

SPEC'S UPDATE

A PUBLICATION OF

MARCH 2001

Spec's Wines, Spirits, & Finer Foods

Owned and operated by the same Houston family since 1962!

2410 Smith Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-526-8787 www.specsonline.com

NOTHING BUT BEST BUYS

By Charles M. Bear Dalton

When I first started teaching wine classes for the Rice University School of Continuing Studies over 12 years ago, I put together a simple list of value wine recommendations. That list was a set of 40 or so picks that I thought represented some of the best buys of the time and that were all wines I drank on a regular basis. Every once in while, I run into someone who still has a copy of that original list or one of its early successors kept folded up in a wallet or purse ready to be pulled out for emergency reference. I've updated the list occasionally and at some point the list became an article. The most recent update was last spring (2000) in my column for *My Table* magazine. In response to numerous requests since then, here is a revised and updated list. You might call it "Bear's Best Buys." I call it "what I drink."

HOW IT'S ORGANIZED

I look at the wines I buy for personal drinking as falling into one of three price categories. Wines that sell for less than \$12.00 or so per bottle (retail) are **everyday wines**. Wines that fall into the \$12-to-\$25 (roughly) range are **weekend wines**. Wines that cost much more than about \$30 per bottle are **special occasion wines**. As you might guess, I drink a lot more wine in the first two categories but I have favorites in all three. Please note that my favorites are not always the wines I think of as "the best." If I had to pick, I'd say La Mexicana is my favorite Houston restaurant. I think the best restaurant in Houston is Café Annie but I eat at La Mexicana a lot more often (although I seldom turn down a meal at Café

Annie). Other than by price, my picks break out into Brut Sparkling Wines, Fruit-Driven White Wines, Chardonnay, Elegant Reds, Robust & Rustic Reds, and Port. A perfect evening of food and wine might include a bit of all of the above.

BRUT SPARKLING WINE

While many think of Champagne and sparkling wines only as celebratory wines, they also make a nice start to a meal and some can go all the way through some meals. Brut is the driest style of Champagne that tastes consistently balanced. It is drier than Extra Dry but has a more richness and fruit than the bone-dry Naturals. Good Brut bubbles can be found to fit any budget. At \$3.99 per bottle, **OPERA 2000 Brut** is a tasty French sparkler that is cheap enough to dump into mimosas but has enough clean, fresh flavor to drink on its own. A bit more expensive but still downright cheap is the **SEAVIEW Brut** (from Australia, \$7.55) which offers lots of clean, refreshing fruit flavor and a bit of toast. For another step up, I like the better Spanish sparkling wines (called Cava), especially **SEGURA VIUDAS Brut Reserva** (\$7.99), **MONT MARCAL Brut** (\$8.39), and **MARQUES de GELIDA Brut** (\$9.48). These have a lot of the toasty yeasty flavors of real Champagne along with nice fruit notes and a refreshing clean finish. Other favorite sparklers in the \$8-\$12 range include New Mexico's **GRUET Brut** (\$11.24), Argentina's **CHANDON Brut Fresco** (\$10.28), Italy's **ROTARI Brut** (\$9.23), and believe it or not, California's **Korbel Brut** (\$9.72). Right now, I'm drinking more Rotari Brut than anything else (a year ago it was Varichon & Clerc and a year from now it may be something else).

The next step up in sparkling wine comes from the better California producers such as Roederer Estate, Domaine Carneros, and Iron Horse. Our mid-level celebrations often include **DOMAINE CARNEROS Brut** (\$19.31) or **IRON HORSE Brut** (\$22.25) or **IRON HORSE Blanc de Blancs** (\$25.19). Now that the millennium madness has left the Champagne market, Champagne prices are beginning to return to normal. The best buy I know of in real Champagne is the fine **OUDINOT Champagne Brut NV** (\$19.89)

If I'm willing to spend much more than \$20, I want the real thing – real Champagne from Champagne in France. While I like the basic Bruts from Taittinger and Veuve Clicquot, my best-bang-for-the-buck picks in Champagne are **MASSE Brut NV** (\$23.92), **NICOLAS FEUILLATTE Brut 1er cru** (\$23.51), **OUDINOT**

(Continued on page 2)

SPECIAL ON-LINE EDITION

CONTENTS . . .

