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Bargains From American Vines

By ERIC ASIMOV

A FEW weeks ago, I wrote about wines at the coveted intersection of high value and low price. I suggested that the greatest concentration of value, where you could find wines that were not merely palatable, but exciting, was in the \$15 to \$25 range. And I recommended 20 bottles at \$20 that were the kinds of wines I would look forward to drinking any day of the week.

Mostly, the reaction was favorable. But several readers were indignant. "Only 3 out of 20 from North America?" one wrote in an e-mail. "Come on, Eric, we can do better than that."

Finding good values in American wines is not easy. Unlike in the Old World, the wine industry in America did not evolve to make intriguing, inexpensive wines.

The United States does not have a centuries-old history of locally produced wines, so it cannot approach the sheer variety produced in Europe, where seemingly every valley has a local tradition of distinctive wines. When the American wine industry began in earnest in the 1960s, the imperative was national and even international. Grapes were selected on a desire to compete with the world's best and to sell to distant markets.

That meant, as the midcentury thinking went, Bordeaux and white Burgundy; cabernetsauvignonandchardonnay. These grapes quickly became the dominant American models for red and white wines, the most popular and most expensive. Success dictated widespread imitation.

Other grapes have joined the cabernet and chardonnay group: pinot noir, sauvignon blanc and a few more. Still, it's a small group of wine types that encompasses the entire price range. Lower-end wines tended to mimic the more expensive models, and so were seldom distinctive and often pretentious. This extended even to zinfandel, once the epitome of good American value. As top versions became expensive, cheap zinfandels often became falsely plush and oak in imitation, losing their fresh vibrancy.

Obviously, I'm overgeneralizing to make a point. Exceptions certainly exist, and things are changing for the better. A new generation of producers now sees beyond the verities of 40 years ago; consumers, exposed in the last 15 years to the wonderful diversity of the world's wines, are demanding more at home.

Here are 12 great American values, all \$20 or less, all a pleasure to drink. Two are cabernet sauvignon, yes, and one chardonnay, one pinot noir and one merlot. But I also have a pinot grigio, a marsanne, a pinot blanc, two rieslings, a field blend and, perhaps surprisingly, a grignolino, one of those locally grown Italian grapes, which was planted in Napa long before cabernet became the dominant grape there. The Heitz family bought an eight-acre vineyard of grignolino in 1961 and has maintained it against all odds. It's that sort of stubborn adherence to tradition that makes for great wine values.

Bonny Doon Vineyard
Central Coast

CONTRA

Old Vine Field Blend 2009, \$16

Contra is an old-style blend, reminiscent of the days when Italian immigrants planted multiple grapes side by side, harvesting and vinifying them together. This wine is 55 percent old-vine carignan, a scorned grape worthy of scorn when overcropped but winsome and perfumed when tended with care. This wine, which also has grenache, mourvèdre, zinfandel, petite sirah and syrah in the blend, is dry, fruity and harmonious with a streak of licorice.

