



wine
Richard Watson

Inexpensive wines offer mixed treats

Following a huge national advertising campaign, it is now finally possible to try the new varietals from Taylor of California. Tasting results, reports from California and commentary from experts have suggested that these six issues will be a new standard in everyday wine. Certainly, the prices are right. All are cork-finished and in the \$4-per-bottle range and are also available in 1.5-liter bottles.

On a recent weekend, several of us drank all of them. Following are informal tasting notes that represent some kind of synthesis of judgment.

Chenin Blanc — Off-dry with the subtle spice that occasionally comes from Chenin Blancs in California. Reasonably pleasant but not a typical Chenin Blanc taste.

Riesling — Some (probably) Sylvaner Riesling character, dry and quite refreshing. All in all among the better in the group.

Sauvignon Blanc — Pretty good acidity and a hint of varietal fruit. Almost any food will dominate its delicacy, however.

Chardonnay — Although the taste tires quickly, there is varietal character here with a hint of wood. A lot of Chardonnay for the money.

Cabernet Sauvignon — A bit musty and dull, there is no evidence of typical Cabernet flavors. This may be a first example of making Cabernet taste like Early Burgundy. Apparently you can make a sow's ear out of a silk purse.

Zinfandel — Flabby and turgid, this also lacks any varietal character.

Concensus: Clearly, the whites are fully superior to the reds. While the former have some varietal character, the latter are plastic and dull. We can all be thankful they didn't try to make a Pinot Noir. For the money, at least the whites are a good value.

We still await the Gallo Chardonnay. And there is some great news in the new-release field. There are some truly remarkable wines recently released and available locally.

In the red/jug (1.5-liter) field is an excellent Burgundy Reserve, a full developed Italian-style wine, round and tasty. It's by Fortino, a Hecker Pass winery that knows how to handle purple red grapes. Also affordable is a Chardonnay in the \$6-a-bottle range, very reasonable for this quality from this grape. It is made by Cavalson under the Clitoga Vineyards label, vintage dated 1979. Very nicely balanced, but beware the same thing dated 1977. There's still much of that around at a dollar less that is clearly less successful.

Also affordable and excellent for drinking now is the 1978 Pine Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon. At about \$8, it is one of the best values around.

Finally, two of the finest wines California has produced, expensive but both worth the cost. Santa Cruz Mountain 1978 Cabernet Sauvignon, marvelous of fruit, chewy and very complex. It will age for years. The finest Chardonnay in some time is the Smith-Maxdore 1979 Chardonnay (limited quantity available only at Red Wagon Shops), a lovely balance of fruit and oak. A wine of real distinction.

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