SPEC'S SPIRIT PICKS
TWELVE-Under-\$12.00

X
8

Prices in this publication are subject to change without notice. All prices listed are for Spec's Warehouse and include a five percent discount for cash. (Many items are available at Spec's neighborhood stores where they may be sold at different prices.) All items are offered "first come, first served" and are subject to availability; some quantities may be very limited. Spec's reserves the right to restrict quantities. Any "sale" prices are good from 03-08-2001 through 04-03-2001. Spec's is not responsible for errors in printing. "Spec's" and the rabbit logo are service marks of the C.B. Jackson Company and are registered with the State of Texas.

NOTHING BUT BEST BUYS *(Continued from page 1)*

Brut 1er cru (\$25.74), **GOBILLARD Brut Tradition** (\$24.50), and **JEAN LAURENT Blanc de Blancs** (\$26.86) and **JEAN LAURENT Blanc de Noirs** (\$24.99). All these real Champagnes offer a lot of refreshment and flavor at the bottom end of the Champagne price scale. Gobillard is a small producer in Hautvilliers, home of legendary monk Dom Perignon, and features a picture of that famed abbot on its labels. Jean Laurent is a tiny producer who makes an all Chardonnay (Blanc de Blancs) cuvee that is as fine and delicate as his all Pinot Noir (Blanc de Noirs) cuvee is rich. Out of this group, I'm drinking more Oudinot Brut 1er cru than anything else.

Really special occasions (anniversary, wife's birthday, getting myself out of my wife's doghouse, etc. - It's not for nothing that my boss, SPEC's president John Rydman sometimes refers to my wife Paula as "SPEC's Champagne buyer.") call for the best and the best for me is **LOUDINOT Blanc de Blancs** (\$27.72), **AUDOIN de DAMPIERRE Brut Cuvee des Ambassadeurs** (\$35.99), **BONNAIRE Cramant Grand Cru Vintage** (\$32.18), **TAITTINGER Brut Millesime** (\$43.79), and - if it's a real spurge - **POMMERY Cuvee Louise Pommery** (\$99.54) or even **TAITTINGER Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs** (\$148.91). Of these more luxurious Champagnes, we tend to drink a bit more of the 100% Chardonnay Oudinot Blanc de Blancs and the Bonnaire Blanc de Blancs than the others.

FRUIT-DRIVEN WHITE WINES

By "fruit-driven white," I am referring to white wines that taste more of the grapes they're made from than the soil they were grown in (*terroir*) or the barrels they were aged in. I don't have anything against *terroir* or oak barrels and, in the right circumstances, am a great proponent of both. Even in these wines, some *terroir* and even a touch of oak is appreciated but I want the fruit to be the thing that shines through. My favorite sources for these wines are the disparate regions of Mosel in Germany and Bordeaux in France but I've found wines that fill the bill from elsewhere in Germany and France as well as from Australia, New Zealand, Spain, California, South America, and even Texas.

Over the years, the one wine my wife and I drank most often was **Ehse Hansen Wehlener Klosterberg Riesling QbA**. Coming in a liter-sized bottle and typically in the 8-8.5% alcohol range, it's fresh, crisp distinctive Mosel apple-juice flavor and a hint of mineral and slate *terroir* had made it a consistent favorite since we discovered it in the mid-1980s. Many bottles of this Riesling were brought to Miller Outdoor Theater, floated down the Comal and

About Vintages - Use your head when it comes to vintages on these picks. In the lower price ranges (under \$25), fresher is almost always better. There are exceptions but the rule generally holds. Most of the wines I'm recommending here are those that I've followed through the years and found to be consistent winners. There are no "one vintage wonders" on this list. Sure, some vintages are better than others. If you know that a particular vintage is awful for a particular area, it's best to avoid those wines in that year. These wines all have a good, multiple consecutive vintage track record. That allows me to recommend them as ongoing favorites with great confidence that you will taste what I tasted and get much the same character and enjoyment that I got from each wine. And enjoying the wine is really all it's all about anyway.

Guadalupe Rivers, or bounced along in saddlebags to a lunch stop on the Salt Grass Trail. The liter-sized bottles make it convenient to pour two into a plastic two-liter soda bottle so that the wine can travel incognito and glass isn't carried into inappropriate places. Last year, Ehse Hansen sold the Wehlener Klosterberg vineyard so this wine is gone. He is replaced it with an **EHSES HANSEN Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling QbA** (\$7.20 per liter) made in the same style, also in the convenient liter bottles and at about the same price. This new bottling was so popular that we blew through over 120 cases rather quickly and have been waiting for another shipment to come in. I'm pleased to write that it is now back in stock.

