



THE UNDERGROUND WINELETTER

A Definitive Guide to Fine Wines

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ONE WINEDRINKER'S OPINION

Wine Prices Are Coming Down

For most of the decade of the '70's, consumers have been faced with ever increasing prices for virtually everything - gasoline, housing, food, and wine. The government encouraged consumption by undermining the value of the dollar through deficit spending and rapid growth of the money supply. Savings declined and investors rushed into "hard" assets and collectibles - real estate, art, vintage cars, and vintage wines. Prices escalated. However, as the decade of the 1980's gathers up steam it looks like a new ball game. The rate of inflation is coming down. High interest rates are encouraging savings. Consumption is declining as evidenced by the depressed market for housing and high ticket consumer durable goods such as autos. Yet through all of this, wine prices have continued to escalate. Repeatedly, we have talked about many wines being over priced. Now the first signs are beginning to appear. Wine prices are coming

down! Not only are they coming down, but especially for young wines we look for the trend to continue and gain momentum. Why? Simple supply and demand. Escalating prices have reduced demand, while at the same time supplies have continued to increase. The market is out of balance. Consider: Price wars on the East Coast have driven the price of many 1978 Bordeaux below the original landing price. The price of 1979 futures has continued to drop. Some 1979's are already starting to arrive. All the while, interest rates remain high. This adds to the cost of carrying inventory and makes alternative lower risk investments attractive. The price for recent vintage Bordeaux seems to be headed lower. The price of California wines has to be affected. Already there is a glut of Cabernet developing (see page 54 in this issue). Retailers are starting to mark down prices to move more wine. With supplies building, the producer price

seems sure to come under pressure.

As we head into 1982, the best advice I can give wine collectors and consumers is patience. We are not in a shortage situation. Be selective. The market for older wine, particularly pre-'66 Bordeaux and to a lesser extent '70 Bordeaux, remains strong with less and less available. If you own these fine, if not acquiring them may be increasingly expensive. However, this is not

the time to be laying in large quantities of young wine (exceptions the best '78 Burgundies which are in such limited supply, the marvelous '78 and '79 Rhônes and a few attractively priced Cabernets). Wait for the market to come into balance. As it does there should be lots of bargains. An old commodity, cash, is gaining a new glitter. It will probably buy more young wine for the buck in 1982 than it has in a long, long time.

John Tilson
Editor



COMING ATTRACTIONS

Cellar Notes • Distinctive New Wines • Selected Tasting Notes • California Chardonnays • California Cabernet Sauvignons • Barrels and Bottles • More 1978 Bordeaux • 1979 Bordeaux • More 1979 Red Burgundies • More 1979 Rhônes • Cork Poppers • And More

ABOUT OUR RATING SCALE & QUOTED PRICES

18-20 Outstanding 15-17 Very Good 12-14 Good Under 12 Below Average

Wines are ranked on a 20 point system on the basis of relative merit. Wines with identical rankings are listed in alphabetical order. Rankings are usually made only after several tastings of any particular wine. Wines rated Very Good or better will also be ranked on a six star system corresponding from 15-20 on a 20-point scale. Wines with a 1/2 ranking will receive a + designation. Stars in () indicate potential. Unless otherwise noted, prices quoted are the approximate California suggested retail prices.

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BRUT CHAMPAGNES

"Seek out the Champagne from small producers"

Despite the fact that the French Franc has declined sharply against the dollar, West Coast prices of Champagne have escalated as much as 20% in the course of the past year. On the East Coast a more competitive market, combined with the favorable currency translation, has resulted in prices that are actually below those of a year ago. For example, Taittinger Blanc de Blancs retails in New York for as little as \$38.25. The same wine on the West Coast carries a retail price of \$67.95! Clearly, these two markets are out of balance.

Last year we suggested laying in a supply of Champagne in anticipation of higher prices. This was based on the diminishing supply of Champagne brought about by small crops in 1978 and 1980. Now 1981 seems to have further compounded the problem. It was a difficult year and the crop was probably only about 40% of normal. Thus, in three years of the past four, supply has been less than 2/3 of demand. The higher prices may have slowed demand, but production has not kept pace with even a flattening of consumption. As a result, the reserves of wine kept on hand by the major Champagne houses have dropped to very low levels. From nearly a 4:1 ratio of reserves to shipments the ratio has now fallen to about 2.5:1. However, for the U.S. consumer the situation is not as bleak as it might first appear. First, there is the strength of the dollar vs. the franc which has offset the increase of approximately 25% in the producer price of Champagne. Secondly, Champagne growers are increasingly keeping a larger share for themselves and producing their own wine. Moreover, not only are they making more of it, they are selling direct eliminating the middlemen who add substantially to the retail cost. Although most of the wine from these producers, called recoltants, is sold in France, a small amount is beginning to trickle into the U.S. (The J. Lassalle Champagnes in this issue are a prime example.) We expect this trend to continue. The commercial houses, called maisons, will be faced with competition. Not only is the quality of the Champagne a factor, but also the cost. Wine from the recoltants may be of great quality because they control the vineyards and can use the best grapes in their own production. Because they sell direct to a knowledgeable market the price also may be lower. As a result, the maisons are faced with a dilemma. Reflecting the short supplies, prices of 1980 grapes were doubled for the best vineyards. The maisons hoped this would cause less problems with the recoltants. But higher prices could result in declining demand. Not a problem now, but conceivably a

problem if there are two good vintages to increase supplies. As consumers, the key is selectivity. Seek out the Champagne from small producers. These are the greatest bargains in Champagne today.

BRUT VINTAGE CHAMPAGNES

Most of the Vintage Champagne currently available is from 1973 and 1975. A great number of these were reviewed last year (see Volume II, Pages 49-53). Listed below are notes on Brut Vintage Champagnes not previously tasted:

Outstanding

★★★★

1976 Billecart-Salmon "Cuvée N.F. Billecart". Last year's 1975 vintage was an outstanding Champagne and an outstanding value at \$18 per bottle. Now the good news! The 1976 is equally outstanding and the price has not increased (the 20% increase in the producer price was offset by the strength of the dollar vs. the French franc). This is a superb wine to stock up on for the holidays. The color is light yellow gold and the nose has a lovely, fruity/yeasty/spicy/steely/vanilla quality - very clean and very attractive. The wine has exquisite balance and a delicious flavor - fruity/spicy/with a hint of vanilla. Long on the palate, this is superb Champagne (18). \$18

1973 J. Lassalle. This Champagne is estate bottled. That is all grapes used to make the wine were grown by the producer. Most Champagne is made by blending grapes from different vineyards. This results in a consistent house style. By using only estate grown grapes there is a risk of more year to year variation. If it's possible to make Champagne like this, a little year to year variation seems a small price to pay. This is wonderful. The color is a pale yellow gold and the nose has a lovely, fruity/lemony/steely/yeasty nose. The flavors literally explode with tremendous fruit and hints of vanilla and a soft steeliness. Everything one could ask in a youthful Champagne, it is full, rich, creamy, and luscious with a long, lingering finish. Need it be said that at \$20 this is a great buy (18).

1973 J. Lassalle "Blanc de Blancs". Oh my, this is another lovely Champagne. Stylistically different from the other J. Lassalle bottling, this is exactly what would be expected from Blanc de Blancs—lighter, more delicate. The color is light yellow gold and the wine has a lovely, fruity/vanilla/slightly smoky/slightly steely nose. It is very nearly balanced—creamy and very flavorful, yet delicate, soft, and lovely with endless flavor—a great success and, again, a great buy (18). \$20

Very Good

★ ★ ★

1975 George Goulet "Extra Quality". This is lovely Champagne with a light yellow gold color and a fruity/yeasty/spicy nose. It is nicely balanced with good fruit and a hint of vanilla and anise. Complex, clean, and very classy, this is a distinctive style (17). \$38

1976 Roederer "Cristal". After a series of disappointing vintages Cristal is now back on track. Lacking just a bit in flavor to be outstanding, but still very, very good. Those who favor elegance may find this faultless. After all, at \$67 per bottle crystal just isn't enough, it's important to be convinced that what you're drinking is as important as the bottle. So if money is no object, this could be your wine. The color is pale yellow gold and the nose has a lovely, perfumed, fruity/apple/yeasty quality. The texture is delicate and the flavors have the same apple-like quality with an appealing freshness. A dry, clean, lingering finish is consistent with the overall style (17).

