

THE POUR

Your 2014 Resolution: Drink Adventurously

By Eric Asimov

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Here's my resolution for 2014: Drink adventurously.

Nowadays, great wines come from all directions and continents. You can easily be content drinking familiar, wonderful wines. Yet for me, the joy of wine requires the warm embrace of old friends and the thrill of recognizing new ones.

Obscure wines hold one potential advantage over their better-known counterparts: greater value. Because there is less demand for unfamiliar wines, they can offer a greater ratio of quality to price. A \$20 bottle from the old reliable Mâconnais may bring you a pretty good expression of chardonnay. But that same \$20 may also bring you one of the best possible expressions of vespaiolo, a white grape from the Veneto in northeastern Italy that, for now at least, has all the cachet of an old sock.

It's long been my contention that the greatest values in wine can be found in the neighborhood of \$20 a bottle. It's not cheap, I know. You can certainly find many drinkable wines for less than \$10 a bottle, and some wines that are highly interesting for \$10 to \$15. But the number of fascinating bottles rises exponentially in the \$15-to-\$25 range.

Here, in no special order, are 20 winter wines for about \$20 apiece that offer not only value but also intrigue. Not all are unknown (Côtes du Rhône, anyone?), but many pique the interest because they come from unfamiliar places, are made from unknown grapes or reflect an unusual style. They are delicious testimony to the bounty of unexplored wines.

Not all will be easy to find. I purchased these in New York City retail shops, but if you have no luck, a good wine shop ought to be able to recommend something similar, and of course the web offers tools like wine-searcher.com, which will give you a fighting chance at tracking them down.

Some of you may be moved to quibble with my choices. No chardonnay but three rieslings? Well, what of it? I happen to love both chardonnay and riesling, but on this occasion, the rieslings were singing beautifully and the chardonnays were maybe a bit flat. Riesling, of course, is not exactly an obscure grape. But riesling from Michigan? My guess is you will be hearing a lot more about Michigan rieslings in the near future.

I'm not one for strict seasonal rules regarding wines. Even in winter, I eat a fair number of dishes that call out for whites. You might even find a rosé on my table in the dead of January. Still, I do make adjustments, seeking out fuller-bodied wines among both whites and reds. Yet I believe there's always a place for delicacy. In deciding what to drink, I pay more attention to mood and food than to weather.

Graphic: 20 Winter Wines for \$20

1. The Eyrie Vineyards Dundee Hills Pinot Blanc 2011

In the last few years, I've really come to appreciate pinot blanc, a grape that rarely gets its due. It makes a wine characterized more by texture than fruit flavor, and so doesn't lend itself to effusive description. I love this wine, from a pioneering Oregon producer. It's creamy yet lively, rich yet energetic. In short, delicious.

2. Destro Terre Siciliane Nausica I.G.T. Bianco 2012

The reds from Mount Etna in Sicily get most of the attention, but the whites are fascinating. This one, from Destro, made of both carricante and catarratto, is provocatively fragrant, with an almost resinous, lemon balsam aroma. The wine blossoms as it warms in the glass, becoming pleasantly savory. It will get even better with another year of age. (Panbianco, New York)

3. Left Foot Charley Michigan Riesling Dry 2011

Michigan? As is often said, all 50 states now make wine, but Michigan is one of a handful making notable wines with excellent potential. If you can find Left Foot Charley's riesling — Michigan's best white grape — it's absolutely worth trying. It's bone dry, with an almost decadent aroma of dried flowers and stones, and is exceedingly refreshing.

4. Eva Fricke Rheingau Riesling Trocken 2012

In recent years, the Germans have moved decisively toward dry rieslings. This modest but lively trocken is an excellent example from the Rheingau, with a little more body than you might find from, say, the Mosel. It's fresh, tangy and winning, with nutlike, melon, mineral flavors. (Bonhomie Wine Imports, South Orange, N.J.)

5. Alfred Merkelbach Mosel Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett 2012

Is it wrong for a winter wine to be graceful, delicate and light-bodied? Beauty is always in season, and this lightly sweet riesling is gorgeous, harmonious, graceful and delicate. It's the balance that draws me in. Pure pleasure. (A Terry Theise Selection/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

6. Kabaj Goriska Brda Ravan 2010

Goriska Brda is in Slovenia, just east of the border with the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region of Italy. Many terrific wines come from this historic area. The bottle identifies the grape as "green sauvignon," which makes sense. Green sauvignon is supposedly a synonym for tocai friulano, but this offers the brash snap of sauvignon blanc, too. Zesty and fresh with persistent, tangy flavors. (Blue Danube Wine Company, Los Altos Hills, Calif.)

7. Brovia Dolcetto d'Alba Vignavillej 2011

In the Piedmont region of northwest Italy, dolcetto is a workhorse grape, perennially underrated in the rush to exalt Barolo and Barbaresco. Perhaps that's as it should be, but when it comes to drinking, dolcetto is what the people of Piedmont pour daily. The 2011 Vignavillej from Brovia is kind of a baritone version, with deep, dark, persistent fruit flavors and, of course, the typical pleasing bitterness. (Rosenthal Wine Merchant, New York)

8. Leo Steen Dry Creek Valley Saini Farms Chenin Blanc 2012

If you can't imagine good chenin blanc coming from California, here is Exhibit A. This lively, delicious wine ought to gladden the heart of any chenin blanc lover with its aromas of lemon, minerals and herbs, and that touch of honey that marks chenin for me. It's rich but not heavy, the kind of insistent wine that I can't resist.