A step up within the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer Riesling range finds **Von KESSELSTATT Kaseler Nies'Chen Riesling Kabinett** (\$13.87 for the Kaseler but I've never found anything from von Kesselstatt that I didn't at least like) which offers great apple and floral fruit and a bit more of the flinty-minerally *terroir* character. Other favorite Mosel wines include **HEIDEMANN'S BERGWELER Bernkasteler alte Badstube am Doctorberg Riesling Kabinett** (\$16.80) and **J.J. PRUM Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spatlese** (\$25.96). These are worth the extra money but they're not everyday wines. Why am I such a fan of these moderately sweet but crisply-balanced whites that have been so long out of fashion? Because they are uniformly low in alcohol (almost always under 10%), because they are fresh and lively with a thrilling tension between the fruit and acid, because they have no oak flavors to fight with food, and because their moderate residual sugar helps them match well with fresh seafood - especially gulf shrimp (bringing out the shrimp's natural sweetness) and with spicy foods (the sugar helps cut the heat). And they are delicious.

From Bordeaux, I like the fresh, lively lower-priced whites labeled Bordeaux, Graves, Pessac-Leognan, and especially Entre Deux Mers. Why especially Entre Deux Mers? While Pessac-Leognan is the best part of Graves and makes the best white wines of Bordeaux (Ch. Haut Brion Blanc and Ch. Laville Haut Brion), these wines need time and demand appreciation. If I'm having a plate of oysters or a grilled catfish filet or just want something fresh and refreshing, I'd prefer the pure fruit and grassy cut of a simpler Bordeaux Sauvignon Blanc. Andre Lurton, proprietor of Ch. Bonnet in Entre Deux Mers, invented the fresh fruity, lively, perfumed style of white that has been adopted by most of the Entre Deux Mers chateaux and is gaining in popularity with white wine producers in most of the other, less-well known parts of Bordeaux. Sauvignon Blanc is blended with Semillon and Muscadelle de Bordelaise, fermented either in tanks or older barrels, aged briefly in older barrels and bottled very early to help it retain as much fruit and freshness as possible. Because any contact with wood is older wood, the wines pick up little if any wood character. Great examples of this style include **Ch. BONNET Entre Deux Mers** (the 1999 was \$7.99, when it comes in the 2000 should be about the same price), **Ch. de FONTINELLE Entre Deux Mers** (\$8.68), **Ch. Le BORY ROLLET Entre Deux Mers** (\$7.78), **Ch. DOMS Graves** (\$9.24), **Ch. GRAVILLE LACOSTE Graves** (\$10.96), and **Ch. LATOUR LEOGNAN Pessac Leognan** (\$12.74, shows a hint wood and more richness). Of this lot, I most often buy the Ch. Bonnet and the Ch. Latour Leognan but all of them are really tasty.

A few other fruit-driven favorites demand mention. I'm quite fond of **WILLM Alsace Pinot Gris** (\$8.82) and **TRIMBACH**
(Continued on page 3)

NOTHING BUT BEST BUYS (Continued from page 2)

Alsace Pinot Gris Reserve (\$13.74). Both show fine pure apple, pear, and citrus zest fruit and touch of minerals in a dry style with enough fruit to handle the spice inherent in Pacific Rim, Southwestern, and Mexican seafood cookery and no oak to fight with the fish flavors. The extra price for the Trimbach gets you more purity and focus and a bit more fruit. For an American take on these Alsace originals, try **CRICKLEWOOD Pinot Gris** (\$9.39) and **BELLE PENTE Pinot Gris** (\$14.89), both from Oregon. All four offer a great bang for your buck.

New Zealand's **VILLA MARIA Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc** (\$9.23) gives a pure expression of grassy-kiwi-gooseberry Sauvignon fruit while showing why there's such a buzz about New Zealand Sauvignon and does both without breaking the bank. For a Texas twist on Sauvignon Blanc (but more in the Entre Deux Mers style), look for **SPICEWOOD Sauvignon Blanc** (\$7.80). Also from Texas, look for the very good **LLANO ESTACADO Chenin Blanc** (\$5.13) and **MESSINA HOF Riesling** (\$6.57). Both give lots of ripe fruit and a little sweetness but both have the refreshing acidity to keep them lively and balanced.