★ ★ +

1973 Henriot. Finally, after two years of the oxidized 1971 vintage, the 1973 has arrived. It's very nice. The color is pale yellow gold with a fruity/yeasty/slightly toasty nose. The texture is full and creamy with long, rich flavors (16½). \$27

1975 Laurent-Perrier. This is a flavorful Champagne with a light yellow gold color and a fruity/spicy/yeasty nose. It has good richness, a fruity/spicy flavor, and a clean, crisp finish (16½). \$25

★ ★

1976 Bonnaire "Blanc de Blancs". With a pale yellow gold color and a fruity/yeasty/citric nose, this Champagne has a clean, fresh, fruity/citric/yeasty flavor—very nice, light, and delicate with a slightly short finish, but at a painful price (16). \$55

1975 De Castellane "Blanc de Blancs". This Champagne has a pale yellow gold color and a lovely, clean, fresh, fruity/yeasty/apple-like fruit. It has clean, apple-like flavors and is light, but nicely balanced (16). \$35

1975 De Castellane "Cuvée Commodore". With a light yellow gold color and a lovely, fruity/yeasty/spicy/vanilla nose, this Champagne is clean and fresh with good fruit and a crisp finish. Perhaps a little austere, but very nice (16). \$50

★ +

1975 Bollinger. If a little short on the palate, the full style of Bollinger is apparent. The color is pale yellow gold and the nose and flavor share a similar fruity/yeasty/slightly toasty quality (15½). \$29

★

1975 Deutz. This Champagne has a light yellow gold color and a fruity/slightly toasty nose. It is clean and fruity with a hint of vanilla. A little on the austere side and slightly acidic in the finish, but pleasant. (15). \$31.25

1973 Charles Heidsieck "La Royale". With a light yellow gold color and a fruity/yeasty quality in the nose and flavor, this wine is nicely balanced and pleasant, if not terribly exciting (15). \$45

1975 Pommery and Greno. This wine is austere with a short, dry finish. It is light yellow gold in color with a slight toasty nose and an earthy complexity in the flavor (15). \$18

Good

1973 Bollinger R.D. At \$58 this can only be termed outrageous. It simply isn't worth it—not even if one prefers old, oxidized Champagne. For if this is the case, just shop around for some non-vintage bottlings at a store that doesn't have temperature control or much turn over! This bottling has a toasty/caramel quality in the nose and flavor. It is full and rich, but old, feeble, and showing signs of early senility (14).

1973 Taittinger "Millésime." At \$32 this is disappointing. The color is pale yellow gold, but from there the faults become apparent. The nose has a chemical, resin quality. In the mouth it is clean and fruity, but rather simple with a rather heavy dosage (14).

Royal What?

1975 Veuve Clicquot "Royal Celebration". Some celebration! The NV Veuve Clicquot is better for nearly 1/3 less (see page 50). This wine has a pale yellow gold color and a toasty nose and flavor. Lacking fruit and showing signs of early senility with a short finish, hopefully the royal couple doesn't share the same characteristics (14). \$30

1975 Mumm "Cordon Rouge". This Champagne is a disappointment. It has a pale yellow color and a slightly grassy/fruity/yeasty nose. The wine is clean and fresh, but it is acidic and short with a green, stemmy flavor (13). \$29

The Billecart-Salmon is imported by Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant in Albany, California, and on the East Coast by Robert Chadderon in New York City. The J. Lassalle is imported by Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant in Albany, California.

NON-VINTAGE BRUT CHAMPAGNES

Many of these Non-Vintage Champagnes were reviewed last year (see Volume II, Pages 53-54). We have updated them in our following review as well as some which were not reviewed last year.

Very Good

★ ★ ★ +

George Goulet "Extra Quality". Agreed. This really is extra quality. Many will find it outstanding. It's very close. A little more staying power on the palate would make it clearly outstanding. Still it's lovely. The color is light yellow and the nose is very perfumed with fruit, spice and a hint of yeastiness. It is full and rich with fruity/spicy flavors and a creamy texture – delicious (17½). \$25

★ ★ +

Billecart-Salmon. This wine is an excellent buy at \$15. However, with the outstanding 1976 Billecart-Salmon only a few dollars more, the value is eclipsed. It has a pale yellow color and a subdued, fruity/yeasty nose with clean, fresh, fruity/spicy flavors. Very well balanced with a lovely finish, it is wines like this that dollar for dollar make California Sparkling wine pale by comparison (16½). \$20

Deutz. Unusual? Yes, but lovely. This Champagne has a light yellow gold color with a faint pink/amber blush. It has a lovely, fruity/floral/banana/vanilla nose – almost Riesling-like with a lovely, delicate balance and clean, fresh, fruity flavors. This is exceptionally easy to drink (16½). \$20

Charles Heidsieck. This is a full-flavored Champagne with good depth and richness. The color is pale yellow gold with a lovely, fruity/yeasty/slightly toasty/carmel nose. With good length on the palate, this is fully matured, but not tired (16½). \$20

Mumm "Cordon Rouge". This widely available Champagne is usually very reliable. It is popular and sells so well stocks generally don't sit around too long to go bad under bad storage conditions at a wholesaler, distributor, or retailer. The primary attractiveness is a clean, fresh, fruity flavor and a nice, elegant balance. The color is pale yellow and nose has a lovely, fruity/yeasty quality. It has a nice finish and is harmonious and attractive (16½). \$24

Perrier-Jouet "English Cuvée". With more body than this producer's "Grand Brut", this is appealing with a light yellow gold color and a fruity/spicy/yeasty nose. It has fruity/spicy flavors with a nice balance and a dry, clean finish (16½). \$26

Perrier-Jouet "Grand Brut". This is a lovely, delicate style Champagne. The color is light yellow gold with a fruity/spicy/grapefruit nose. It is clean and very nicely balanced with a good flavor and finish (16½). \$22

★ ★

Henriot. This is an attractive wine. The color is pale yellow gold with a yeasty/fruity nose. It is clean and pleasant with a fruity/citric flavor and a nice balance (16). \$23

Moët & Chandon "Brut Imperial". Usually a very good wine, this is no exception. The color is light yellow gold and the nose has a lovely, fruity/yeasty/vanilla quality. It has nice apple-like, vanilla-tinged flavors with a fresh, clean finish (16). \$18

Pol Roger. With very good flavors and nice balance, this Champagne has a light yellow color and a fruity/spicy/yeasty nose – very attractive (16). \$25

Taittinger. With a light yellow gold color and a fruity/spicy/yeasty nose, this wine has a characteristic Taittinger style. It is lovely with nicely balanced flavors and a relatively high dosage leaving an attractive impression of sweetness (16). \$25

Veuve-Clicquot. This is very nice Champagne with a light yellow gold color and a subdued, fruity/yeasty/spicy nose. It has fresh, clean, fruity/lemony/spicy flavors (16). \$21



Besserat de Bellefon "Reserve". This wine has a pale yellow gold color and a subdued, toasty/yeasty nose. With a lovely, fruity/yeasty flavor, there is a good fruit/acid balance, but a little more depth would be desirable – still very nice (15½). \$14 New York

Piper-Heidsieck "Cuvée des Ambassadeurs". This Champagne has a light yellow color and a fruity/yeasty/spicy nose. It has similar clean, fresh, fruity/spicy flavors. A little short, but it's still very pleasant (15½). \$25

Best Buy

Rene Brun "Cuvée Reserve". At \$12 per bottle this is the least expensive Champagne reviewed, but still it is very good. The color is light yellow gold and it has a fruity/yeasty nose. It has good fruity/spicy flavors and a nice balance (15½).



de Venoge "Cordon Bleu". This is very pleasant with a light yellow gold color, a fruity/spicy/licorice nose and clean, fruity flavors (15). \$23



Roederer. This wine is showing considerable age. Not obvious from the pale yellow color, but toasty on the nose and flavor. It has an apple-like quality so often present in Roederer Champagnes with some acid showing through on the finish (15). \$27

Good

Laurent-Perrier. Old, and on the way down hill, no doubt this has been around for some time. The color is pale yellow gold, but the nose has a toasty/caramel/yeasty quality which follows through on the palate (14). \$20

Bollinger "Special Cuvée". Some aren't so special. This is one. The color is light yellow amber with a toasty/orange blossom nose. The wine has toasty/fruity flavors and a short finish (13½). \$24

Lanson "Black Label". This Champagne can vary all over the map in terms of quality. The ones we found were not memorable. Pale yellow gold color with a slight amber blush, the wine is toasty and slightly oxidized with good richness (13½). \$22

Gosset "Reserve". This wine has a herbaceous/tarry nose that is not attractive. It is clean and has some fruit, but is austere and slightly bitter (13). \$28

Charbaut. This wine has seen better days. The color is light yellow gold with a toasty/slightly musty nose. It has rich, fruity/caramelized flavors (12½). \$28

Pommery & Greno. This is sparkling wine. That's obvious at first glance. But it isn't recognizable as Champagne. The color is pale yellow gold and the nose has a tarry/creosote quality. The flavors are fruity, simple, and short (12). \$22

Below Average

Nicolas Feuillatte "Reserve Particuliere". Reserve Particuliere? What kind of joke is this? How bad is the regular unparticular? This has a pale yellow gold color and a skunky nose. Slightly flat, but also syrupy with a short finish. Back to the cellar, Nicolas baby, surely you can do better than this (11). \$18



CALIFORNIA AND IMPORTED BRUT SPARKLING WINES

Is there an alternative to Champagne? Very simply, the answer is no. In California there are many wines called Champagne which is a sacrilege. The great majority of the bulk process "Champagne" is made from inexpensive, Central Valley grape varieties and most are very sweet and nearly undrinkable. After all what can you expect for \$2? However, even using the more time consuming and expensive Method Champenoise such as is used in Champagne there are large quantities of sparkling wine produced in California, Italy, Spain, and France. Most are far less expensive than Champagne, except in California where some wines improperly command prices higher than the best Champagne. Ah yes, but are they Champagne? Again no. Only Champagne is Champagne. It comes from the specific Champagne district of France, is produced from specific vineyards, and under specific controls regarding production. Nothing else is Champagne. Not Sparkling Vouray. Not Sparkling California Chenin Blanc. Not Chandon, not Schramsberg, not anything outside of Champagne. Unfortunately, these other sparkling wines generally fall into the poor-good category with very little achieving distinction. With the higher Champagne prices there is reason to be optimistic regarding sparkling wines in the future. Italy and Spain are certain to have better and better quality wine available. Most should be at an affordable price. California sparkling wines are now starting to be produced in greater quantities and should show improvement. Here the problem might be that the first successful producer to "win" a tasting against Dom Perignon will try to price the wine at parity. However, for now, that's not a problem. As can be seen from the following review California has a long way to go.

