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Fine Oregon wines good deals

Posted by Katherine Cole, special to The Oregonian March 17, 2009 00:02AM

WINE NOTES: Great buys include bottles from top-notch producers and improved batches from others

But that reputation is also the worst thing about Oregon wine. With so many homegrown pinot noirs priced at \$25 to \$75 a bottle, it's difficult to drink local if you're on a tight budget.

This dichotomy is difficult in troubling economic times. It's just not feasible to support struggling local businesses if their prices are out of reach for us.

With this in mind, I recently set out in search of the best Oregon wines that don't break the bank. I rounded up 36 locally produced bottles selling for \$15 or less and did a big blind taste test.



My conclusion: You can have your local wine and drink it, too. Some of the high-end labels are lowering their prices, while the perennial bottom feeders have been improving the quality of their products in recent years.

So, without further ado, here are my recent top picks from the Oregon bargain bin:

Riesling

If you haven't learned to love riesling yet, do so now. As I've often written in this column, this grape offers serious bang for the buck, especially when it comes from Germany or Washington.

My lineup of six low-priced Oregon rieslings all tasted fine, but one was head and shoulders above the rest. Blame the bad economy: The **2007 Ana Vineyards Dundee Hills Riesling (\$13.50)** originally sold for \$22.50, but this label has been laid off, so to speak. Now this gem is deeply discounted; snatch it up at its new bargain price so as to better mourn its loss.

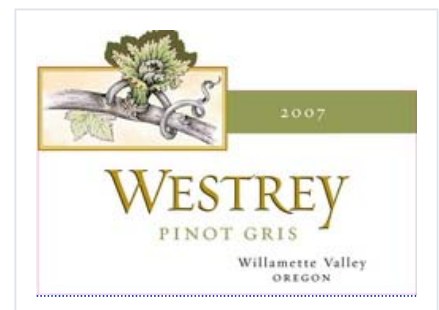
Made from some of the oldest riesling vines in the Dundee Hills by superstar vintner Lynn Penner-Ash for Ana Vineyards, this luxurious treat boasts a creamy orange-blossom nose and supple, slightly spritzy mouth feel, plus the parting gift of an endless citrus-accented finish. Stock up on this treasure while you can at Fred Meyer Burlingame and Northwest Best, Liner & Elsen, Market of Choice West Linn, Strohecker's and Vinopolis.

Pinot gris

The state has no shortage of pinot gris grapes, which means that plenty of inexpensive bottles of this every-night white are on store shelves. I had trouble selecting a winner among the eight upstanding entries in this category.

However, I kept coming back to the **2007 Westrey Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$15)** because it made me think of sitting in the sunshine at a sidewalk osteria. Minerally, dry and refreshing, with notes of lime, grapefruit and herbs, it's what you'll want to have on hand this spring when the possibility of dining al fresco presents itself.

Find it at E&R Wine Shop; Elephants Delicatessen; Fred Meyer Burlingame, Hawthorne and Hollywood West; Great Wine Buys; Little Green Grocer; Strohecker's; Vino; Whole Foods Market Pearl District; and Zupan's Burnside.



White blends

What happens to all the leftover wine that doesn't make it into the regular bottling of chardonnay, pinot gris or riesling? It gets mixed together to make a blend. Always nicely priced, these incidental (or accidental?) wines can sometimes turn out to be disasters and other times ethereal, depending on the vintner's blending skills and the raw materials he or she has to work with.

Take the **2007 Anne Amie Cuvee A Amrita Willamette Valley White Wine (\$12)**, which tastes intentional rather than haphazard. This wine is all texture and sensation, caressing the palate with its creaminess and zinging on the finish with white pepper. Mostly made of pinot blanc, it's enhanced by the addition of some Mller-Thurgau, chardonnay and riesling. Find it at Bales Cedar Mill Thriftway Marketplace, Foster & Dobbs, Great Wine Buys, New Seasons Markets Concordia and Sellwood, and Strohecker's.

Red blends

Similar to the white blend, the red blend might just be the juice that didn't make the cut for a varietal bottling. But it also might be a purposefully built wine. In great wine regions like Bordeaux and the Rhone, it's traditional to blend different grape varieties to create something unique and tasty.

In this category, the **NV Redhawk Red Table Wine (\$12.75)** hits the mark with a Bordeaux-like blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc. The label, with its proud eponymous red hawk and Latin motto (which translates as "the end crowns the work") is so handsome that you won't even notice the absence of a vintage or appellation.

But these two missing pieces explain, in part, why this wine is such a screaming deal: It's a combo of 2005 and 2006 grapes sourced from Washington's Columbia Valley as well as southern Oregon's Applegate Valley.

Despite its mixed heritage, the softly spicy sipper tastes like a thoroughbred, with piquant, juicy and robust notes of red bell peppers, tomatoes and cherries. It begs to be paired with meatballs accompanied by a hearty tomato sauce.

And the wine has convinced me to keep an eye on Redhawk Winery & Vineyard, which has been upgrading and innovating since changing hands almost four years ago. Find it at Belmont Station; Fred Meyer Burlingame, Hawthorne, Hollywood West, Northwest Best, Raleigh Hills, Sunset and Tualatin; or any New Seasons Market.

Pinot noir

Are there any good local pinot noirs for less than \$20? Alas, not many.

But the **2007 Kings Ridge Oregon Pinot Noir (\$16.75)** is one of them.

(Unfortunately, it oversteps my original aim of finding wines for \$15 or less. But I liked it so much better than its less-expensive colleagues that I decided to fudge a bit. And anyway, some stores may price it at \$15.)

It has a gorgeous light-ruby hue and has an inviting nose of strawberries and raspberries with a hint of hay. The light and food-friendly palate is clean and crisp with notes of orange peel, tart raspberry and cherry. Bright acidity makes it a sure bet for matching with springtime fare such as salmon and spring veggies.

Find it at Fred Meyer Beaverton, Burlingame, Gresham, Hawthorne, Hollywood West, Johnson Creek, Northwest Best, Raleigh Hills, Sunset, Tigard and Tualatin; Haggen Tualatin; John's Market Place; or any New Seasons Market.

Note: Prices are approximate. These wines may be available at stores other than those listed; and you can special-order most wines through your local wine merchant.

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