

Rocky Mountain News

WEINBERG'S WINE NOTES: Bargain buys make economic woes easier to take

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It's now been a week since New Year's Eve 2008. Bubbles have been popped and poured, resolutions have been made (and a fair share already broken, I'm sure). Usually the new year is a time of optimism and renewal, but of course, this is no ordinary year. If you're like me, you're apprehensive about 2009, and that means it's time for a pity party.

Why drown sorrows with choice libations? Why not? Do you have something better to do with your bottles? Part of being human is letting off steam in the company of friends and family. And what better way to do so than with wines that taste expensive but are really a bargain?

Certainly there are a lot of reasonably priced wines out there, but in my opinion very few of them overdeliver, which is what's required when commiseration is on the menu.

As those of you who follow this column know, I think sparkling wines are often underutilized, and their celebratory appeal is perfect for parties. So seek out the spicy, tangy Greg Norman Sparkling Chardonnay/Pinot Noir from South Eastern Australia, with hints of pineapple framing green apple and toasted bread flavors. It's such a bargain that you should pour it liberally as your guests arrive. It's well-made bubbly at a reasonable tariff and a fabulous way to get the party started.

White wines also often surprise me with their value and food friendliness. The lemon-lime Mouton-Cadet Blanc, a light and refreshing white Bordeaux from France, has enough acidity to firmly enhance appetizers and tapas. Put this wine on your sideboard, then step back and watch it disappear.

Another solid performer is the lime-leaf infused Robert Mondavi Fume Blanc out of the Napa Valley, tasting remarkably of pears in light syrup, very different from any other fume blancs I've tried at that price point. And if you see the Joseph Drouhin St. Veran White Burgundy, with its green apple nose and lemon zest finish, grab enough to let everyone have a glass with their meal.

For those who prefer California Chardonnay over French versions, at my most recent tasting jury **Napa Station's** pineapple-scented **Chardonnay**, redolent of lemon curd and brown sugar, stole the show. It's an amazing value, and I highly recommend it.

As for reds, at the lighter end of the spectrum I recommend Good Red from Paso Robles, Calif., an enticing blend of merlot, sangiovese, zinfandel and syrah, with the typical cinnamon, spice and baked apple flavors of second- and third-year French oak.

It's very fairly priced, and another plus is that the producers donate a dollar to charity for each bottle purchased.

I also like the gooseberry- and cola-accented **Napa Station Cabernet Sauvignon**, another solid performer from this producer. Its dark-cherry attack and wall of supple tannins eventually resolve into a finely grained, lip-smacking finale.

An even heavier red that I think outclasses its price tag is the Earthquake Petite Sirah from Lodi, Calif. This wine packs in so much sweet black fruit that it takes awhile for the tongue to identify the black cherry and butter cream elements that round out the tasty finish. Make sure you have some charred meat around to complement this monster of a wine.

There's no doubt that the first three months of the year, what I call "the darkest season," is a depressing time, with little sunlight and a lot of clouds and snow. The natural letdown after last week's holiday finale has enough of a bite to cause us to reach instinctively for a great drink.

So I hope these recommendations help you to pick out a terrific bottle of wine for your next pity party. Who knows? It might make its way into your regular rotation, even when you start feeling better about things.

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Recommended

SPARKLING

* Greg Norman Sparkling Chardonnay/Pinot Noir NV (South Eastern Australia, Australia) \$16

WHITE

* Mouton-Cadet Blanc 2007 (Bordeaux, France) \$10

* Robert Mondavi Fume Blanc 2007 (Napa Valley, Calif.) \$17

* Joseph Drouhin St. Veran 2007 (Burgundy, France) \$17

* **Napa Station Chardonnay 2007 (Napa Valley, Calif.) \$19**

RED

* Good Red Blended Red Wine 2005 (California) \$12

* **Napa Station Cabernet Sauvignon 2006 (Napa Valley, Calif.) \$25**

* Earthquake Petite Sirah 2005 (Lodi, Calif.) \$28