California Brut Sparkling Wines

Good

Chandon "Blanc de Noirs". This bottle seems to have more fruitiness than some other bottles of the last few years. Despite variations in color, the Blanc de Noirs seem to generally be more successful than the Blanc de Blancs. The color is light salmon pink and the nose has a perfumed, fruity/cherry nose. The wine has clean, fruity flavors, good bubbles, and a slightly bitter finish (14). \$12

1977 Schramsberg "Blanc de Noirs". This is one of Schramsberg's better efforts. The color is a pale pink with a fruity/yeasty nose. It is clean and fresh with good bubbles, but a little short of flavor and somewhat austere with a slightly bitter finish (14). \$18

Korbel "Natural". This is a pleasant beverage, although despite the "Natural" designation, the wine leaves an impression of sweetness. The color is pale yellow with a slightly perfumed, fruity nose. It is clean, fruity, and fresh with good bubbles, and a slightly bitter finish (13½). \$11.24

Chandon "Blanc de Blancs". The problem with the Chandon sparkling wines is that the consumer has no way of knowing which batch of wine he's buying. And, make no mistake, the wines do vary. Chandon is experimenting in a constant effort to improve the product. Somehow the Blanc de Blancs just doesn't seem to be improving much. It has a light yellow gold color and a fruity, somewhat floral nose. It is clean, dry, and somewhat austere with good bubbles and a slightly bitter finish (13). \$12

1975 Grand Cru Vineyards "Cuvée de Pinot Noir". This wine has a pale salmon color, a chemical nose, and fruity, clean flavors with good bubbles, and an austere, dry, slightly bitter finish (13). \$14

1978 Mirassou "Au Natural". Made predominately from Pinot Noir grapes, this wine is dry, clean, and fresh. The major fault is a definite lack of flavor. The color is pale yellow gold and the nose is very subdued, almost neutral. A pleasant dry beverage, but it's hardly distinctive (13). \$12

1978 Mirassou "Brut". This is a clean, fresh, sparkling wine with good bubbles and a subdued, fruity/floral nose. There is a slight sweetness and a hint of bitterness on the finish. Not really Brut in the sense of being dry, but rather like a slightly sweet, sparkling Chenin Blanc (13). \$11

1978 Schramsberg "Cuvée de Pinot". This is quite pleasant, even if it is a little sweet. The major flaw is a bitter finish. Otherwise, it has a medium pink color and a fruity/raspberry nose in a fresh, fruity/berry flavor with good bubbles (13). \$15

How to Pay More and Get Less

1975 Schramsberg "Reserve". Ouch! Are you kidding? This wine costs more than the three Champagnes we rank as outstanding. Maybe it "won" a tasting somewhere. The color is pale yellow gold with an unusual, fruity/slightly herbal nose. It has good bubbles and is clean with a fruity/floral taste and a slightly bitter finish (13). \$24

Hans Kornell Brut. At least this wine is better than the "Sehr Trocken". Even though it tastes somewhat like Riesling, where the "Sehr Trocken" (which one might think would taste like Riesling) doesn't at all, it still has little distinction. The color is light yellow and the nose has a vanilla/pineapple quality. It is very fruity with considerable sweetness, good bubbles, and a bitter finish (12½). \$9.75

Korbel "Blanc de Noirs". This is a strange wine with a light salmon color and a weedy/strawberry jam nose. There are good bubbles and a fruity, slightly bitter flavor with a hint of sweetness (12). \$9.25

Below Average

1976 Almaden Chardonnay Nature. Labeled Grand Cuvée 1976, it's hard to find anything grand here. The color is a medium yellow and the nose has a toasty/muscatel quality. There is a nice carbonation, but the flavors are toasty and bitter (11). \$9

1976 Almaden Cuvée Blanc de Blancs. Unlike the Chardonnay this isn't labeled grand. Good because it isn't either. The color is light yellow gold and the nose slightly oxidized. There are good bubbles and a fruity, slightly sweet flavor with a bitter finish (11). \$8.75

Heitz Cellar "Brut". Is this Joe Heitz's worst wine? Maybe. It is produced and bottled by Heitz Champagne Bottling Cellars. Rumor says Hans Kornell. Who knows, but it's not very good. The color is light yellow gold with a perfume/floral nose. It has fruity/floral/slightly bitter flavors, good bubbles, and a touch of sweetness. Probably blended with Central Valley grapes plus Riesling, Columbard, a little Chenin Blanc. Again, we really don't know, but there's no real reason to care either. Why does Joe put his name on this stuff (11)? \$7.79

Hans Kornell "Sehr Trocken". How this wine continues to sell is a mystery. At \$12.75 per bottle it is absolutely baffling! The wine is a blend of various grapes, probably varying from batch to batch. What is said to be the current release has a light yellow gold color and a decidedly unattractive, chemical/muscatel nose. There are good bubbles and a musty, slightly sweet flavor that finishes bitter (10).

Imported Brut Sparkling Wines

Despite the large quantity of wines produced, they seem to be quite limited in California. Below are notes on a few. Perhaps at a later date we will search out more across the country and do a more intensive review.

Very Good



Best Buys

Crémant de Bourgogne (Cave Cooperative de Viré). If you need a low priced alternative to Champagne, this is probably as close as can be obtained. It actually tastes like Champagne. The color is light yellow and the nose has a subdued, fruity/yeasty/somewhat spicy nose. The wine is crisp, yet there is fruit and depth of flavor with lovely bubbles and a clean, dry finish (15). \$7

Juvé y Camps "Reserva de la Familia". This is a clean, fresh, fruity wine with good flavor and bubbles. The color is light yellow and the nose has an attractive, spicy/woody/fruity quality. The fruity flavors have nuances of pineapple and spice and the wine finishes clean and dry (15). \$6

Good

1977 Venegazzu. This is a very pleasant wine. If only it were more attractively priced. At \$12.50 it is priced very close to some non-vintage Champagne, albeit these bottles are becoming more and more difficult to find. The color is pale yellow and the nose has a subdued, fruity, yeasty quality. It is clean, fresh, light, and delicate, very close to neutral with a short finish (14).

Freixenet "Carta Nevada". This wine has a light yellow color and a grapefruit-like nose with a hint of mustiness. It is clean and fresh with good bubbles and a papaya-like flavor. A little watery, but quite pleasant (13½). \$5.50

Delapierre "Blanc de Blancs". This wine is pleasant and inexpensive. The two seem well suited. Pleasant wines should be inexpensive and inexpensive wines should be pleasant. In reality, the two hardly ever get together. With a light yellow gold color and a tarry/creosote nose, the wine is clean and dry, if somewhat austere (13). \$3.49

Freixenet "Cordon Negro". This wine has a light yellow gold color and an unusual cigar-like nose. There is some fruit and good bubbles – pleasant, if a bit austere (13). \$7

Below Average

Codorniu "Clasico". Clasico? Yeah, if that means weird O.K. In fact for \$4 this might evoke some "Clasico" responses around the table for some special evening. The color is light yellow and the nose could pass for petroleum jelly. Hmmm. The wine is dry and crisp with good bubbles but it tastes like sagebrush. Maybe cowboys would like it (9).

1973 Freixenet "Brut Nature". Nature was never like this. The color is light yellow gold, but the nose is foul, like stagnant water, and the flavors have a bitter, chemical quality. Oh yes, the bubbles are nice (8). \$7

The Crémant de Bourgogne is imported by Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant in Albany, California. European Beverage Company in Canoga Park, California, imports the Juvé y Camps "Reserva de la Familia."



