

Wine gifts don't have to break the bank

By Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr 
Tuesday, December 22, 2009 | [No comments posted.](#)

Following our column about gift wines that make a statement -- albeit a pricey one -- we heard from readers who asked us to suggest more affordable wines.

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We weren't trying to suggest that you need to spend more than \$50 to get a good wine. We don't have that kind of money any more than you do. But at least some expensive wines deliver an extraordinary experience in wine tasting -- if the occasion and budget permit, go for it.

Today, however, we offer some inexpensive wines -- "inexpensive" in today's terms is under \$15.

Can you get quality for that kind of money? Absolutely. Take, for example, Millegrand's Minervois from southern France. A blend of carignan and grenache, it is effusively fruity and guaranteed to please. The staff at Bay Ridge Wine & Spirits tell us it sells out -- often to the same customers -- every year they order cases of it. It is one of the best wines under \$12 that we have tasted this year.

Cote Tariquet Chardonnay/Sauvignon Blanc 2008 (\$12). This white blend from Gascony is one of the best white wine buys on the market. Consistent year to year, it has bright acidity, apple and citrus aromas and grapefruit flavors.

Domaine Coussergues Chardonnay/Viognier 2008 (\$12). This is an even split of two white grape varieties and represents one of the most tasty wines on the market for this price. Very floral and peach aromas with tropical fruit flavors. Medium body and crisp acidity make it a good food match to chicken dishes or as an aperitif.

Columbia Crest Grand Estates Cabernet Sauvignon 2007 (\$11). We persist in touting this Washington state producer because it makes consistently good wine at excellent prices. This year its 2005 reserve cabernet sauvignon topped the famous 100-best wines list by Wine Spectator. But this little brother is also delicious. Easy to find, the grand estate cabernet sauvignon has great depth for the money with cherry and black currants notes, medium body and soft mouthfeel. Blended with a bit of merlot, cabernet franc and syrah.

Columbia Crest Grand Estates Merlot 2007 (\$12). Excellent, varietal merlot fruit with dark berry flavors, spice, cocoa and excellent balance. It was judged the best under \$15 merlot in a blind tasting we recently attended.

Cellar No. 8 Chardonnay 2008 (\$10). This California producer has been making inexpensive red wine for some time now, but strangely this is its debut in the white wine category. Most of the grapes hail from Santa Barbara, one of the best regions for chardonnay and pinot noir. It has good expression of fruit: tropical flavors, creamy mouthfeel and a hint of citrus.

Smoking Loon California Pinot Noir 2007 (\$9). Made by Don Sebastiani and sons, Smoking Loon is one of several new brands targeted at value-minded customers. You won't find a lot of complexity here, but this has to be one of the best pinot noirs at this price. Simple, honest fruit. The Smoking Loon chardonnay is also a decent buy.

St. Francis Red 2006 (\$10). One of the best values on the market today, this is a motley blend of merlot (48 percent), cabernet sauvignon, syrah, zinfandel and mixed black grapes. It doesn't matter: just quaffable easy wine.

The Crusher Cabernet Sauvignon 2008 (\$13). Don Sebastiani and family are Hollywood producers when it comes to inventing wine labels. The Crusher series are among their best -- great value, forward varietal fruit flavors and balance. This wine uses grapes from Wilson Vineyard in Clarksburg.

Clayhouse Adobe Red 2007 (\$15). This is a fun blend of zinfandel (44 percent), petite sirah, syrah, malbec, grenache and mourvedre. Lots of ripe cherry and plum flavors with a touch of blueberry pie and vanilla.

Cline Cellars Zinfandel 2008 (\$12). This and the producer's syrah are among the two best buys in California year after year. The California zinfandel has lots of ripe plum and raspberry flavors with a dash of spice and sweet vanillin oak.

Ruffino Chianti Superiore 2007 (\$13). The superiore label allows Ruffino to blend as much as 25 percent of the wine with other red varieties. The wine is simple in style with cherry, vanilla and plum notes.

Altozano Tempranillo Cabernet Sauvignon Vino de la Tierra De Castilla 2006 (\$11). We get requests all of the time for moderately priced wine values, well this is a table pounder. Rich fruity nose, with a full expression of mature cherry, berry flavors, and a wee hint of oak from only 3 months in French and American oak barrels. Extremely drinkable and very good.

Coltibuono Cancelli 2008 (\$11). Spicy, peppery aromas with berry flavors and a ice touch of mineral.

Andeluna Cellars Malbec 2007 (\$10). Everyone seems to love malbec these days, and what isn't there to love? This Argentinian version has copious berry flavors, simple design and excellent balance for the price. We also liked its torrantes, also \$10, because of its unique flavors and crisp acidity.