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AIMING TO PLEASE, AT A GOOD PRICE

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It's a little like the auto industry. Winemakers, understanding our sour economic mood, are scrambling to please us. They're not always lowering prices on existing products; instead, they're creating new blends, even new wines, at lower prices. And if they already have popular wines at popular prices, they're taking them off the lower shelves and placing them at eye-level so we will notice them.

To create these wines, they tend to steer away from California's standard, expensive cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay and toward unusual grape blends created in France, Italy and Spain.

It's amazing what you can buy for \$20 and under. The iconoclastic Bonny Doon Vineyard in California, for example, is taking Italy's famous sangiovese grape and blending in freisa, syrah and grenache to produce a sturdy, extra-fruity steak wine for \$13. It's quite different from the more traditional Banfi Centine from Italy, which blends sangiovese with cabernet sauvignon and merlot to create a richer, softer black-cherry scented wine. But the price is the same: \$13.

For white wine lovers, Bonny Doon turns to a wine that's popular in Spain's northern Galicia region. But it uses grapes from Monterey County, Calif., to create a blend of albariño, loureiro and treixadura at \$19.

For lovers of Asian cuisine, Bonny Doon produces a muscat wine in the northern Italian style, with moscato giallo grapes blended with loureiro. It's slightly off-dry with very crisp acid -- a nice food wine. And \$18.

Also from Italy comes a pinot grigio from Stellina di Notte. This is a good recession-era choice, since an inexpensive pinot grigio, by its nature, is more likely to be good than, say, an inexpensive sauvignon blanc. It's more forgiving. And this one from northern Italy is actually quite nice. Especially at \$10.

And in California, Morgan Winery produces a tarter, more powerful pinot grigio for \$17.

So don't just grab the first bottle you see. Shop around a bit and you can ride out the bad times in style.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

- 2008 Bonny Doon Albariño, Ca' del Solo Estate Vineyard, Monterey (albariño, loureiro, treixadura): powerful; crisp white grapefruit and lemon flavors; \$19.

RECOMMENDED

- 2007 Stellina di Notte Pinot Grigio delle Venezie IGT, Italy: light, crisp green melon and tart lime flavors; \$10.

- 2007 Stellina di Notte Chianti DOC (sangiovese, canaiolo): tart cherry and cloves; light, crisp and fruity; \$13.

- 2008 Bonny Doon Muscat, Ca' del Solo Estate Vineyard, Monterey (moscato giallo, loureiro): aromas and flavors of golden delicious apples; very crisp, slightly off-dry; \$18.

- 2006 Banfi Centine Toscana IGT, Italy (sangiovese, cabernet sauvignon, merlot): light and bright, with crisp black cherry and espresso flavors, very smooth; \$13.

- 2006 Bonny Doon Sangiovese, San Benito County (sangiovese, freisa, syrah, grenache): crisp tart cherry flavors; firm tannin; spicy; \$13.

- 2006 Artesa Vineyards Chardonnay, Carneros: rich and creamy, with flavors of peaches and butter; \$19.

- 2008 Morgan Winery R&D Franscioni Vineyard Pinot Gris, Santa Lucia Highlands, Calif.: Granny Smith apples and minerals; tart and crisp; \$17