DISTINCTIVE NEW WINES



1978 Chalone Pinot Noir. Wow! Anyone who thinks California Pinot Noir is dull should taste this wine. It absolutely overwhelms every other Pinot Noir available today. (A review of 50-60 Pinot Noirs will appear in a subsequent issue.) Available almost exclusively from the winery, early acquisition is advised since only about 500 cases were made. The color is very dark and the nose has a lovely, ripe fruit/spicy quality. It is full and rich with loads of fruit and a spicy complexity. Opulent, lush, long on the palate, great balance, this wine has everything. Seemingly destined for long life, this is a California classic (18). \$18



1980 Balverne Gewurtztraminer "Pepperwood Vineyard". This wine is dry and it's certainly one of the best, if not the best, dry style Gewurtztraminers yet produced in California. The color is pale yellow with a slight green tinge. The wine is very perfumed with a fruity/floral/spicy nose. In the mouth it is clean, light, fresh, crisp, and fruity with a nice balance and a hint of spice. Delicious, irresistible, and easy to drink, this is a wine to buy for current consumption. Unfortunately, only 1,204 cases were produced (16). \$8

1980 Balverne "Healdsburg". This proprietary wine is a blend of estate grown Johannisberg Riesling (22%), Gewurtztraminer (70%), and Scheurebe, a Riesling hybrid, (8%). It is crisp and fresh with 1.8% residual sugar. The color is pale yellow with a green tinge. The nose has a clean, perfumed, floral/fruity/slightly spicy quality. It is very grapy with a slight spiciness and a nice balance of acid and sweetness. Production was 1,348 cases (16). \$5

1980 Balverne Johannisberg Riesling "Oak Creek Vineyard". Again, this is amongst the best California wines of this type. It is slightly sweet with 1.9% sugar. The color is light yellow and the nose has a lovely perfume of fruit and peaches. Clean, fresh, crisp, slightly sweet, fruity/peachy flavors are presented in an elegant, flavorful style. Some 3,712 cases were produced (16). \$7.50

1980 Balverne Scheurebe "Annaberg Vineyard". Only a very small quantity of this wine was produced. It is very rare in California with only Joseph Phelps and Balverne thought to have planted vineyards. The color is pale yellow with a green tinge. The nose is subdued, but has a fruity/floral/slightly steely quality – very attractive. The wine is clean, fresh, crisp, and fruity with a slight sweetness (2% residual sugar) and a nice finish (16). \$9

CALIFORNIA CABERNET SAUVIGNONS

"The consumer is well advised to be aware of the supply situation."

Many 1979 Cabernets are now coming to market. In the North Coast counties, production was down about 15% from the bountiful 1978 crop. Reflecting a large supply situation, grape prices trended down slightly. The vintage was quite unusual. A lengthy heat wave accelerated maturity, but the harvest season was interrupted by cool, rainy weather which caused excessive mildew and rot in some vineyards. Generally speaking, the most successful wines were made from grapes harvested before the rains. However, the rains were punctuated by warm periods which allowed a portion of the harvest to be picked in good condition. This should produce some good wine as well. Overall, 1979 can be called a successful vintage. 1980 looks even better and 1981 also seems to be quite good. California has experienced five consecutive very good to outstanding vintages in the 1977-81 period. Beginning in 1977 the majority of the vines planted in the early 1970's reached maturity. This has resulted in a large supply of Cabernet Sauvignon.

The consumer is well advised to be aware of the supply situation. For a year (see Volume II, page 40 and subsequent Cabernet Sauvignon reviews) we have advised selectivity. A buyers market is developing. Producers are scurrying to sell more and more wine outside of California in the hopes of reducing inventories. Other marketing gimmicks are rampant. Releasing only small amounts of wine to produce the impression of scarcity and creating expensive "reserves", "special selections", etc. at \$15-30 per bottle that are often no better than less expensive regular bottlings are two primary examples. Despite all the gimmicks the basic laws of supply and demand ultimately will prevail. For the next several years there should be no problem acquiring an ample supply of very good-outstanding Cabernet Sauvignon in the \$8-15 per bottle price range. Anything priced much higher than this is generally not worth it. The indiscriminate use of a wide variety of special labels at expensive prices without bothering to put special wine in the bottle could ultimately spell the demise of these short sighted producers. They won't be missed.

Very Good

★ ★ ★

1979 Diamond Creek "Volcanic Hill". This is one of this winery's best wines (see Barrels and Bottles Volume II, Page 120). In time it should prove to be outstanding. The color is very dark. The nose has a

deep, fruity/cherry/cedary nose with a hint of violets. Really incredible and much more developed than we tasted out of barrel. There is a lovely, deep, fruity/cherry flavor with hints of spice and vanilla. Youthfully tannic, but harmoniously balanced. Give this wine a minimum of 4-5 years more age (17). \$15

1979 St. Clement "Napa Valley". At \$11 per bottle this is a must buy. The color is dark and the nose has a deep perfume of fruit, berries, cherries, vanilla, cassis, and oak. The flavors are deep with a fruity/cherry/oaky quality. Very nicely balanced, 4-5 years are needed to soften the youthful tannin, but this very well could prove to be outstanding (17).

★ ★ +

1979 Diamond Creek "Red Rock Terrace". (Barrels and Bottles Volume II, Page 120). True to form the 1979 Red Rock Terrace is more forward than the other two Diamond Creek Cabernets. Also less complex. The color is dark and the nose has a deep, berry/fruity/oaky quality that carries through on the taste. Full and very flavorful, there is tannin to lose (16½). \$15

1979 Keenan "Napa Valley". This wine is deliciously fruity. The color is very dark and the nose is fresh with fruity/oaky aromas. There is lots of fruity/berry flavors. Lean, but nicely balanced, a few years bottle age should soften the wine and yield a lovely bottle (16½). \$12.50

1977 Mayacamas "Napa Valley". As expected this is one of the biggest, most flavorful '77's. There is great potential, but at least 10 years are needed for the wine to develop. The color is dark and the nose has a lovely, ripe, cherry/oaky quality. It has loads of the same ripe cherry fruit backed by an oaky complexity. Full, rich, tannic, lots of depth, just what Mayacamas Cabs are all about - potentially outstanding (16½). \$15

1977 Ridge "Monte Bello". (Barrels and Bottles Volume II, Page 31). This vintage yielded the smallest crop in Ridge's 20 year history. Only about 800 cases of this wine were produced. The mind boggling \$40 per bottle price reflects the scarcity as well as the quality. The color is dark and the wine has a ripe, fruity/oaky nose with a hint of chocolate. There is lots of fruit, ripe, but not raisiny, with full, rich flavors that have impressive length on the palate. Well balanced, but youthfully tannic, this wine should improve for at least 10 years and in time could prove to be outstanding (16½).

1978 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars "Stag's Leap Vineyards, Lot 2". Perhaps a little more depth than the first lot and seemingly a little more subdued. It will be interesting to follow both wines as they develop (the first lot was reviewed in Volume III, Page 10). Lot 2 has a dark color with a fruity/berry/oaky nose showing a hint of chocolate. It has good berry-like flavors, a subtle oak balance, good depth, and some tannin to lose (16½). \$15



1976 BV "Private Reserve". This wine is a substantial improvement over the terribly mediocre 1975 which was so highly touted by the winery. The color is dark with an amber edge and the nose has a deep, ripe fruit/oaky quality. There are similar flavors in a medium-bodied style with tannin to lose. Lacking a little in depth, especially for a generally low yielding year like 1976, but with the potential for development for 3-5 years (16). \$18

1978 Burgess Cellars "Vintage Selection". This Napa Valley Cabernet has a dark color with an amber edge. It has a fruity/oak nose with hints of cinnamon and mint. There is good depth with good fruit balanced by oak and a hint of spice. Supple, yet with a good underlying balance of tannin and acid, this should be lovely in 4-5 years (16). \$16.50

1979 Carneros Creek "Napa Valley". This is a very nice wine with a dark color and a fruity/berry/oaky nose. The flavors are similar. Not a big wine, but very flavorful with good tannin/acid balance, this should be lovely in 4-5 years (16). \$12.50

1977 Chateau Montelena "Napa". Surprisingly, this is a big wine. The color is dark and the nose has an intense, fruity/berry/oaky quality with a hint of green olives. Loaded with fruit, the wine is round, ripe, and somehow quite tannic. Lay it away for 4-5 years and it should be lovely (16). \$14.75

1979 Diamond Creek "Gravelly Meadow". (Barrels and Bottles, Volume II, Page 120). Just now this wine shows a little bitterness in the finish. This should resolve nicely with time. The color is dark and the nose has a deep, fruity/cherry/oaky quality. It has good fruit with a cherry-like quality and nice depth of flavor (16). \$15

1978 Lower Lake "Stromberg's Hummel Lane Vineyard". This Lake County Cabernet shows appeal to lovers of big, chewy wines. The color is dark with an amber edge and there is a deep, fruity/berry quality in the nose and taste backed by lots of oak and a chocolate richness. Just now very tannic, time will tell how it

will develop, but the flavors make it youthfully appealing despite the abundant tannin. At \$7.50 it's a best buy (16).

1976 Robert Mondavi "Reserve". (Barrels and Bottles Volume II, Page 122). If expensive, this is still an attractive wine. The color is dark with an amber edge. The nose has a ripe fruit quality with noticeable oak and a hint of mint. The wine is round with oaky/ripe fruit flavors. Some tannin, but not excessive, there seems to be enough fruit to carry this wine for many years (16). \$25

1978 Mt. Eden "Santa Cruz". Just over 600 cases of this wine were produced making it a near bumper crop for this low yielding vineyard atop Mt. Eden. The color is dark and the nose has a deep, fruity/cassis/tea leaves nose. Loads of fruit and an earthy/oaky quality are backed by substantial tannin. It is a big wine that needs years to mature, yet it is an enigma. There is youthful appeal, yet with a few hours the wine fades and becomes oxidized. This may indicate that the wine doesn't have staying power. For now the wine is impressive, later who knows. At \$25 per bottle it's an expensive gamble (16).

