

26 STELLAR WINES UNDER \$100 (THAT TASTE LIKE THEY COST A LOT MORE)

These wines definitely punch well above their weight.

By SARA L. SCHNEIDER



Photo: Courtesy of Gloria Ferrer

A wine cellar populated with expertly curated, closely managed bottles—maturing through time to their optimum drinking moment—is a wonderful thing. Should you be so lucky to be sitting on such a collection, your special occasions are covered as those bottles meet their moments. But what of the spontaneous Friday night? Friends are popping by to share the rib eyes you’ve snared on your way home from the office. You’re not in the mood to reach for one of the \$350 Napa Cabs you got on allocation, and yet you want to drink well. What you need then are bottles that go easy on your wallet but over-deliver on their price.

Such bottles are in reach. A few savvy strategies lead to wines priced under \$100 that offer the great fruit and skilled winemaking of much more expensive bottles. The only thing you might have to give up, in some cases, is the potential for long aging. But that's the point on a spontaneous Friday night—pop these corks and enjoy.

Trust Your Favorite Producers

At risk of stating the obvious here, skill in the cellar doesn't take a break just because a winemaker has turned his or her attention from the flagship—expensive—label to the juice destined for more affordable bottles. Winemakers in general, in fact, take great pride in the quality of their second-tier wines. The grapes might not have come from the very best rows in the vineyard (but often very near them), and the wine might not have seen as much time in new French oak. That only means you can expect a slightly different style—a wine with more immediately enjoyable fruit, a wine that won't take a few more years in your cellar for the oak to integrate and the tannins to unwind. A wine, in other words, to enjoy without premeditation.

Bella Union 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley

From the partners of Napa's iconic Far Niente and Nickel & Nickel wineries comes Bella Union (\$80), a Cabernet Sauvignon created to showcase the art of blending across vineyards in the valley. The nose opens with exotic pipe tobacco, anise, and hints of vanilla leading to a whole berry patch of flavors—a delightful, elegant wine with acidity keeping the fruit bright through a very long finish.



Bella Union Cabernet Sauvignon
Photo: Courtesy of Bella Union

Lial Vineyards “Blueprint” 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley

From industry veteran (and member of one of Napa Valley’s most historic wine families) Robin Lail of Lail Vineyards, Blueprint (\$80) is a Cabernet blended from great vineyards across the region. Noted winemaker Philippe Melka deliberately shapes a wine with ripe fruit available in the moment but with impressive complexity. Lush blackberry, cherry, and plum are layered with fresh mint, exotic spice, and mocha.



Lail Vineyards Blueprint Cabernet Sauvignon
Photo: Courtesy of Lail Vineyards/Bryan Gray

Ridge Vineyards 2015 Estate Cabernet Santa Cruz Mountains

This iconic California producer is better known for its Monte Bello Cabernet, which famously beat some of the best Bordeaux in the 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting—and came in first over both Bordeaux and Napa in the 30-year rematch. But that wine tops \$200 now. Ridge Vineyards, Monte Bello’s little sister, in the \$70 range, offers fruit from the same vineyard, along with seriously good winemaking. Savory, aromatic notes of black olive and cedar augment black currant, licorice, and spice, with an elegant tannin structure.

Shafer Vineyards 2016 “TD-9” Napa Valley

This Merlot-based blend (with Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec; \$60) takes the name of the tractor John Shafer learned to drive in 1973, when he ditched his morning train commute in Chicago for vineyard farming in Napa Valley. In the 2016 TD-9 from Shafer, licorice, pine forest, and warm spice give way to generous ripe cherry and raspberry flavors wrapped in velvety tannins.



Shafer Vineyards TD-9

Photo: Courtesy of Shafer Vineyards

Spottswode Estate Vineyard & Winery 2015 “Lyndenhurst” Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley

The signature estate Cabernet from Spottswode (\$225)—remarkably consistent, even through the years of über-ripe styles—has earned a reputation for structure that invites aging. As president and CEO Beth Novak Milliken puts it, Lyndenhurst is “the wine to enjoy while you are waiting for your Estate Cabernet to age.” Layers of briary blackberry, espresso, forest, and flint aromas give way to juicy boysenberry flavors, warm oak spice, and rounded, drink-now tannins.

Vaso Cellars 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley

A new sister winery to Dana Estates (whose wines head upward from \$400), Vaso Cellars offers a Cabernet for more spontaneous consumption (\$85). A unique mix of fermentation vessels—large upright oak tanks, small barrels, concrete, and open-top stainless-steel tanks—creates fascinating textures and great balance in this wine. Savory herb and tobacco aromas mix with warm spices and red fruit on the nose, while bright, lush fruit on the palate is wrapped in supple tannins.