In the weekend-wine price range, Alexander Valley's **IRON HORSE T-bar-T "Cuvee R"** (formerly labled Fume Blanc - \$16.73) combines assertive but fully ripe Sauvignon Blanc fruit and flavors with the perfume and honeysuckle notes that come from adding 20% Viognier. This flavorful wine always has a rich-

ness about it that is balanced with refreshing acidity.

CHARDONNAY

I'll admit that I do buy a fair amount of Chardonnay. I mostly switch around but there are a few I buy regularly. From California in the everyday class, I often buy **JEKEL "Gravelstone" Monterey Chardonnay** (\$10.28) and **DELOACH California Chardonnay** (\$6.99). These both give me the fruit and balance I'm looking for without a heavy malo-lactic character and too much residual sugar. When I want something nicer, I usually choose between **RIDGE California Chardonnay** (\$15.62 when we last had it), **IRON HORSE Sonoma Green Valley Chardonnay** (\$19.73), **MARIMAR TORRES Sonoma Green Valley (Russian River) Chardonnay** (\$21.20), **SOQUEL Vineyards Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay** (\$22.30), and **RIDGE Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay** (\$31.27). These wines all have in common the fact that they are grown in cool climates which keeps the fruit from getting too ripe (which keeps the alcohol at reasonable levels), they all show a fine sense of balance, and they all show a bit of minerally terroir character. None are over-oaked and none show much tannin or any residual sugar (neither of which is uncommon in California Chardonnay) so they all pair up fairly well with food (which can be a problem with a lot of California Chardonnay). On the richer, butterier side of things, I like **CHATEAU ST. JEAN**

(Continued on page 4)

SPEC's 2001 WINE TRIP

The itinerary is now set for SPEC's spring 2001 WINE TOUR OF BURGUNDY AND THE RHONE VALLEY.

We'll depart from Houston on Air France on Friday, May 18th at 4:15pm and arrive in Marseille on Saturday morning. We'll spend Saturday afternoon and evening in Provence, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday morning in the Rhone, Tuesday afternoon in Macon and Beaujolais, and Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday in Beaune (touring Burgundy proper). Saturday afternoon and evening will be spent in Paris with the afternoon free for wandering and shopping. We're planning to have at least two meals at wine producing properties. We'll return to Houston on Sunday, May 27th arriving at 1:55pm. From the time we arrive in Marseille until we return to the Paris Airport, we'll use the same large, luxurious tour bus which will provide everyone with ample room as we move between visits and regions.

In Marseille, we'll stay at the Hotel Sofitel on the harbor. In Avignon, we'll stay at the Grand Hotel. In Beaune, we'll be in the Hotel Le Cep. Our night in Paris will be in the Hotel Pont Royal (in the Latin Quarter). SPEC's wine manager Charles M. Bear Dalton will lead the tour. Joan Patrick, director of l'Alliance Francaise de Houston, will accompany the tour to act as translator and generally help out. We plan



to visit one wine property on Saturday and 3-4 properties Sunday through Friday. The planned (but not yet confirmed) itinerary is .

Saturday - Provence (afternoon winery visit and dinner)

Sunday - Rhone (Pegau, Beaucastel, Vieux Telegraph, Verget du Sud)

Monday - Rhone (Leseac, St. Cosme, Caves des Estazarques)

Tuesday - Rhone (Guigal), Macon (Verget)

Wednesday - Burgundy (Louis Jadot, Jacques Prieur, Bouchard Pere et Fils)

Thursday - Burgundy (Latour Giraud, Trapet, Pillot, Caillot, St. Martin, Bizot)

Friday - Burgundy (Ch. de la Tour, Michel Gros, Confuron Cotetidot, Remoissenet)

Saturday - Paris (free afternoon for shopping and sight-seeing)

We are in the process of scheduling and confirming all the winery visits and meals. The cost is \$4,250 per person, double occupancy. (The single occupancy rate is \$5,310.) This cost includes all but one meal (Saturday lunch in Paris) and, of course, personal charges at the hotels. As always, these prices include SPEC's famous 5% discount for "cash." A deposit of \$1000.00 per person is due within three days of reservation. The balance will be due on April 1, 2001. There are a total of 22 places available. This is the second European wine trip SPEC's has put together for our customers. Last year's trip to Champagne and Bordeaux was a sold-out, smash success and we plan to make this year's trip even better. For reservations or more information, please call Bear Dalton at SPEC's at 713-526-8787.