1978 Trefethen Vineyards "Napa Valley". Lacking the early appeal and complexity of the 1977, this is a bigger wine, but at this stage not better. The color is dark with an amber edge and a fruity/berry/oaky nose. It has nice fruity/berry/oaky flavors with some tannin to lose. The wine improves in the glass and is much improved after 3 hours air. This is a good sign of future aging potential. The \$10 price makes laying a case away a reasonable investment (16).



1978 Robert Mondavi "Napa Valley". This is a very nice Cabernet that should improve for 5-6 years. The color is dark with an amber edge and the nose has a subdued, fruity/berry/oaky quality. The wine has good depth and fruity/oaky/berry flavors backed by moderate tannin (15½). \$12

1978 Stonegate "Steiner Vineyard". This Sonoma Cabernet has a dark color and a subdued, oaky/fruity nose. It is full and rich with big fruit, lots of oak, and substantial tannin. Rather straightforward, but flavorful and seemingly with potential for improvement over many years, this is a wine to lay away (15½). \$12

1978 BV "Rutherford". Although priced 33% higher than the equally good 1977, at \$8 this is still a value. The color is dark with an amber edge and the nose has a ripe fruit/oaky/vanilla/almost chalky nose. There is good, ripe fruit flavors with an oak complexity and a slight amount of tannin to lose. This wine should continue to improve for 4-5 years (15).

1978 Conn Creek "Napa Valley". There is a Lot 1 and Lot 2 bottling of this wine. Reportedly, a different yeast was used on each. This really is carrying separate bottlings too far. The wines are virtually identical. One bottle of the Lot 2 has a noticeable amount of SO₂ that blew off with a few minutes air. The color of both wines is dark with an amber edge. They show a deep, fruity/oaky nose and similar flavor. Both are full and tannic. At this juncture the Lot 1 seems to have more of a berry-like fruit quality. Score it 1/2 point higher (15). \$12.50

1978 Durney Vineyard "Reserve". This is a massive wine, but bigger is not better. At 1/3 less, the regular bottling is a better wine (see Volume III, Page 11). The color is very dark and the nose has a grapy, over-ripe fruit quality with a hint of butterscotch. It is a huge, thick wine with loads of fruit and tannin, only time will tell how it will develop (15). \$16

1978 MEV "Santa Clara". This wine is from the Kennedy Vineyard just below the vineyards of Mt. Eden and Martin Ray. It is a huge Cabernet that will need a decade or more to develop. The color is very dark and the nose has a deep, minty/fruity/oaky quality. It is loaded with fruity/oaky, minty flavors. Very intense, but also very lean, and very tannic. If there's enough fruit this could be a real winner in 1995 (15). \$12

1978 Villa Mt. Eden "Reserve". At \$25 per bottle this "Reserve" is a bigger wine than the regular bottling. The price is also more than double (\$25 vs \$12). Frankly, it just doesn't seem worth it. The 1978 regular has more style (see Volume III, Page 10). The grapes were picked from a special section of the vineyard at a greater degree of ripeness than the regular bottling. The color is dark and the nose has a very oaky quality with some fruitiness underneath. The wine is deep, intense, and powerful with a tannic, bitter finish. Only time will tell how this will develop (15).

1978 Chateau Chevalier "Reserve". Unbelievable! The prices this winery charges are equal to or more than the wines from the best producers, yet the wines are generally mediocre. And now comes a \$25 "Reserve". Sure, it may be the winery's best, but \$25 is ridiculous and, based on the track record, \$10 would be more like it. This wine is typical heavy style, yet without the off character of so many past Chateau Chevalier bottlings. The color is dark and the nose has a fruity/oaky quality. It is big, full, oaky, tannic, and slightly hot and alcoholic. Yet there is also loads of jammy fruit flavors. Only time will tell if it will ever come into balance (14 1/2).

1977 Joseph Phelps Vineyards "Eisele Vineyard". Unlike previous Eisele Vineyard Cabernets, this wine lacks the depth of flavor that is so characteristic. The color is dark with an amber edge. The wine has a fruity/oaky/minty quality. There are fruity/oaky flavors and a bitter, tannic finish. More fruit and more depth are needed for the wine to be in balance. At \$25 per bottle, it's easy to pass on this one (14 1/2).

1979 Kistler Vineyards "Glen Ellen Vineyard". This is unusual wine more like Pinot Noir than Cabernet: the French oak has an overwhelming dominance. The color is dark and the nose has a fruity/spicy/toasty quality - Burgundian. There is fruit with hints of spice and toast and some tannin to lose. Not typical Cabernet and surely to be controversial as to quality and price (14). \$18

1979 Pine Ridge "Napa Valley". This wine has a medium dark color with an amber edge and a fruity/over-ripe, slightly vegetative nose. The wine has good flavor with an over-ripe quality and nice balance (14). \$10

1979 Ranchita Oaks "San Luis Obispo County". This wine has a medium dark color and an amber edge. If a little simple, it is still pleasant and easy to drink with a ripe, fruity/oaky/cherry nose and fruity/cherry/vanilla flavors (14). \$8.50

1978 Sycamore Creek Vineyards "Central Coast". This wine has a dark color and a fruity/berry/oaky nose. It has good, fruity/berry/oaky flavors backed by a substantial tannin. Rather simple, but with some room for improvement with time (14). \$12

1979 Kistler Vineyards "Veeder Hills-Veeder Peak". A tiny quantity of this wine was made. At \$20 per bottle the price is simply ludicrous! Bearing no resemblance to Cabernet or little else for that matter,

Caveat Emptor prevails here. The color is dark and the nose has a plummy/toasty/spicy/slightly volatile quality. There are ripe fruit/toasty flavors. Not unpleasant, but not memorable either (13).

1978 Lower Lake "Vinas Las Lomas". This wine is flavorful, but the nose has a hint of oxidation. There are loads of ripe fruit flavors and lots of oak. Well balanced, but not a wine to keep (13). \$7.50

1978 Milano "Sanel Valley Vineyard". This wine will appeal only to lovers of massive, high extract wines. They will find greater appeal to the wine. The color is very dark, with an unusual green banana nose. There is an intense ripe fruit, but the wine is alcoholic and tannic (12). \$15

Below Average

1978 Lower Lake "Holdenried Vineyards". This wine has a dark color and an over-ripe, grassy, banana-like nose. It is over-ripe and tannic (11). \$7.50

1978 Mirassou "Harvest Selection". This unfiltered wine from Monterey has loads of vegetables in the nose and taste. There's also some mint in the nose which is attractive. In the mouth the wine lacks the fruit and roundness for long term aging. In fact, it is rather austere and dry. Unless you like vegetative Cabernet, leave this on the shelf (11). \$12



SELECTED TASTING NOTES



Zinfandels

Nearly every year produces some very good Zinfandels. One reason is that the grape is widely planted in almost every area of the state. The largest plantings are in the Central Valley where it is used primarily for blending in jug wines. The different styles produced range from dry to sweet, from light, Beaujolais-style wines to heavy, impenetrable, inky, alcoholic monsters. Hopefully, we are past the peak of popularity for this latter style wine which often can be well nigh undrinkable.

Zinfandel is unique to California and the grape has a very appealing fruitiness and good flavor. However, the potential of Zinfandel as a wine to accompany meals has not yet been reached. Rather than wines that are "too much" what is needed is a balance—a balance of fruity flavor and alcohol. Rather than blend with Petite Sirah to give color and intensity why not some other variety to soften the wine? Clearly, there is room for some experimentation in this area. Eventually the marketplace will direct the style of Zinfandel. While not supported by "hard" data, many retailers seem to reflect the attitude that the popularity of Zinfandel is waning. Whether this is due to an increased supply, higher prices, or less demand is not known precisely. However, it does seem that \$8-10 Zinfandels are generally of limited appeal. (Exceptions are

for wineries such as Ridge where the wines have established a well earned reputation.) If it's possible to profitably make a nice \$4-6 Zinfandel using less cellar treatment and blending for early drinkability, maybe now is the time. To date when wineries have made such a wine they have usually sold it in bulk rather than release it. A prime example is a Mendocino winery which sold a large quantity of really delicious, lighter style Zinfandel to a small Southern California food chain. It is a very good, delicious Zinfandel which the chain was able to retail at a nice profit for only \$1.99 per bottle! (If you happen to live in Southern California you might want to check into the 1979 Trader Joe "Mendocino" Zinfandel at Trader Joe and Pronto markets.) On a national level, it seems that at least a few wineries could produce and sell a fresher, lighter, fruitier Zinfandel. As can be seen from the following review, there are too few of this type of wine available today.