Vaso Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon
Photo: Courtesy of Vaso Cellars

E. Guigal Hermitage Rouge 2015 Rhône Valley

Three generations of the Guigal family have grown into a reputation for some of the most iconic wines from almost every Rhône appellation, such as the cult fave La Landonne, which can set you back well over \$200, if you can find it. Short of its single-vineyard wines, though, this producer manages to make classic wines from the great regions that are remarkably affordable. From the precious few acres of the one broad slope that is Hermitage, the 2015 E. Guigal Hermitage Rouge (\$75) is powerful and savory, long and layered, with black pepper under rich but vibrant dark-fruit flavors.



E. Guigal Hermitage Rouge
Photo: Courtesy of E. Guigal

Château Pichon Longueville 2015 Réserve de la Comtesse

Pauillac deaux

Under the auspices of the Rouzaud family, proprietors of Champagne Louis Roederer, the Comtesse de Lalande Estate has benefitted from replanted vineyards and a new cellar. This “first class second growth,” as it’s dubbed (\$42.50), is produced from the same terroir as the Grand Vin Château Pichon Longueville, and offers dark and alluring mineral notes and perfumed violets along with plump berry flavors balanced with the savory character you want in a good Bordeaux.



Château Pichon Bordeaux

Photo: Courtesy of Château Pichon Baron

Pastourelle de Clerc Milon 2009 Pauillac Bordeaux

A second label from Château Clerc Milon, now owned by Baron Philippe de Rothschild, the Pastourelle, at \$35, is simply a screaming deal. Mint, spice, and earthy loam mix it up with red raspberry fruit through a beautifully long finish.

Explore Lesser-Known Regions

The world over, once a region earns the spotlight for the best kind of winemaking, all other appellations must forever play catch-up. How often have you heard, “This place [fill in the blank] is like Napa Valley 30 years ago”? The truth is, many so-described places have been honing their winemaking acumen all those 30-plus years, and the fact that they still aren’t Napa is good news for the value-seeking wine lover: Their bottles offer serious quality for the price. While many regions around the globe play the also-ran role to star appellations, two West Coast areas—eastern Washington and California’s Paso Robles—are sweet spots right now for Cabernet Sauvignon and its Bordeaux cousins.

WASHINGTON

Canvasback 2015 Grand Passage Cabernet Sauvignon Red Mountain

There's a trend afoot in Washington: Top California vintners are snapping up vineyards there. From Duckhorn Wine Company comes Canvasback wines. This reserve-level bottle (\$80; not yet from the estate vineyards coming online but sourced from great Red Mountain sites) is concentrated, complex, and structured, with juicy blackberry, black currant, and licorice coated in rounded tannins and underpinned with earthy forest-floor notes.



Canvasback Cabernet Sauvignon
Photo: Courtesy of Duckhorn Wine Company

Col Solare 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon Red Mountain

Partnering with Washington's largest producer, Chateau Ste. Michelle, Tuscan wine legend Marchesi Antinori has endorsed the state's potential in no uncertain terms with this Red Mountain winery. From a warm, ripe-fruited year, the 2015 Col Solare (\$75) offers lush dark fruit—cherry and berry—layered with mocha, licorice, and spice.



Col Solare Winery

L'Ecole No. 41 2015 Ferguson Vineyard Walla Walla Valley

The 2011 vintage of this Cabernet-based blend from L'Ecole won Best International Bordeaux Blend from the Decanter World Wine Awards. The 2015 (\$65) carries on the impressive quality, showing the impact of high elevation and thin, basalt soils, with concentration from small, thick-skinned berries, great acidity, solid tannin structure, and pure fruit—blackberries layered with espresso, graphite, and stony minerality.



L'Ecole No. 41

Photo: Courtesy of L'Ecole

PASO ROBLES

Allegretto 2015 Ayres Family Reserve Tannat Paso Robles

A rare version of a grape better known in South America, this Tannat from Allegretto (\$55) offers up a complex nose of spices, black pepper, leather, licorice, espresso, and high-toned violets that you might expect from the variety. But the palate that follows is surprisingly refined—the wine’s characteristic powerful tannins have been tamed, and elegantly frame plum and red cherry fruit.

Booker 2016 “My Favorite Neighbor” Paso Robles

Eric Jensen of Booker is one of Paso’s notable producers making full-throated wines that often flout tradition (such as, say, blending Rhône varieties with Bordeaux grapes). “My Favorite Neighbor” (\$80) aims to honor the farmers who tend the special sources of Jensen’s fruit across the Westside hills of Paso. The 2016 blend of Cabernet, Syrah, and Petit Verdot is saturated with color; aromas of wild dark berries, cassis, and violets brood a little with pepper and tobacco, followed by sexy red fruit (loads of plum) and lush, mouth-filling textures.



