



BROADBENT

◆ SELECTIONS ◆

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Worth the Search : 20 Wines for Under \$20

Eric Asimov selects inexpensive bottles that won't be found on the main highways of wine. // BY ERIC ASIMOV

The great intersection of quality and value in wine occurs in the \$15- to \$25-a-bottle range. Here, you can find wines that are not merely sound or decent but fascinating, without breaking the bank. Can you find these sorts of wines for less than \$15? Possibly, but the choices rise exponentially if you can commit to paying just a little bit more.

In the last few years, I've written a series of columns spotlighting 20 exciting wines for \$20 apiece. The 20 for \$20 conceit was rhetorically neat and made sense, as it took the midpoint of the \$15 to \$25 range. But this time I've switched it up, picking 20 wines for under \$20 (yes, the list includes wines listed at \$20, but rounded up from \$19.99, so technically they are all under \$20).

Why the change? Because the rhetorical device was too limiting. Continuing to focus solely on the \$20 bottles would have required repeating some wines from previous columns, which, no matter how wonderful those wines remain, I wanted to avoid. Expanding the range increased the pool of possibilities.

You may wonder what makes \$15 to \$25 the sweet spot. Aren't there plenty of good wines for under \$15? Under \$10? Fred Franzia, the chief executive of Bronco Wine Company, producer of Charles Shaw wines, better known as Two-Buck Chuck, once famously stated that no wine should ever cost

more than \$10.

That may be true if you are mass-producing wine, practicing economies of scale in order to efficiently create a specified product with advanced technology. Big Agriculture and fast-food companies operate on similar principles, which is why it is cheaper to buy a sack of burgers at McDonald's than it is to buy good ingredients to make your own.

I would rather pay more for good food than settle for something cheaper, even if it's edible. The same applies to wine. Made on a giant scale, wine for the most part is a commodity, sound but uninteresting. Made on a smaller scale, with an eye toward quality, wine becomes a labor of love, with more personality and character than what's rolled out in the millions of bottles. Is this equation always true? No. More than a million bottles of the Juvé y Camps cava on my list are produced annually. But it is true more often than not.

The sorts of wines I've selected, which speak of a place and express a culture, generally cost more. They require more sweat to produce and more investment financially and emotionally. Their value is in the soul they radiate. If you love wine, it's a price worth paying.

Finding these wines requires looking on the margins. You won't find bottles from the most prestigious regions on this list. But it's worth departing from the main highways of wine. In wine and in life, the best discoveries are often on the back roads.



Musar Jeune Red 2010

Bekaa Valley, Lebanon \$18

This is not the great, idiosyncratic, long-lived red of Chateau Musar. It's a less expensive wine made to be drunk young. Even so, it's really good, spicy and earthy, with a flavor that seems to combine dark fruits and soy. It's made primarily of cinsault, with some syrah and cabernet sauvignon blended in. Better a taste of Musar that stands well on its own than no Musar at all. (Broadbent Selections, San Francisco)