Very Good

★ ★ ★

1979 Lytton Springs "Sonoma County". First popularized by Ridge who made several fantastic Lytton Springs Zinfandels, the vineyard owners

established their own winery and have been making the wine for the past few years. Although in some years subject to quite a bit of bottle variation, the wines have shown the same intense style. This 1979 is true to form. The color is very dark and the nose has an intense, olallieberry perfume with a hint of spiciness. There are loads of olallieberry fruit with the characteristic briary quality. The wine is big, intense, and very concentrated, but it is balanced. Tannic, but not overly so and not raisiny, if given a few years to soften this should make a really good bottle (17). \$8

1979 Shafer "Napa Valley". Without hitting you over the head with a 2x4, this is a lovely Zinfandel with lots of flavor and great style. The color is medium dark and the nose has a very perfumed, cherry-like quality with a touch of vanilla. The wine has intense, berry-like flavors showing a hint of oak and a little briariness. Nicely balanced, this is a Zinfandel style that is irresistible (17). \$7

★ ★ +

1978 Preston "Sonoma". This is a really lovely, estate bottled wine from the Dry Creek area. It has a medium dark color with just a little amber at the edge. The nose is complex – fruity/berries/cherries/oak/spice and a hint of briariness. The wine is round with a similarly complex flavor and loads of fruit. With some underlying tannin, expect this Zinfandel to improve for several years (16½). \$6.25

★ ★

1979 Burgess Cellars "Napa Valley". This wine seems to exhibit more fruit than the 1978 vintage. The color is dark and the nose has a nice, berry/oaky/briary quality. It is a big wine, in the Burgess style, with a berry/oaky flavor showing a hint of black pepper. With some tannin to lose, give this another year or two of bottle age (16). \$8

1978 Caymus "California". Here is a Zinfandel for those who favor a full throttle, full-bodied wine. The color is dark and the nose exhibits a fruity/oaky quality. The taste has a deep, fruit flavor intermingled with briariness and oakiness. With a good balance, this wine should improve for 3-4 years (16). \$7

1979 Ridge "Glen Ellen". Although this wine has an indicated 15.3% alcohol, it doesn't show it. The color is medium dark with an amber edge and the nose is very complex – fruit, berries, oak, and mint. In the mouth the wine is full, rich, and ripe with good balance. Give it a few years to develop (16). \$9

★ +

1977 Robert Mondavi "Napa Valley". In an easy-to-drink style, this is a very pleasant Zinfandel. It has a medium dark color with some amber at the edge and a fruity/oaky nose showing a hint of mint. With good, fruity/berry/briary flavors, the wine is round with some underlying tannin (15½). \$6.50

1979 Ranchita Oaks "San Luis Obispo". This is another very nice, flavorful, easy to drink Zinfandel. The color is medium dark with just a hint of amber at the edge. It has a nice, fruity/somewhat cherry-like nose and fruity, cherry-like, vanilla flavors. Well-structured with a roundness and depth that is most attractive, a little underlying tannin should soften with another 1-2 years bottle age (15½). \$6.50

1979 Santino "Shenandoah". This is a very flavorful Zinfandel and a good buy at \$6. Made in a big style, but nicely balanced and with an underlying impression of sweetness. The color is dark and the nose exhibits a perfumed, fruity/oaky/vanilla quality. There are loads of berry-like fruit with hints of vanilla, chocolate, and oak. Rich, round, and full, the wine is nicely balanced and youthfully appealing (15½).

★

1979 Cakebread Cellars "Beatty Ranch, Howell Mountain". At \$10.50 this Napa Valley Zinfandel is amongst the most expensive. The color is medium dark with a subdued, berry/briary/vanilla nose. The wine is very flavorful with a ripe fruity/briary quality. It finishes dry and has quite a bit of tannin and should improve for a few years (15).

1979 Calera "Templeton". No mistaking this wine. It is Zinfandel all the way in a ripe fruit style. The color is medium dark and the nose has an oaky/fruity/spicy/briary quality. Loads of ripe fruit flavors have a briary/oaky complexity and a nice balance of tannin/acid (15). \$4.50

1978 Chateau Montelena "California". This wine may not be elegant, but it is flavorful and well structured. The color is medium dark and the nose exhibits a ripe, fruity/oaky quality. Good, ripe fruit flavors nicely balanced by oak are backed by moderate tannin. Probably best consumed over the next few years (15). \$7

1978 Dehlinger "Sonoma". Like many Zinfandels, this wine is blended with some Petite Sirah. It has a dark color with an amber edge and a big, grapy/spicy/briary/oaky nose. Full, grapy/fruity/briary flavors are backed by moderate tannin. Just a little hot on the finish, but it's very flavorful (15). \$6.75

1979 Fetzer "Scharffenberger". This seems to be the best of the 1979 Fetzer Zinfandels. The wine has a dark color and a lovely, ripe, fruity/berry/cherry/briary/oaky nose – quite complex. There is an abundance of fruity/berry/vanilla flavors. Just now the wine is a little harsh on the finish and quite tannic. Given a few years, it should round out nicely (15). \$7.50

1979 Leeward Winery "Amador County". Here is an attractive wine for early consumption. The color is medium with just a touch of amber – very light for Zinfandel. There is a very attractive, peppermint candy quality underlying the fruity aromas. The wine is clean and fresh with a spicy/oaky/fruity/berry flavor – light and very pleasant, but a little pricy (15). \$7.50

1979 Montevina "Amador County". Montevina seems to always make very good Zinfandel. This wine exhibits a dark color and a ripe, berry nose with berry flavors and a hint of briariness. With some tannin to lose, it should develop well for a few years, but is best consumed relatively young for the fruitiness (15). \$6.50

1979 Ridge "Coast Range". This is a pleasant, flavory wine for early consumption. The color is medium with an amber edge and the nose exhibits a ripe fruit/berry/floral/pickling spice/oaky nose. There are fruity/oaky flavors with some underlying tannin (15). \$5

1978 Ridge "Fiddletown". Blended with 5% Petite Sirah, this is a full-flavored Zinfandel. The color is dark and the nose has a fruity/berry/oaky/spicy quality. The flavor is consistent – fruity/berry/oaky/spicy, and the wine finishes slightly dry and tannic (15). \$15

1979 Calera "Cienega". This wine may "win" wine tastings, but it's almost too powerful to drink as a dinner wine. It has a dark color and a really lusciously perfumed, ripe, fruity/oaky/spicy nose. Unfortunately, the alcohol is also much in evidence. In the mouth it is intensely flavored with lots of fruit and spice, but there is a decided late-harvest quality, and a hot finish reflecting an alcohol content of over 15% (14). \$7.50

1979 Carneros Creek "Yolo County". This is a very unusual wine. The color is medium dark and the nose exhibits a strawberry jam quality. It also has ripe, strawberry jam flavors with a hint of briariness and a slight sweetness. It is probably best consumed after dinner with fruit, cheese, and nuts (14). \$6.25

1978 Conn Creek "Napa Valley". This is a big style Zinfandel. The color is dark with just a little amber at the edge and the nose has a ripe, fruity/raisiny/oaky/slightly volatile quality. The flavors are intense with lots of fruit and substantial, underlying tannin. Several years are needed for the wine to soften (14). \$7.50

1978 Souverain "Vintage Selection". Made from North Coast grapes, this wine has a dark color and a nice, berry/vanilla/oaky nose with an underlying briariness. It has good fruit and a nice balance of oak. Round, with good texture, the fruit is just a little short, but very nice for current consumption (15). \$7

1978 Sterling Vineyards "Napa Valley". This wine has a medium dark color and a ripe, fruity/spicy nose showing a hint of volatile acidity. There is good depth with full, ripe, fruit flavors. Slightly dry and tannic on the finish, there seems to be enough fruit to lay the wine away for a few years (15). \$7.50

Good

1978 Hacienda. This estate bottled wine from Sonoma County has a dark color with an amber edge and a lovely, fruity/berry/spicy/oaky nose. It has round, fruity/briary/spicy/oaky flavors, but is just a little dry and tannic with a short finish (14½). \$6

1979 Baldinelli Vineyards "Amador County". This wine has a definite raisiny quality, but it is flavorful and pleasant. The color is medium dark and the nose has a raisiny/cedary quality. The raisiny flavor has a slight spiciness balanced by a soft, underlying tannin (14). \$5.75

1979 Fetzer "Lolonis". This Mendocino Zinfandel is made in a lighter style. Unfortunately, a stemminess in the taste and slightly bitter finish are major detractions. The berry-like flavors and lovely, perfumed, berry/vanilla/briary nose are, otherwise, exceptional (14). \$7.50

1977 Charles Krug "Napa Valley". Lacking a little in depth and flavor, this wine is still pleasant. It has a medium dark color with a little amber at the edge and a grapy/oaky/cedary/slightly minty nose. The simple, oaky/fruity flavors finish short (14). \$4.25

1977 Louis M. Martini "California". The least expensive Zinfandel of the wines reviewed in this article, this has to be considered a good buy at \$3.75. Indeed, historically, the Martini red wines have always been good values. This one is medium dark with an amber edge and displays a fruity/oaky/minty/slightly medicinal nose. It has ripe, round, fruity flavor with some oakiness and an underlying soft tannin (14).