Booker Paso Robles
Photo: Courtesy of Booker Wines

Halter Ranch 2016 “Ancestor” Estate Reserve Adelaida District, Paso Robles

The ancestor namesake of this signature Bordeaux blend from Halter Ranch is the largest coast live oak on record, spreading over one of the winery’s vineyards. The wine (\$60) is a mouthful of pleasure for the price—sweet plum and beautifully concentrated berries layered with intriguing spices and earthy minerality, with a lovely tannin structure carrying through a long finish.



Halter Ranch Ancestor
Photo: Courtesy of Halter Ranch

Follow the winemaking legends to their more obscure projects

Among collectors and connoisseurs, a few wine consultants have become household names. Learn that Michel Rolland or Philippe Melka is overseeing a new Napa brand, for instance, and your trust is fully engaged—without even tasting the wine. These winemaking luminaries, though, often have in their portfolios brands in prominent places that simply aren’t as well-known as others, and so can’t command top prices. The winemakers also keep their eye out for promising places far from the likes of Bordeaux and Napa Valley, and the wines they produce from farther afield will almost surely set you back a lot less (sometimes a **very** lot less).

Château Lafleur-Gazin 2008 Pomerol

In wine circles, the name Christian Moueix might conjure the Right Bank bottles of Château La Fleur-Pétrus and Château Hosanna, or even Dominus in Napa. But tucked between Château La Fleur-Pétrus and Château Gazin in Pomerol is the lesser-known Château Lafleur-Gazin, and since 1976 the Moueix family has made the wines for the Borderie family, who owns the estate. The 2008 (\$42.50) delivers an impressively complex swirl of tobacco, black pepper, earth, and violets around rich and mouth-filling blackberry fruit.



Château Lafleur-Gazin Pomerol
Photo: Courtesy of Château Lafleur-Gazin

Crocus 2014 Le Calcifère Malbec de Cahors

In partnership with Cahors wine producer Georges Vigouroux (owner of Château de Mercuès, a 13th-century castle that's now a Relais & Châteaux hotel), California consultant Paul Hobbs has gone all in on Malbec, the region's native grape, with Crocus. While the label's top wine clocks in at \$125 (and has serious aging potential), step down a notch (to \$45) and you still get a wine that has spent 18 months in oak—50 percent new and 50 percent single-use. This inky Malbec gives off aromas of tobacco leaf, cedar, and earth, with the blueberry, black cherry, and spice that follows delivered with decidedly firm tannins.



Crocus Wines

Photo: Courtesy of Crocus Wines

Château Lagrézette 2014 Cuvée Marguerite Malbec de Cahors

Even before the abovementioned Paul Hobbs hung his cap on Malbec in Cahors, French consultant Michel Rolland teamed up with Alain Dominique Perrin, former director of Cartier International and proprietor of 15th-century Château Lagrézette, to help replant the estate vineyards and refine the production of Malbec in the region, which had come to be thought of as just a rustic and powerful black wine. This château has gone a long way toward changing that reputation. You **could** spend \$120 for a bottle of Lagrézette, but the Cuvée Marguerite, at \$70, over-delivers with elegant floral notes and layers of spice (anise stands out) under bold black fruit.



Château Lagrézette Vineyard

Photo: Courtesy of Château Lagrézette

Andis Wines 2017 Original Grandpère Vineyard Zinfandel Sierra Foothills

Here's one for the radar. With the 2017 vintage, high-profile Napa consultant Philippe Melka is overseeing Andis Wines in California's Amador County. This dark and concentrated red (\$40) comes from one of the oldest documented Zinfandel vineyards in the country—planted in 1869. Intense mixed berries and dark cherries are layered with warm spice, licorice, fennel, pepper, and crushed rock, with a beautiful balance of acidity to keep the wine bright through an endless finish.



Andis Zinfandel

Photo: Courtesy of Andis Wines

Sequel 2015 Syrah Columbia Valley

John Duval, renowned for Australia's iconic Penfolds Grange Shiraz (now going for \$850), chose Washington for a second chapter in Syrah. One of the Long Shadows Vintners brands—a family of wines overseen by some of the world's best-known winemakers, including Michel Rolland—Duval's Sequel (\$60) has a power and concentration somewhat reminiscent of Grange. But nicely tamed tannins play foil to vibrant dark berry fruit and a slightly wild cured-meat character (a good thing in Syrah).