NOTHING BUT BEST BUYS (Continued from page 3)

Robert Young Chardonnay (\$21.89) and **BERNARDUS Monterey Chardonnay** (\$19.50).

Anyone familiar with Llano Estacado's track record shouldn't be surprised that Texas can make good Chardonnay. The one I buy most often is the regular (not Cellar Select) **LLANO ESTACADO Texas Chardonnay** (\$8.66) which offers plenty of fruit with a nice feel, good richness, and enough acidity to keep it balanced and lively. (The biggest danger for Texas Chardonnay is that the wines won't have enough acid to keep them balanced and fresh tasting.)

There are four imported Chardonnays I buy on a regular basis. From cheapest to best, they are Chile's **VINA TARAPACA Chardonnay** (\$4.86), Southeast Australia's **PENFOLDS Koonunga Hill Chardonnay** (\$6.85) and **ROSEMOUNT Show Reserve Chardonnay** (\$14.57), and Burgundy's **VERGET Bourgogne Blanc** (the 1998 was \$16.21, the 1999 should be in that ballpark). Without lapsing too far into geek-speak to try and describe them, suffice to say that they all taste good and will give you much more flavor and character than the price would indicate.

I will offer a caution concerning my Chardonnay picks. None of these wines are flashy. They're all well-made, flavorful, focused, well-integrated wines with some degree of subtlety. If you favor the "oak two-by-four dipped in pineapple juice" style of Chardonnay, these picks will be either a disappointment or an epiphany.

ELEGANT REDS

Elegant balanced reds are the red wines I think work best at the dinner table. They can complement everything from grilled salmon to rack of lamb. Some have more fruit than others and they can come from grapes as different as Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon. The thing they all have in common is balance.

ALEXANDER VALLEY VINEYARDS Pinot Noir (\$14.46) is a consistent winner in this field. It has a super cherry and mixed berry fruit component that is balanced with moderate tannins and enough acidity to keep it fresh and alive. It tastes good with almost everything and, over the last two years, has become a favorite on

Introducing . . .

SPEC's Winery Direct

SPEC's Winery Direct is a new program we've started to take advantage of great deals on odd tank lots of wines and spirits we occasionally come across. This first Winery Direct offering is a tank lot of 1997 Oregon Pinot Noir that didn't fit into the producer's blend but is delicious on its own. It worked out to about nine barrels or 225 cases of wine. We bought it cheap and we're selling it cheap.

SPEC'S WINERY DIRECT Pinot Noir, Oregon, 1997
12x750ml **\$8.97** **\$102.25**

This 1997 Oregon Pinot Noir features a well-integrated, vinous, black-cherry scented bouquet with good richness and lots of juicy red and black cherry fruit in the mouth. The fine fruit flavors last throughout the long finish. Satisfying and delicious. Fine. **SPEC's Score: 88+ points.**

my Thanksgiving table. Other Pinots worth noting include Texas' **ESCONDIDO VALLEY Pinot Noir** (shockingly good at \$6.60) and **CHANDON Carneros Pinot Meunier** (\$16.99). Conventional wisdom says the Escondido Valley shouldn't be as good as it is because it's too hot in Texas to grow good Pinot Noir. The Chandon shouldn't be at all because the Pinot Meunier was planted with the idea they'd use it to make sparkling wines. When it never fit into the sparkling cuvees, Chandon tried making a red wine as a last resort to replanting the vineyard. I'm glad they did. (For another great Pinot Noir pick, while it lasts, see **Introducing SPEC's Winery Direct** in box above.)

On the Cabernet-Merlot front, I tend to favor Bordeaux reds at the table. My favorite everyday-priced Bordeaux wines vary from vintage to vintage but **Ch. PARENCHERE Bordeaux Superieur** and **Ch. TOUR St. BONNET Medoc** always seem to make both this list and SPEC's 12-Under-\$12.. (**For some other currently available value-priced Bordeaux picks, please see box "SPEC's Best Buy Bordeaux" on this page.**)

In the \$17 to \$30 range, my preferred red Bordeaux wines include **Ch. HORTEVIE St. Julien** (the 1997 was \$21.36, the 1998 will be arriving in the next couple of months), **Ch. La GARDE Pessac-Leognan** (\$20.99 for the 1997), **Ch. LAPLAGNOTTE BELLEVUE St. Emilion** (\$17.48 for the 1998), and **Ch. Rauzan Segla** second label **SEGLA Margaux** (\$23.33 for the 1997). The higher-priced (over \$30) Bordeaux wine I buy most often is **Ch. Haut Batailley Pauillac** (\$33.25 for the 1997), a dynamite Pauillac which is owned and made by the Borie family who also own **Ch. Ducru Beaucaillou** and **Ch. Grand Puy Lacoste**.