1979 Mastantuono "Dusi Vineyards". This is a massive Zinfandel from the renown area of Templeton in San Luis Obispo County. The color is dark and the nose exhibits a musty/oaky quality with some fruit underneath. The wine is thick, heavy, and full with a tannic, ripe, fruit flavor (14). \$9.75

1979 Mountainside "Amador". This wine has good varietal character with a dark color and a fruity/berry/briary/oaky nose and flavor. The major fault is a dry finish and a rather short finish (14). \$4.50

1978 Joseph Phelps Vineyards "Napa Valley". This wine won't appeal to everyone, but it is quite unique. The color is medium dark with some amber at the edge and the nose exhibits a fruity/sassafras/vanilla/oaky nose with a slight underlying stemminess. The wine has ripe fruit flavors backed by a briariness and a slight stemminess. The finish is tannic, slightly bitter, and a little hot reflecting an alcohol of nearly 15% (14). \$7.75

1978 Ridge "Geyserville". This wine was made from late picked grapes and blended with 5% Petite Sirah. It has a medium dark color and an oaky/grapy/spicy/earthy nose. Ripe fruit flavors show a similar complexity. The wine has rough edges, but is very flavorful (14). \$12

1977 Simi "Alexander Valley". This estate bottled wine from Monterey is made in a Beaujolais style. The color is light and already showing some brown tones. The nose has a ripe fruit, slightly vegetative quality. The wine is light, fruity, soft, and pleasing (14). \$4

1978 Zaca Mesa "Santa Ynez Valley". This estate grown Zinfandel is made in a big style with 15.3% alcohol. It has a medium dark color showing some amber at the edge and a vanilla/fruity nose. The fruity/oaky/briary flavors exhibit a ripe fruit quality with some spiciness. The wine is tannic and finishes hot. It is probably best consumed relatively young (14). \$5.50

1978 Dry Creek "Sonoma". This wine has a dark color and a big, grapy, ripe fruit nose showing some volatility. Grapy flavors have an underlying, dusty/slightly stemmy quality. Slightly bitter finish and quite rough, this wine is flavorful, but lacking in complexity and charm (13½). \$6.75

1978 HMR "San Luis Obispo". This wine has a dark color with an amber edge and a briary/berry/peppery/slightly herbaceous nose. It is round and full with ripe, grapy/spicy flavors. The finish is a little hot and slightly bitter (13½). \$5.75

1978 Raymond "Napa Valley". This estate bottled Zinfandel has a medium dark color with an amber edge and a fruity/oaky/weedy/briary nose. It is round and fruity with a briary/oaky quality and a slightly dry, tannic finish (13½). \$6.85

1978 Sutter Home "Amador". This wine has a medium dark color with an amber edge and a ripe, late-harvest, alcoholic nose. There are ripe, late-harvest flavors and a finish that seems almost sweet. Here is a prime example of why bigger isn't better (13½). \$6.25

1979 deLoach Vineyards "Sonoma County". This estate bottled wine suffers from too much SO₂ and a slight pétillance when first poured. Given enough air, both will dissipate. The color is dark and the nose has an oaky/fruity quality. There are fruity/oaky flavors, but the wine is hollow and finishes short (13). \$7

1978 Franciscan "Napa Valley". This is an unusual wine. The color is dark and the nose has a fruity/briary/oaky quality with a pronounced volatile component. The over-ripe fruit flavors are slightly stemmy with a briary/oaky overtone and leaves a sweet/sour sensation on the palate. Soft and flavory, but it's volatile and destined for an early trip to the vinegar bin (13). \$6

1978 Ravenswood "El Dorado County". This massive Zinfandel is a curiosity of sorts. The color is medium dark and the nose has a raisiny, over-ripe, slightly volatile, alcoholic quality. There are over-ripe, raisiny flavors with a hint of spice, an impression of sweetness and a hot finish. Nothing wrong with the wine, but made in a very heavy, overdone style (13). \$8.50

1979 Ridge "Shenandoah". There's nothing really wrong with this wine except there's no real flavor excitement. The color is medium dark and the nose quite subdued showing some fruit and oak. Likewise, the flavors show a fruity/oaky quality. The wine has good balance, but is restrained and dull (13). \$7.50

1978 Souverain "North Coast". This is a simple, easy-to-drink wine at a fair price. The color is medium dark and the nose has a subdued, fruity/oaky quality with a slightly grassy undertone. There is an uncomplicated fruitiness without any real depth (13). \$4.50

1979 Sycamore Creek Vineyards. This estate bottled wine from Morgan Creek exhibits an over-ripe, pruny quality in the nose and taste. Oaky and with an impression of sweetness, it seems best suited as an after dinner wine (13). \$8

1979 Fetzer "Ricetti". This Mendocino Zinfandel suffers from a slightly minty nose and a dry, somewhat medicinal flavor. Seemingly lacking in fruit, it is best consumed now (12) \$8.50

Below Average

1979 Bale Mill Cellars "Napa Valley". Back to the ol' bale mill with this one! Seemingly made from over-ripe grapes, this wine exhibits a medium color and a

pronounced, raisiny quality. It also has a little SO₂ in the nose, some stemminess in the taste, and finishes quite harsh (11). \$6.25

1979 Parducci "Mendocino County". Unfortunately, even at under \$4 this wine is no bargain. It has a medium dark color and it goes downhill from there – H₂S nose, little fruit, dry, tannic, no style, no depth (10).

1979 RED BURGUNDIES

"As with most very large vintages, there is a great deal of variability . . ."

The 1979 vintage was a very successful one for the growers, with extremely large amounts of wine being produced from throughout the area, except for the certain parts of Nuits-Saint-Georges, Vosne-Romanée, and Gevrey-Chambertin which suffered from hail storms in June and July. Some growers in these areas will have little or no wine. Others have produced very good-outstanding wines.

As with most very large vintages, there is a great deal of variability in the quality of the wines and so extreme care should be made in the selection of purchases. In particular, many of the shippers wines are likely to be uninspiring. However, the best of the 1979's have good color and fruit, and are more forward and elegant than the 1978's. Nonetheless, due to the quantity of the vintage and the less warm summer weather, even the very best 1979's generally lack the extraordinary body, concentration, and backbone of the most successful of the 1978's. Prices of the wines should be down a bit from the lofty levels of the 1978's, but bargains are likely to be few and far between.

Latricières-Chambertin (J. M. Ponsot). This is a superb Burgundy. Better than the 1978? Maybe. At this point the intensity and flavors of this 1979 are impressive. The color is medium dark and the nose has a deep, fruity/oriental spice/slightly smoky quality. In this respect the wine bears an uncanny resemblance to the wines of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. There are deep, fruity/oriental spice flavors and firm acidity. Just now the wine is a bit hard, but there is great depth and the promise of elegance in 6-7 years (18). \$27

Vosne-Romanée "Les Brulées" (H. Mayer). If one could call a wine pretty, this would be it. It is irresistible, seductive, charming, elegant, yet voluptuous. The color is dark and the nose shows a deeply perfumed quality – berries, spice, and a lovely smokiness. The flavors are deeply imbedded with an abundance of fruit and spice with the underlying smokiness. Long on the palate, impressively balanced, this should improve for many years if you can resist drinking it (18). \$36

Outstanding

★★★★

Échezeaux (H. Mayer). The only fault of this wine is youth! The color is dark and the nose has a deep perfume of raspberries and spice – really extraordinary. The wine has great intensity and tannin and acid to lose. Presently, rather tight and locked-up, but my what a Burgundy this will be in 5-6 years (18). \$43

Very Good

★★★

Charmes-Chambertin (J. Roty). In time this wine will be elegant. The color is medium dark and the nose exhibits a deep, fruity/spicy/smoky/bacon-like nose. It is rich with ripe, fruity flavors showing a hint of smoke and spice (17). \$35

Gevrey-Chambertin (P. Rossignol). In time this Burgundy could be outstanding. The color is dark and the nose exhibits a deep, fruity/spicy quality. There is lots of fruit and the wine is rich with fruity/spicy flavors. Long on the palate with a good tannin/acid/fruit balance, this wine needs 4-5 years to develop (17). \$17.50

Gevrey-Chambertin "Champs-Chenys" (J. Roty). This is a firmly structured, tight Burgundy that needs several years to soften. The color is dark and there is a big, fruity/smoky/spicy/bacon-like nose. A very flavory wine with tannin and acid to lose, this should be superb in 4-5 years (17). \$17.50

Richebourg (H. Mayer). In time this should be outstanding. Just now the wine is very backward. The color is dark and the nose has a subdued quality of fruit and spice. The wine is full, rich, and concentrated. There is good length on the palate, but presently this is somewhat obscured by the youthful tannin and acid. Way too young to drink, but it seems to be all there. An almost infinitesimal production of this nectar is made each year. If you can find it, go ahead and hock the ranch to buy it (17)! \$83

Volnay "Clos des Chenes" (M. Lafarge). This early maturing wine offers an abundance of honest Pinot Noir flavor in a medium-bodied style. The color is medium dark and the nose exhibits a lovely, deep, fruity/berry/cherry/spicy nose. The flavors have good depth with berries/cherries and spice very evident. Long on the palate, it should be exquisite in 1-2 years (17). \$20