Look to Old World Regions

When we think of the greats of the Old World, names like Domaine de la Romanée-Conti or Pétrus are quick to pop to mind. But wines like those are all but out of reach for mere mortals. In fact, in the former case, very few of the best Burgundies are modestly priced; those grand cru vineyards are carved up in such small lots that supply-and-demand principles are simply not on the side of the consumer. (And while Bordeaux does have some affordable treasures, the top bottles are hard to lay hands on.) Other European regions, though, with the luxury of more winegrowing space and equally long local winemaking traditions are still good for a well-priced bottle. Take Spain, for instance. Its Tempranillos and Garnachas (Grenaches) have been undergoing a style renaissance of sorts, from old-school techniques to more international profiles and preferences. Expect the spotlight to be flipped on soon, but before Spain becomes the wine world's newest darling, it's possible to snag these bottles for a reasonable sum.

Compañía Vinicola del Norte de España 2011 Imperial Gran Reserva Rioja

Fun fact: French architect Alexandre Eiffel, of Eiffel Tower fame, designed the original, innovative cellar for Compañía Vinicola del Norte de España (which translates to the Northern Spanish Wine Company), around the turn of the last century. Needless to say, there's history in the brand, which now comprises four labels. The Imperial Gran Reserva (\$80) is made only in good years. The 2011 (85 percent Tempranillo, plus Graciano and Mazuelo) is a wine of the earth, with forest-floor, black pepper, and leather aromas layered under dusty red fruit. The palate is rich and tangy, a classic balsamic character brightening berry flavors and elegant tannins.

Tempos Vega Sicilia 2013 Pintia Toro

This 100 percent Tinta de Toro (\$78) from the Tempos Vega Sicilia family of wines is a beauty—aromas of violets over dusty berries, black pepper, leather, and loam give way to vibrant spiced cherry and black raspberry fruit, coated with tannins that balance power with elegance.



Tempos Vega Sicilia Pintia Toro
Photo: Courtesy of Tempos Vega Sicilia

Try to Get Lucky with “Sleepers”

For whatever the reason, there are outliers to be found, anomalies—wines with pedigree and critics’ acclaim that haven’t left their traditional affordability behind. To find these prizes, you generally have to check in with the aforementioned critics, who simply have the chance to taste more wines than the rest of us.

Château Haut-Bailly 2011 Grand Cru Classé de Graves Pessac-Léognan

On one of the highest hills in Pessac-Léognan, with some of the oldest vineyards (a quarter of the vines are reportedly 100 to 120 years old), Château Haut-Bailly is remarkably consistent. The 2011 (\$79) delivers sexy complexity, with blackberries, cassis, minerals, earth, and an endless finish. Robert Parker gave it a 94+ score.

Drink Sparkling Champagne Instead of Champagne

All those bubbles in the world’s celebratory wines are not created equal. The best, of course, get there in the traditional Champagne way—through a second fermentation in the bottle that gives the CO2 nowhere to go. It’s time-consuming, and it’s expensive. But Champagne is not the only bubbly made that way. All self-respecting West Coast sparklers (and there are more and more of them) employ the method and, generally priced well below Champagne, offer a refreshing winemaking deal.

Frank Family Vineyards 2013 Blanc de Blancs Carneros

Imagine a hand-riddled bottle of bubbly for \$55! This elegant all-Chardonnay sparkler from Napa’s Frank Family shows fresh brioche, nutty notes, and a lovely creamy mousse from three years on the lees. White blossom aromas, green apple and pear flavors, crème brûlée hints, and a stony minerality on the finish combine for a terrific blanc de blancs.



Frank Family Blanc de Blancs
Photo: Courtesy of Frank Family

Gloria Ferrer 2007 Carneros Cuvée Sonoma

With all the splendor of a vintage Champagne that has spent many years on the lees, this late-disgorged tête de cuvée from Spanish-owned Gloria Ferrer (\$80, and only made in good years) consistently over-delivers. Brioche notes set off fall apple, pear, mellow citrus, and subtle red fruit flavors. A structural granite quality loops in on the lingering finish.



Gloria Ferrer Cuvée
Photo: Courtesy of Gloria Ferrer

Roederer Estate 2009 L'Ermitage Rosé Anderson Valley

The Mendocino County outpost of Champagne Louis Roederer and Cristal produces some of the best sparkling wine in California. The delicate salmon color of this Roederer Estate tête de cuvée (\$65) matches its delicate red berry flavors. But vibrant energy balances delicacy in this one, and creaminess civilizes tart cranberry and warm spice.



Roederer Estate Rosé
Photo: Courtesy of Roederer Estate