Three Bordeaux up-and-comers on my radar screen are **Ch. d'AIGUILLE Cotes de Castillon** (\$14.20 for the 1998), **Ch. La FLEUR St. GEORGES Lalande de Pomerol** (\$19.69 for the 1997), and **Ch. la BERNADOTTE Haut Medoc** (\$18.77 for the 1997). **Ch. d'Aiguille** is made and owned by Stephen Niepperg who also owns **Clos de l'Oratoire**, **Ch. Canon la Gafelliere**, and **Ch.**

(Continued on Page 5)

SPEC's BEST BUY BORDEAUX

	BOTTLE	CASE
Ch. Brisson Cotes de Castillon '98	12x750ml \$10.88	\$120.53
Ch. d'Aiguille Cotes de Castillon '98	12x750ml \$14.20	\$155.53
Ch. du Cauze St. Emilion '98	12x750ml \$15.88	\$173.88
Ch. du Pintey Bordeaux Superior '96	12x750ml \$11.15	\$115.91
Ch. Hostens Picant Bordeaux Rouge '98	12x750ml \$12.14	\$126.20
Ch. la Grand Clotte Lussac St. Em. '98	12x750ml \$11.69	\$129.46
Ch. le Sarte Graves Rouge '98	12x750ml \$12.87	\$141.16
Ch. Parenchere Bordeaux Superior '98	12x750ml \$13.76	\$148.84
Ch. Pontoise Cabarrus Haut Medoc '96	12x750ml \$14.99	\$166.46
Ch. Puygeraud Cotes de Franc '98	12x750ml \$12.90	\$142.85
Ch. Semillan Mazeau Listrac '96	12x750ml \$13.35	\$147.89
Ch. Semillan Mazeau Listrac '97	12x750ml \$15.15	\$165.88
Ch. Tayac Reserve Cotes du Bourg '95	12x750ml \$15.83	\$175.39
Ch. Thieuley Res. Francois Courselle '98	12x750ml \$12.50	\$136.90
Ch. Tour St. Bonnet Medoc '98	12x750ml \$11.90	\$131.76
Ch. Tour St. Bonnet Medoc '97	12x750ml \$12.73	\$140.98
Ch. Vieux St. Andre St. Emilion '98	12x750ml \$14.64	\$160.36
Reserve Epicure Bordeaux '98	12x750ml \$12.69	\$140.54

NOTHING BUT BEST BUYS (Continued from page 4)

La Mondotte (all top flight St. Emilion). Ch. La Fleur St. Georges is owned and closely attended to by Ch. Angelus (St. Emilion) owner Hubert de Bouard. Ch. la Bernadotte is owned by Madame de Lencquesaing of Ch. Pichon Lalande (Pauillac) fame and is made by her Pichon Lalande enology team.

From California, I've settled on a few consistent favorite Cabernets that never disappoint. I particularly like **ALEXANDER VALLEY VINEYARDS Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$15.26), **BERINGER Knight's Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$20.55), **FRANCISCAN Oakville Estate Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$21.89), and **SEQUOIA GROVE Napa Cabernet Sauvignon** (25.39). The Alexander Valley is one of the very best values in a Cabernet on the market today. Beringer's Knights Valley combines just the right amount of fruit and ripeness with a balanced, elegant style. The Franciscan and the Sequoia Grove, each featuring lots of blackberry fruit, fine cedar and tobacco notes, and that classic "Rutherford dust" character, duke it out every year for my favorite Napa Cab.