9. Ponce Manchuela Reto 2012

The Manchuela region of east-central Spain is little known to Americans, and grapes like the red bobal and white albillo are equally unfamiliar. But quality has greatly improved in recent years, and the wines are increasingly interesting, like this dry, penetrating albillo from Ponce, with a juicy, persistent citrus flavor, a pleasantly oily texture and a welcome touch of bitterness. (T. Edwards Wines, New York)

10. Domaine de Ferrand Côtes du Rhône Cuvée Antique Vieilles Vignes 2011

A Côtes du Rhône needs little explanation, especially when it's as soulful and satisfying as this 2011 from Domaine de Ferrand. It's made primarily of old-vine grenache, and the soft, supple, juicy red fruit simply sings. (Weygandt-Metzler, Unionville, Pa.)

11. Contrà Soarda Breganze Vespaiolo 2012

Like the albillo, the white vespaiolo grape is almost completely unknown. Contrà Soarda specializes in the indigenous grapes of the Veneto. Its Breganze Vespaiolo is full-bodied and substantial, with a ripe, rich citrus flavor that cries out for oily seafood. This wine was bottled with a dose of carbon dioxide, which gave the first glass a surprising, pleasant spritziness. (Jan D'Amore Wines, Brooklyn, N.Y.)

12. Filliatreau Saumur-Champigny La Grande Vignolle 2009

The Loire Valley remains a bargain-hunter's paradise, and Saumur-Champigny is fertile ground for lovers of cabernet franc. The 2009 Grande Vignolle from Filliatreau is rich and mouth-filling, with ripe flavors of red fruit, as befitting the warm vintage. But the fruit is laced with an undercurrent of minerality that kept drawing me back for more. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

13. Bloomer Creek Vineyard Finger Lakes White Horse Red 2008

Cheval Blanc, White Horse: get it? Just as with the great St.-Émilion, White Horse is a blend of cabernet franc and merlot, and if it lacks the polish, gravitas and staying power of the classic, it's nonetheless deep, rich and structured, generous and well shaped with flavors of earthy red fruit. Great value from the terrific husband-and-wife team of Kim Engle and Debra Bermingham from the Finger Lakes.

14. Broadside Paso Robles Margarita Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2011

Fine California cabernet sauvignon is not restricted to Napa Valley. I've had wonderful cabernets from Sonoma and the Santa Cruz Mountains, and this one from one of the cooler areas in Paso Robles. I've enjoyed Broadside's classically structured cabernet for several vintages now, and the '11 is especially good: dry, rich and slightly tannic, with snappy red fruit and an herbal tinge.

15. Mulderbosch Stellenbosch Faithful Hound 2010

This blend of five Bordeaux grapes — cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot and malbec — is a big, juicy, tannic mouthful that really develops aromatically in the glass. It's both distant and inviting in a classic Old World style, fruity yet not sweet. Roasted meats, please. (Mulderbosch, Bridgeport, Pa.)

16. Burlotto Verduno Pelaverga 2012

Beyond the most famous wines of the Piedmont are those made from more esoteric grapes like freisa, ruchè, grignolino and pelaverga, a specialty of the Verduno area. Burlotto's Verduno Pelaverga is like a fresh breeze, light, spicy and pure. Delightful and versatile, for when you need a break from the heavier reds. (Bacchanal Wine Imports, Port Chester, N.Y.)

17. À Vita Cirò Rosso Classico Superiore 2010

When was the last time you said, "Cirò from Calabria"? It's new for me, too. But because I've come to know and enjoy the Savuto wines of Calabria, the unruly toe of the Italian boot, I was excited to try a Cirò, made with the ancient gaglioppo grape. It was both surprisingly delicate and profoundly tannic (give this a few hours in a decanter), with an intriguing mealy, nutlike note. With air, it developed a pretty aroma, like pressed roses. Serve with fatty meats. (DeGrazia Imports, Winston-Salem, N.C.)

18. Joan d'Anguera Montsant Altaroses 2011

Montsant is to Priorat as Gigondas is to Châteauneuf-de-Pape, a modest but charming region that both benefits and suffers from its association with the grandeur of its neighbor. While proximity to Priorat makes for an easy sales pitch, it also tends to obscure what Montsant does best, offering delightfully amiable wines like this one from Joan d'Anguera, made entirely of garnacha, or granatxa as rendered in Catalan, gently fruity with grippy tannins and touches of anise and earth. (De Maison Selections, Chapel Hill, N.C.)

19. Domaine le Roc Fronton La Folle Noire d'Ambat 2010

What is negrette? What is Fronton? What on earth is La Folle Noire d'Ambat? To answer that last question, you must try this red, made from the inky black negrette grape grown in Fronton, in southwest France just north of Toulouse. You will find La Folle Noire d'Ambat is a ripe, succulent, exotically fruity wine that makes for delicious, easy drinking anytime. What else do you need to know? (Langdon Shiverick, Los Angeles)

20. El Maestro Sierra Oloroso Jerez-Xérès-Sherry 15 años 375 milliliters

Isn't it time to climb on the sherry bandwagon? Oloroso is the sherry equivalent of red wine, as against fino's white. While this 15-year sherry offers an aroma of sweet fruit, it is dry and graceful with complex, luscious flavors of caramel and minerals. Though light and refreshing, it is 19 percent alcohol. Nonetheless, try with red meat or game. (De Maison Selections, Chapel Hill, N.C.)

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