have a curiously aged red to orange brick appearance, average surface reflectivity, funny that it does have the look of an older wine. The nose has the texture of

one of those balls you squeeze to try and release tension, yields while also resisting, jammy blueberry, blackberry, boysenberry preserves with maple syrup on top, if you want molasses and toffee they are there too, naught else though. Full-bodied, put together to create biggest initial impression, smoky with leather and glazed ham nuances prior to the full-on vanilla cream, caramel, freshly whipped butter oak flavorings as well as boysenberry, blackberry, black cherry fruit. In its classification, adroitly arrayed yet nothing which would interest anyone but the inexperienced, especially given its price. 86

Shirvington
South Australia, McLaren Vale
Shiraz

2005, \$69.99, 16.0%

Fully opaque black core comes with a hint of filminess, surrounded by thin, if completely luminescent and saturated, scarlet red rims. French vanilla, toasted coconut and toffee blossom like a spring morning in the nose, infectious insipidity, mintiness brings moderate lightness to the otherwise super-thick plum, boysenberry, blackberry scents, ends bluntly like it hit a wall. Full-bodied like Jackie Gleason in a Speedo, spills out all over, the oak is at mammoth proportions here, hard to recognize any flavors beyond the vanilla, caramel, buttered toast and coconut custard. Of course, the blackberry, blueberry fruit no slouch, but as this component lacks natural flow it tends to not soak in as much as it might otherwise. The tannins are disjointed, prevents any further possible balance. Moderate flower petal, orange peel, eucalyptus swipes. The weight persists easily, creating an impression of lasting longer than it does. 86

Teusner
South Australia, Barossa Valley, Avatar
Blend

2003, \$36.99, 14.5%

Enough filminess in the purple core to nudge it into opacity, the color moves in clear stages through crimson to brick red to light ochre at the furthest rims, well-hued throughout. Piercing double barrel of mint and eucalyptus in the nose, followed on by coconut custard, crème brûlée, extremely voluble, to the exclusion of the raspberry, blackberry scents, try searching for more if you like. Medium to full-bodied, not as obvious as many in its peer group, knows to highlight the candied strawberry, raspberry, red cherry fruit as well as the toffee/vanilla swirl. That said, not exaggerated nor grotesque, in fact has the acidity to demarcate the lines in the fruit. Offers some lemon juice, eucalyptus, sweet maduro tobacco wrapper, yet curiously lacking in complementary flavors. It's nice if nondescript but, frankly, not that interesting. 60% Grenache, 20% Mataro, 20% Shiraz. 85

Henry's Drive
South Australia, Dead Letter Office
Shiraz

2005, \$24.99, 15.0%

Placid black purple core easily achieves opacity, begins to take on a deep red hue way before approaching the rims where its much clearer if no less hued. The nose betrays its alcohol if not at times touches of nail polish, the vanilla cream and caramel attempts to lay low in its sheer heaviness yet still ends up taking up more space than the semi-clipped cherry, blackberry, blueberry fruit scents, uninteresting otherwise. Full-bodied, full of extract and weight but feels dammed up a few seconds after mouth

entry. Something which evokes lemon and flower petals briefly inserts itself before the onset of the caramel, vanilla, custard flavors, this creating the a momentary elevated perception of acidity. Kind of scrapes along, lurching left and right, albeit with a smile on its face. Hard to say if there's eucalyptus, licorice or cedar there but it's possible. Not such a bad thing it didn't get delivered. Grapes sourced 75% McLaren Vale, 25% Padthaway. (Screwcap) 84

NEW ZEALAND WHITE

Kumeu River

Kumeu

Chardonnay

2004, \$29.99, 13.5%

Flat golden hue, has enough translucent layers to remain visually compelling through the rims despite weaker color intensity. Super crisp and zippy nose, honed by tight oak toast, lime juice, clove, burnt buttered toast, meager traces of minerality, the pear, peach, apple fruit scents basic and semi-clipped. Full-bodied, maybe even oakier in the mouth with sour pickle, dill flavors accompanying the more usual butter, toffee, smoke cornerstone. Acrid enough to make the lime, orange citrus bitter, impeding the majority of any inclination to flow. Linear and lean peach, apricot, pear, green apple, pineapple fruit, for all of its diversity, lacks depth and easily overcome by the oak. Average acidity, gains its posture from, guess what, the oak. Compact so that it feels it's finishing before it sinks fully in. Can't say it out-and-out sucks for it is surely good at what it aims to do, but not much of an expression of anything but the ability to afford expensive wood planks. (Screwcap) 85

CHILE RED

Kingston Family Vineyards

Casablanca Valley, Tobiano

Syrah

2005, \$19.99, 14.0%

Completely saturated and opaque glowing purple core, almost day-glo in appearance, the rims barely sneak in any ruby-magenta hues given the oppressive outward march of the purple hue. There's a definite floral perfume to the nose as well as some white pepper, however, the caramel and also honey coated ham really steal the show, obscure even the fairly thick currant, blackberry fruit scents, remains densely packed no matter how much you sniff nor wait for it to open. Full-bodied, here the ham, game, leather start, continue and end the show. The honeyed, caramel thing toned down some, more interested in displaying orange citrus and dried potpourri nuances. The acidity makes a fine showing of itself, tannins more in a relaxed mode. While ripe, there's little desire in the plum, blackberry, black cherry fruit to show off. Shows nice fullness through the finish. 88