Vosne-Romanée (H. Mayer). This is a lovely Burgundy with a deeply perfumed, cherry nose showing a hint of spice. It has cherry-like flavors with a slight spiciness. A delicious wine, long on the palate, balanced just a bit to acid, keep it a few years (17). \$26

★ ★ +

Beaune "Clos Du Roi" (H. Boillot). This Burgundy exhibits a style that has immediate appeal. The color is medium dark and the nose has a lovely, deeply perfumed nose showing fruit/berries/cherries/vanilla/spice and a slight smokiness - very complex. Light, yet elegant, this wine is well balanced and exhibits an honest Pinot Noir fruit with berries and cherries backed by a hint of spice (16½). \$22

Vosne-Romanée "Cros Parantoux" (H. Mayer). Not nearly as concentrated as Mayer's 1978 "Cros Parantoux", this wine shows a ripe fruit quality with good depth, but lacks the flavor of the best Mayers. Still very, very good, but one is easily spoiled and begins to expect only outstanding wines from this master. The color is dark and the nose has a slightly raisiny, spicy quality. There are good, ripe fruit flavors with tannin and acid to lose. This wine needs 4-5 years to be at its best (16½). \$36

★

Beaune-Greves (M. Lafarge). This is an irresistible Burgundy for current consumption. The color is medium and the nose has a lovely, perfumed, candy-like, fruity/cherry nose. It is clean and fresh with cherry-like flavors and a spicy complexity (16). \$17.50

Gevrey-Chambertin "Fontenys" (J. Roty). Lighter than its producer's other wines it suffers mainly by comparison. The color is medium dark and the nose has a lovely, deep, fruity/spicy/smoky/bacon-like nose. It has nice fruit and a smoky/earthy/spicy complexity. Just a little short, but very appealing and with sufficient tannin and acid to warrant several years aging (16). \$17.50

Best Buy

Monthélie-Côte de Beaune (J. F. Coche-Dury). At \$12.50 this Burgundy is a great buy. The color is medium dark and the nose has a fruity/spicy/smoky/slightly toasty nose. The wine has good depth and a berry-like/spicy/smoky/vanilla flavor. Some tannin and acid argue for cellaring a few years (16).

Pommard "Clos Des Boucherottes" (Coste-Caumartin). This wine has a medium dark color and a lovely, deep, fruity/vanilla/smoky/spicy nose. It has good fruit with a spicy/vanilla quality. Nicely flavored, again early maturing, but it is delicious (16). \$25

Pommard "Les Rugiens" (H. Boillot). This Burgundy is a little on the light side, but it is nicely balanced and has lovely, deep flavors. The color is medium and the nose has a fruity/spicy/smoky quality. The flavors are consistent and the wine has early appeal (16). \$25

Volnay (J. F. Coche-Dury). This is quite a delicious wine. The color is medium dark and the nose has a subdued, fruity/berry/spicy quality. It has lots of fruit with a spicy complexity and is soft, round, and very appealing for consumption (16). \$20

Volnay (M. Lafarge). Not quite as much depth as this producer's "Clos des Chenes", but at 25% less, the wine is a very good buy. The color is medium and the nose has a lovely, cherry quality with a hint of spice. It is clean and on the light side, but with nice balance and a lovely, lip-smacking flavor of berries, cherries, and spice (16). \$15

Volnay "Les Caillerets" (H. Boillot). This producer's wines have a family resemblance. This has a medium color and a lovely, fruity/berry/spicy nose. Lovely, fruity/spicy/berry flavors are rendered in a light, yet elegant style. However, the wine has good depth and an abundance of flavor—again, honest Pinot Noir character in an early maturing, easy-to-drink style (16). \$22

Good

Vosne-Romanée (G. Mugneret). This wine has a medium color with an amber edge. The nose exhibits oak and a cherry/vanilla/spicy complexity underneath. It is clean with oaky, cherry-like flavors showing a hint of spice. Rather astringent and a little harsh, the wine seems to lack the depth for long term keeping (13). \$22

The Ponsot Burgundy is imported by Kermit Lynch in Albany, California, and Robert Haas in Vermont. The Henri Jayer wines are imported for sale in California by Kermit Lynch and Martine's Wines in San Francisco. For the U.S. excluding California, Nevada, and Arizona the importer is the Barrington Companies, Los Angeles. The J.F. Coche-Dury is imported by Kermit Lynch in Albany, California.

1979 RHÔNES

"Every winelover should lay some of these wines away."

Without question 1979 is a very successful year for Rhône wines. Unlike 1978, it was not a late year. If there is one characteristic of the 1979's vs. the 1978's, it seems to be that the 1979's are a shade less intense and more forward. Hence, they should mature earlier. For the best wines this may mean 6-8 years vs. 10 or more years to reach maturity. And, again like the 1978's, the prices are quite reasonable. Every wine-lover should lay some of these wines away. Below is an assessment of a few earlier arrivals. Over the next 12 months many more 1979's should become available.

Outstanding

★★★★

Côte Rôtie "Les Jumelles" (Jaboulet). This is an excellent wine that is a worthy successor to the very good 1978. As compared with the 1978, it is more forward and perhaps not quite as intense, but showing great complexity. The color is medium dark and the nose has components of cherries/berries/smoke and

earthiness. In the mouth the wine has good fruit with flavors that show nuances of cherries/spice and earthiness backed by a smokiness that is very appealing. Long on the palate and with tannin and acid to lose, this should be lovely in 5-6 years and keep for many more (18). \$19

Crozes-Hermitage "Thlabert" (Jaboulet). This wine is one of the buys of the year. In today's inflated wine market this may be the best bottle of red wine available for under \$10. However, equally as important, the wine is outstanding exclusive of price. It may not have the aging potential of a Hermitage or Côte Rôtie, but for many years it will provide superb drinking. The color is dark and there is great intensity in the nose—fruity/plummy/berry/peppery/spicy. The wine has very good fruit with a hint of cherries. It is delicious and long on the palate with moderate tannin and good acid balance (18). \$9

Hermitage (Chave). Again, compared with this producer's 1978, this wine is much more forward. While the 1978 is so closed-in that it's difficult to get a glimpse of its ultimate complexity, there's no guessing with the 1979 – it is outstanding. The color is dark and the nose shows a cherry/spicy/slightly earthy quality that is just beginning to develop. With several hours air, a lovely, rose petal bouquet develops adding a lovely complexity. The wine has good fruit and depth. It is full and very flavorful with a fruity/berry/earthy taste. Not as hard as the 1978, but nicely balanced. This certainly will be one of the finest wines of the vintage and make great drinking in 6-7 years (18). \$14 Chicago



Hermitage "La Chapelle" (Jaboulet). No less fine than this producer's superb 1978, this wine characteristically is perhaps a little more forward than the 1978. The color is very dark and the nose evokes nuances of cherries, raspberries, spices, and a hint of earthiness. It is a big, rich, full, luscious wine with a cherry-like flavor and nuances of earthiness and vanilla. Still quite tannic, this has superior potential and should be laid away for at least 5 years (18). \$19



Very Good

★★★

Côte Rôtie (Jasmin). This wine has a dark color and a fruity/cherry/green olive nose. It has ripe, fruit flavors exhibiting a fruity/cherry/earthy/mineral quality. Round and full with some tannin and acid to lose, the fruit is just a little short. Expect this wine to develop for 6-7 years and keep for many more (17). \$15

Hermitage (Grippat). This is a delicious wine that should be fairly early maturing – say 4-5 years. It has a medium dark color and a lovely, deep, cherry/berry/spicy/vanilla/earthy nose. The flavor has a cherry/vanilla quality. Medium-bodied with some tannin and acid to lose, this wine is not as full as the Hermitages of Chave or Jaboulet, but still it is lovely (17). \$11

Saint-Joseph (Trollat). This wine is very nearly irresistible for current drinking, but if left alone for a few years it should be even better. The color is medium dark and the nose is intense with a perfumed, raspberry/violet/spicy/earthy quality. The wine has medium body with a fruity/cherry/raspberry/earthy flavor. There is some tannin and acid to lose. Long on the palate, this is really a very lovely wine (17). \$8

★★+

Châteauneuf-du-Pape "Les Cedres" (Jaboulet). This wine is equally as attractive as this producer's 1978, but quite different with a fresher, fruitier quality. The color is dark and the nose has a vanilla/cherry/berry/slightly toasty quality. It has good fruit and a cherry/vanilla/slightly toasted flavor. With a moderate amount of tannin this wine should be early maturing (16½). \$15

Cornas (Clape). This is a huge wine that will require many years age to mature. The color is very dark and the wine exhibits a rather closed-in, black cherry nose. It is full, rich, and ripe with lots of fruit and tannin (16½). \$10

★

Saint-Joseph (Grippat). This wine is made in a medium-bodied style. The color is medium and the nose is unusual with a fruity/burnt almond/herbaceous quality. Very fruity with a cherry/berry taste and hints of spice and herbs, the wine has good acid and some tannin yet to lose (15). \$8

The Jaboulet wines are imported by Frederick Wildman of New York. They are available in most major U.S. markets. The Chave Hermitage is imported by Consolidated Distilled Products in Chicago and Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant in Albany, CA. Prices may vary outside California.