

Good, inexpensive wines that are easy to find

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By Bill St. John, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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The United States is now the world's leading consumer of wine. (As a nation, though, we do not crown the per-capita-consumption contest. **Vatican City** does. Strength in small numbers.)

We also enjoy, without argument, more choice in wine than does any other country. By and large, other folk consume the wine of their own land over that of another. We do too: 70 percent of the wine we purchase is American. But the remaining 30 percent comes from a plethora of foreign places.

Some of it is good; some not; none of it is everywhere available. That makes shopping for unvaryingly decent wine frustrating. For example, as I do my job, I'll recommend a solid Argentine malbec that well may be available in Chicago yet not in **Williamsburg** — Virginia or Brooklyn.

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To ferret out no-fail, fairly priced wines, both foreign and domestic, that are widely distributed around our country, I tasted about 100 wines from a few dozen sizable winemakers. I offer an alphabetical list, with prices from the winery or Internet. Given overall consistency, I omit citing vintage years, with a couple of exceptions.

You may buy these wines at major supermarket and drugstore chains throughout the country.

Born in the USA

Big House, California (\$10 a bottle or \$22 a 3-liter box): Super-plus delish in red, white and zinfandel; each a mishmash of grapes — 14 for the red! — but they really work.

Charles Krug, Napa (\$13-\$20): If you find them at or below \$20, killer cabernet and a yummy nonvintage merlot; saucy sauvignon blanc for even

less.

Concannon Vineyard Selected Vineyards, California (\$10): Make this a go-to red wine house: merlot, cabernet and pinot noir; Deal City.

Dancing Coyote, Clarksburg, Calif. (\$11-\$18): Not just another cute critter label, but some nice, Euro-rooted whites such as albarino and verdelho; reds are so-so.

Hess Select, California (\$14-\$20): Especially noteworthy for its cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay.

J. Lohr Estates, California (\$8-\$18): A wide range of reds and whites from many regions; surefire chardonnay, cabernet and shiraz.

Liberty School, California (\$15): Props to the Central Coast chardonnay and the Paso Robles redCuvée, a fabulous blend.

Newton Vineyard, Napa (\$25): Its 2008 Claret is a superb melange of mostly merlot and cabernet.

Pacific Rim rieslings, Columbia Valley, Wash. (\$10-\$13): A trio, dry to sweet, of the best-priced rieslings in America, from America.

Ravenswood zinfandels, Lodi, Calif. (\$10-\$13): America's red from a longstanding, trusted maker.

Redtree, California (\$8): Low cost for solid quality; go for petite shiraz, moscato and pinot grigio especially.

Robert Mondavi Private Selection, California (\$8-\$11): The Central Coast red blend Meritage is excellent.

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Rodney Strong Vineyards, Sonoma County (\$14-\$17): Terrific cabernet and chardonnay from well-sourced vineyards.

Snoqualmie Naked series, Columbia Valley, Wash. (\$11-\$15): Reds and whites from the most eco-friendly winery of **Washington**; don't miss its chardonnay or merlot.

Other countries' wines

Alamos, Argentina (\$10): What malbec is all about; also zesty torrantes.

Babich, New Zealand (\$10-\$14): Chin-dripping, succulent sauvignon blanc; nonaggressive.

Banfi, Tuscany, Italy (\$10-\$15): Banfi + red + under \$15 = win-win

Casillero del Diablo, Chile (\$8-\$11): Some of Chile's supervalued cabernet, shiraz, carmenere and sauvignon blanc.

D'Arenberg, Australia (\$15-\$20): In this dollar range, try d'Arry's red, Hermit Crab white. "Love Grass" shiraz.

El Coto, Rioja, Spain (\$10-\$15): The trio of blanco, rosado and red crianza pinpoint Rioja at a great price.

Hugel, Alsace, France (\$11-\$15): Cuvee Les Amours and Gentil white are about as good as food wines get.

Jaboulet Parallele 45, France (\$8-\$13): Another fab trio of red, white, rosé; Deal City.

Mionetto, Italy (\$10-\$15): For the money, Italy's most solid sparkler in a range of styles; its Sergio is a treat over \$15.

Montecillo, Rioja, Spain (\$12-\$21): Get a well-aged wine in the 2007 crianza or 2006 reserva — the current releases.

Nobilo, New Zealand (\$10-\$13): A sauvignon with some character.

Peter Lehmann, Australia (\$17): Among many Lehmann labels, seek out the red blend Layers from Barossa.

Pillar Box, Australia (\$12): Super buy in red and white blends from Padthaway.

Santa Julia [+], Argentina (\$10): The "[+]" is for added-value in its nature-friendly torrantes and malbec — and more money in your pocket.

Terrazas Reserva, Argentina (\$15-\$17): No-lose malbec and two whites.

Xplorador, Chile (\$8): Last on list, but first in value, Concha y Toro's new four best-buy bottlings of reds and chardonnay.

Bill St. John has been writing and teaching about wine for more than 30 years.

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.

Uncorked