

The Glut

I wrote well over a year ago about the huge volume of wine that exists in the United States, and which now is becoming visible to consumers in the form of lower prices for many products.

Others who wrote later about "the glut" failed to mention why, precisely, there was so much wine afoot. All of the writers (correctly) pointed to the large California harvest of 1997, but few pointed to the weakness of currencies around the world combined with large wine crops in other countries.

Among the places that are now offering us wines that fill shelf space and provide value are Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, Portugal, Chile and even such remote places as Apulia in the boot of Italy. (See Wine of the Week.)

Moreover, the number of new brands in the United States is expanding. Austin, Nichols and Co. now has a new line of wines on the shelf called Canyon Ridge, and Fetzer Vineyards is planning a special new brand from Australia to be announced next year.

Price is always an issue with me, and especially in the last year as so many great value wines have been available (like the 1998 **Robert's Rock** white table wine that I had as a Wine of the Week a few weeks back – a wine that sells for all of \$5 a bottle).

In the notes below, look at some discoveries worth buying and note the prices as they compare with California's \$25 and \$35 wines.

Tasting Notes All wines were evaluated double-blind

Exceptional

1997 **Stellenryck** Chardonnay, Wine of Coastal Region, South Africa (\$13): A delightful slightly tropical aroma with citrus notes; a texture of racy acidity along with body from oak aging, and a fresh, crisp, lush taste that works brilliantly with food. Imported by Maison Marques and Domaines.

1996 **Morgan** Chardonnay, Reserve, Monterey County (\$25): A bigger, richer wine than I usually like, but one with real charm. Tropical fruit, oak and a real juiciness in the mouth, and then a faint note of mint in the aftertaste. Tasty wine.

1997 **Truchard** Chardonnay, Carneros (\$25): Probably the finest Chardonnay Truchard has ever made. New wine maker Sal De Ianni's first effort, it is a clear example of Carneros fruit, just a trace simple at this early stage, but lovely, juicy/soft stuffing with decent acidity that should round out in a few months.

Very Highly Recommended

1997 **Alderbrook** Chardonnay, Dry Creek Valley (\$13.20): An attractive citrus aroma and soft entry, but there is ample fruit here and a delicate crispness in the finish. Nice wine that shows best with seafood in cream sauce.

1997 **L'Ormarins** Chardonnay, Franschoek Valley, South Africa (\$13): Another bargain from South Africa. Slightly green apple aroma with hints of underripe fruit and a fine, crisp entry. Delicate fruit and excellent acidity. This wine has none of the oak often found in Chardonnay. Definitely a food-oriented wine.

1996 **Brancott**, Renwick Estate, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$23): Ripe fruit and citrusy aroma, soft entry and crisp finish. Not as big a wine as Brancott's Ormond Estate Chardonnay (\$23), but both are tasty and worth a try.

1997 **Frog's Leap** Chardonnay, Carneros (\$21): Faint earthy note blows off after swirling to reveal attractive citrusy, lime peel aroma and complex dried fruit complexity. Crisp and appealing with food.

Wine of the Week

1997 **Torre Sveva** Castel del Monte (\$8): A fascinating red wine from Apulia in the heel of the Italian boot. This wine is composed of 70% Troia, a local grape, as well as Aglianico and Montepulciano. The aroma is flowery, almost as if Aleatico were in the blend, plus a spice note like Zinfandel. But there is also a deep, peppery, earthy quality about it that pleads for pasta. Made by the Folonari family at its Premio Vini winery. The designation Castel del Monte is the name of the region where the grapes are grown, in the province of Bari. Quite a bargain.

Happy New Year! Remember, you'll see us next on Jan. 7, 1999.

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