

Go for *the value*

Whether for long-term investment or great price today, this list is worth a look



By Michael Pinkus

The oTher d ay I conducted a blind tasting for a wine class. That's where you pour the wine without revealing the name, grape variety or where it's from, and the tasters have to name the wine's origin and makeup.

During one particular exercise, a student guessed the wine to be California Cabernet and, when I asked for an explanation, she answered without hesitation that all good wines come from California.



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A collective titter rose from her classmates, but this got me thinking about other places in the world that make great wine. Now, the truth is, most vineyards do make some good wine, but not all of those wines come to our shores; many stay right there at home.

In Italy, Spain, New Zealand, Australia, Portugal and right here in Ontario, world-class wines are being made — and all for comparatively reasonable prices. I base that with vintage and longevity in mind — a “good” wine isn't always inexpensive, but if you take into account that you could buy it for \$25 today and enjoy it 10 to 15 years later, that's a good investment.

Case on point: I know that many consider Ontario wines to be expensive in compari-

son to the flood of relatively cheap wine from elsewhere, but consider that many \$40 Ontario wines will outlast many under-\$15 Chilean wines in your wine cellar and we're onto something here in Ont-ari-ari-ari-o.

When most people think Italian wine, the first one that comes to mind is Chianti and maybe some other Tuscan wines, but I always head a little farther north to the Veneto region, where Ripasso and Amarones are made.

These blended appassimento wines (made with dried fruit) can lead to a lifetime love affair with Italy. These wines can spend years in your cellar with great rewards, even in off-vintages. Ripasso or Amarone can easily be consumed (and thoroughly enjoyed) 10 years from vintage date.

Two of my favourite Ripasso wines of late are the Farina Le Pezze (#195966), a real value at \$15.60, and Masi's Campofiorin (\$18.95 – #155051).

You'll find the Le Pezze the more fruit-forward of the two, which makes for a great sipper, while the Masi shows elegance and pairs well around the dinner table.

Take a step up in style and you're into Amarone country and one of the best values is also from Masi, the Costasera 2009 (\$39.95 – #317057). This may not seem like a bargain, but you could still be drinking this happily 20 years from now.

What makes this Costasera so special is the declassified fruit it contains. In most years, Masi offers two special single-vineyard Amarone wines along with their base model. In 2009, they didn't think the quality was sufficient for their “special” wines so instead they put this great fruit into the beginner Amarone, thus raising the bar in the lower-priced version — declassified fruit always improves the quality of the wine it goes into. I remember learning about this process from a Portuguese producer who did the same thing and, eight years later, I'm still enjoying those bottles for which I paid less than \$12.

Speaking of Portugal, you should be making your way into that section of the LCBO of Vintages section more often. These are wines you'd gladly pay double for if they were from someplace like California.

Check out the Quintas das Apegadas 2009 Velha (\$16.95 – #314435) made from old-vines fruit and, if you think that means nothing, then you really have to start checking out old-vines wines. They are truly some of the best in the world – the older the vines, the better the fruit they produce.

Another favourite is the Veedha 2010 Douro (\$13.95 – #255851). With its ripe red fruit and easy drinking – with lots of juicy red berries – it's another steal of a wine.

But if you're not willing to put more than >>

>> \$10 into a country you've never tried before (outside of a glass of Port), then do try the Quartetto 2010 (#253880) at \$9.25. This is a wine that over-delivers for the price. Red berries and subtle spice, but it's the berries that stand out here and you'll just want to sip it again and again and again. If this does not get you asking yourself, "What other gems does Portugal make?" then nothing will.

Portugal's neighbour, Spain, also offers great value and two of my perennial favourites are from Bodegas Castano: La Casona (\$8.95 - #143743) and Hecula (\$11.80 - #300673). Both are made from Monastrell and offer different quality levels for different occasions, but they still won't break the bank — though your guests will think you spent a mint on them.

Monastrell is the Spanish term for the Mourvedre grape, popular in the south of France and Rhone Valley.

With the hot weather, Canadians turn to white wines and one of my go-to summer sippers comes from a company called Cono

Sur. Many think the name is a play on the word "connoisseur," but in truth it means South Cone. If you look on a map of South America, the bottom end does look like a cone, but instead of ice cream it's filled with wine — at least that's how I look at it.

Cono Sur offers the ultimate summer wine with their 2012 Viognier (\$9.95 - #64287). This is a wine that shocks me year-in and year-out at just how good it is, and how little you pay for it. But this is not one for the cellar, it's a drink-now wine. The good news is, it stays on shelves all year long so you can bring back summer any time you like; just be sure to get the most recent dated wine.

I was once asked for my thoughts on a hot upcoming area of the world and my choice was as familiar as it is obscure. The country is one most wine drinkers are very familiar with: Australia. But head south of the big country and look for the island of Tasmania where they are making some of the most appealing Pinot Noir.

Although Tasmania is part of Australia, and most of us think of Oz as hot,

Tasmania, because it is an island and because of its position in the world, is actually much cooler than the homeland — and thus delivers on its promise of true cool climate wines with plenty of fruit and acid (which is what keeps the wine fresh).

Names like Tamar Ridge, Josef Chromy and Devil's Corner have been through the province lately and are worth searching out and picking up whenever they appear in Vintages. They will not be cheap (or as my mother prefers I say, "inexpensive") but they are so worth it.

Before I let you go, let's go full circle back to where we began this conversation — the class wine tasting. It turns out the wine the student was tasting was not Californian after all, but was actually a Chilean Syrah from a producer called Montgras — the 2010 Antu Syrah (\$16.95 - #675371). This is a wine that is just so perfect for summer gatherings around the grill.

Next column we'll look at stellar Ontario reds from the 2010 vintage ... one of the best Ontario has seen. 

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