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20 Wines Under \$20: A Little More Money for a Lot More Wine

Value in wine does not mean the cheapest price. The extra dimensions of distinctiveness and interest usually require \$15 to \$20 a bottle.

Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times



By Eric Asimov

For quite a few years I have argued that the greatest values in wine are found around \$15 to \$20 a bottle. For just as long, I have heard the persistent objection that \$15 to \$20 is too much to spend for a bottle of wine, and the suggestion that I instead focus on wines that are \$8 to \$10.

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Inevitably, somebody always [chimes in](#) that the canny French, who are born knowing about wine, never spend more than 5 euros a bottle.

I'm not one to advise anybody on how they should construct a budget. It's not hard to find bottles in the \$8-to-\$10 range. These wines will be sound. They will be solid. But for the most part they will not be particularly interesting or distinctive.

Finding those extra dimensions, in my experience, requires spending a little extra. I wish that were not so, but it is the truth.

What do you get? In this latest round of 20 Under \$20, I picked up a beautiful sparkling wine from the Savoie region of France, a gorgeous Barbera d'Alba, an exceptional sémillon from the Margaret River in Western Australia, five excellent American bottles, a lovely fino sherry and three very different rieslings, each superb.

Many of the people who object to my suggested price range have found cheaper wines that they like. These are generally bottles produced in the millions, like [La Vieille Ferme](#), a straightforward, unpretentious blend available in red, white or rosé from the southern Rhône Valley that costs less than \$8 a bottle and can be found just about anywhere.

Don't get me wrong, La Vieille Ferme and wines like it are fine. You cannot do much better for the price, and you can do a lot worse. But these are not transporting wines. You are not likely to wonder where they come from, where those flavors have been all your life or what sort of people made that wine.

As for those French people, forgive me for dispelling the myth that the French are all in on some colossal joke about the money other people spend on wine. Visit any French supermarket and you will find a universe of wretched bottles for around 5 euros each, and plenty of French consumers who are happy to buy them.

The fact is that most French people, like most Americans, do not want to spend much on wine and are happy with what they drink, even if critics do not think much of these bottles. But a smaller group of consumers wants something more, and these avid wine lovers are willing to spend a little extra.

Editors' Picks

These 20 bottles, from eight countries on four continents, are for them. And they are for everybody else, too. If \$20 seems too much, consider it an occasional splurge. You may conclude that these wines still are not worth the money, or you may find them exciting enough to begin restructuring the budget.

Nothing in principle is wrong with large-scale wine production. Some of the greatest wines of all are made in quantity. Château Lafite-Rothschild, [the legendary Pauillac](#), produces about a half-million bottles a year, while [Dom Pérignon](#), the great Champagne, is said to make a couple of million bottles a year. Even at that scale, they are works of great craftsmanship.

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Inexpensive wines are generally able to be so cheap because of technological manipulations, automation and economies of scale, which in most cases cannot help but compromise quality.

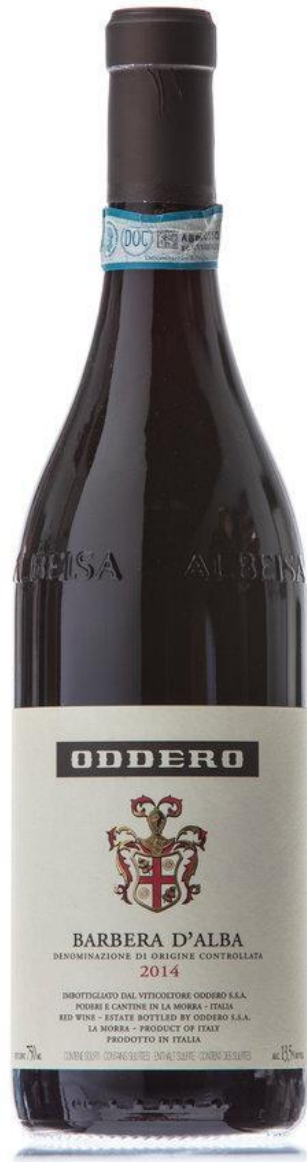
Most of the wines on the list that follows are small-production, made by dedicated producers using traditional practices, without compromise or labor-saving automation. The question is not “Why are they so expensive?” It is “Why don’t they cost more?” That’s a pretty good definition of value.

For those who are frustrated that they cannot find all these wines, there are [good reasons](#) that may be true. I can’t change that. But I can make the following suggestions (which I hope will be helpful) for finding a wine of value:

- Find the [best wine shop](#) near you, even if it is not the most convenient.
- View these 20 bottles not as a hard-and-fast list but as an outline of types to seek out. If your merchant does not have one, maybe she can suggest an analogous bottle. Dozens of them are out there.
- Use internet tools like [wine-searcher.com](#) to help you find bottles.
- Don’t be bound by vintages.
- Do not underestimate vicarious pleasure. There is great value to knowing these bottles are out there, even if not immediately available. Think of it as if you are bookmarking a particularly intriguing recipe or a review of a restaurant in another city. You may not be able to cook the dish right away, or get to that restaurant this week. But you may find an opportunity in a few months or next year, and if you see that bottle on the list, you have most likely found yourself a deal.

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The Winter 20 Under \$20



Image

Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Oddero Barbera d'Alba 2014 \$16.96

This is a beautiful Barbera d'Alba from an excellent Barolo producer, full of the grape's typical bright fruit flavors and lively acidity. It is bracing, delicious and unblemished by oak flavors. Though it's verging on five years old, it's absolutely fresh. The 2015s are also on the shelves, and I'll warrant they are just as good. (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)