



Italian Sangiovese grapes, used to make Chianti, are ready for harvest.



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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Top Value Red Wines

THIS ARTICLE WILL FOCUS ON THE BEST RED WINES currently in the marketplace. Many wine writers believe that the best wine values come from Spain, and I agree. Last year (2013) I discovered two similar wines from the Alicante region of Spain. The basic wine, Tarima (2011), is without a doubt one of my greatest red value wine finds. It is made from a fabulous grape, Monastrell or Mourvèdre (French) or Mataró (English). This is an indigenous grape from Spain and often produces a complex and sophisticated tasting wine, particularly given the price. This is very true for this wine. It is a full-throttled red, which is quite mouth-filling, gracious, and earthy as well, with black fruit overtones.

I have found great examples of Monastrell, but



Tarima Hill 2011

I knew the grape principally as the distinguished element of my favorite Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Château de Beaucastel. This wine consistently uses the largest percentage of Mourvèdre, which along with the other 12 permitted varietals in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, gives it great complexity and very high quality. Tarima is not the equal of this wine, but at eight to 10 percent of its price, it is a sure bet as a best buy. The Tarima Hill is essentially the same wine, except from older vines. I have had both wines at the same time with friends and we rated them essentially the same with perhaps a one percent preference for the Tarima Hill. Whether it justifies the \$13-15 versus the Tarima (50-100 percent price increase) is up to you.

continues on page 118 ➤



Continuing with Spain, I recently found a most astonishing value, by far the best I have ever seen. It is the 2011 Teso La Monja Almirez from the Toro region and is 100 percent Tempranillo, also an indigenous grape of Spain. I feel it is the most food-friendly red wine grape I know. It pairs very well with beef, lamb, pork, and particularly chicken. Depending upon the region and the producer, it varies in different levels of intensity and in general produces a wine I prefer with food.

The Almirez, however, is a wine of immense structure and boldness. Along with the wine Cénit, made from the oldest vines in the Northern Hemisphere, this is not only the biggest and boldest of Tempranillo, it's a massive wine compared to wines in general. One reviewer stated that it is hard to believe it is available for less than triple digits (retailing locally from \$23-\$28). One writer stated that while no drop of this grape could be in a Châteauneuf-du-Pape, (true), it reminds him of one of the best examples of same at multiples of the Almirez's price.

The fact that Toro can be the source of such a massive wine comes as no surprise, but the fact that it can be of such high quality comes as a great surprise to all of my clients, including myself, who bought it. This wine will probably age extremely well (10-20 years) and demands big food, but also is very pleasant to drink by itself (one to two hours after decanting). While the tannins are round (soft), the mouth-feel and extract are profound, with evidence of charcoal, cassis, blackberries, and barbecued meats.



From Italy comes my next find – the best value, high-quality Chianti I have found thus far. Retailing from \$10-\$13, the 2010 Basilica Cafaggio Chianti Classico meets all my specifications. I drink a lot of Chianti, generally Reservas, but this is the only one I have ever found anywhere near this price point which doesn't disappoint. Even more so than Tempranillo, I think Chianti from the Sangiovese grape demands food and particularly if the wine is 100 percent Sangiovese, as this wine is. Chianti is my 'go-to' wine for pasta and pizza and goes well with beef, pork, or chicken also. While this wine drinks well now, I think it will improve with an additional couple of years of age.



The final two stops on the Red Wine Value Roadshow takes us to France. From a noted producer, Alain Jaume, comes 2011 Grand Veneur

Reserve. Although not very expensive (\$12-\$15) this is a benchmark Côtes du Rhône made from Grenache exclusively. This wine is redolent of black fruit, roasted meats, lavender, and anise. It has generous body left without too much power, and provides layers of concentration. This work-horse grape of the Southern Rhône drinks well by itself, but is also very food-friendly. It goes well with most meat and is great with grilled vegetables.

In a previous article on the Northern Rhône, (see QB Jan/Feb 2014 online), I focused on Michel Chapoutier in much of the writing. As you may know, most of his wines from there are expensive to very expensive. Luckily for us, he produces wines from the Southern Rhône as well.



In closing, I wish to focus on one of the highest value wines I've ever found. It is his Domaine de Bila-Haut Occultum Lapidem 2012, and costs \$24-\$30. As was the case with the two previous vintages, this wine offers a very highly-rated selection (points) at a very reasonable price. It comes from the south of France, the Côtes du Roussillon, which borders the Rhône. It is a blend of Syrah, Grenache, and Carignan. It is massive in structure and will age for perhaps two decades. It is redolent of coffee, anise, and plum. Evidencing minerality, earthiness, wild herbs, and black fruits, it shouts for a piece of red meat to harness these abundant attributes.

All of these wines are well-priced and deserve attention before they disappear from the market. I hope you find them and enjoy them as much as I do. À votre santé! U