ROBUST & RUSTIC REDS

I like Zin. And Petite Sirah, And Grenache. And Mourvedre. And big chewy red blends featuring all these grapes and more. I like my drinkin' reds a little on the chunky side and I don't much care where they come from as long as they taste great. Starting with Zinfandel, if Ridge makes it I'll drink it. I buy the **RIDGE Sonoma Station Zinfandel** (\$17.16) whenever I can get it. I also buy a fair amount of the more expensive **Ridge Geyserville, Ridge Lytton Springs** and **Ridge Pagani Ranch**. I feel about the same way about Ravenswood. I buy the **RAVENSWOOD Vintner's Blend Zinfandel** (\$8.99) and the **RAVENSWOOD Alexander Valley Zinfandel** (\$16.78) more often than the others but I buy 'em all. Seghesio also scores well with me in the premium Zinfandel category with the delicious and concentrated **SEGHESIO Old Vine Zinfandel** (\$21.54) and **SEGHESIO Home Ranch Zinfandel** (\$28.35). In the lower price ranges, I buy a fair amount of **DELOACH California Zinfandel** (\$7.79), **PEDRONCELLI Mother Clone Zinfandel** (\$9.99), **MARIETTA Sonoma Zinfandel** (\$14.10), **SEGHESIO Sonoma Zinfandel** (\$12.33), and **DELOACH Estate Bottled Zinfandel** (\$16.44).

As much Zin as I drink, you'd think I wouldn't have time for America's other unique wine but I do love my Petite Sirah. Whether its **BOGLE California Petite Sirah** (\$9.44), **FOPPIANO Petite Sirah** (\$14.99), **GUENOC Petite Sirah** (\$13.39), or **CONCANNON Petite Sirah** (\$11.38), I love the grapy blackberry fruit character, the black pepper, and the chewy-earthy richness, all at a great price. For a step up in both quality and price, I look for **RIDGE York Creek Petite Sirah**, **CONCANNON Reserve Petite Sirah** and **STAGS' LEAP WINERY Petite Sirah**.

The California red I buy the most of (although the Bogle Petite Sirah and Seghesio Zinfandel are close) is just that - red, as in **MARIETTA Old Vine Red** (\$9.69). This is a good, basic, chewy, red wine filled with dark fruit.

From the Rhone and Provence areas, I buy and drink a lot of Cotes du Rhone and more than a little Gigondas, Vacqueyras,

Chateaufeuf du Pape, Bandol, and Coteaux d'Aix en Provence wines and I buy them from a number of different producers. What all these wines have in common is a similar climate and a similar cocktail of grapes that focuses on Grenache with Syrah and Mourvedre in strong supporting roles. A few of the names I most often look for include **Dom. de l'ESPIGOUETTE Cotes du Rhone** (\$9.53), **Dom. de PIERREDON Cotes du Rhone** (\$9.66), **Dom. PERILLIERE Cotes du Rhone Villages** (\$10.79), **PATRICK LESEC Cairanne Cotes du Rhone Villages Vieilles Vignes** (\$14.70 - no track record but the currently available 1998 is delicious), **St. COSME Gigondas** (when available), **LA CRAU DE MA MERE Chateaufeuf du Pape** (\$19.44), **DOMAINE PEGAU**

I've said it before and I'll say it again - All these wines will taste better if they are served at the right temperature. The reds are at their best at about 60°F and the whites taste best at about 45°F. None of these wines needs further aging to be enjoyed although any of them can be kept for at least a year. Any of the reds might benefit from being splashed into a decanter before serving.

Chateaufeuf du Pape (\$26.99), and just about anything from the southern Rhone with "Patrick Leseq" on the label. A new wine from the southern Rhone that has really caught my attention is **Ch. de TOURETTES Cotes du Luberon** (\$19.85 - From Jean Marie Guffens of Verget fame). It tastes like a really good Chateaufeuf du Pape but has the feel and texture in the mouth of a fine bottle of Morey St. Denis. I've drunk parts of at least nine bottles of this over the last three months.

Australia also makes a number of fine reds utilizing Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvedre. In the everyday price range, look for **St. HALLET'S Gamekeeper's Reserve** (\$9.89) and **YALUMBA Bush Vine Grenache** (\$11.99) When it's available, the **ROSEMOUNT GSM** (for Grenache-Syrah-Mourvedre, \$23.80) is a consistent winner with rich spicy, black fruit character while still maintaining a fine balance and good structure. For a completely over the top fruit-bomb of an Aussie red, I like the **d'ARENBERG Custodian Grenache** (\$21.84) with its sweet fruit, juicy depth, and frankly delicious, super low acid style.

PORT

I love Port and drink a fair amount of it both at home and when dining out but there are three that I buy much more of than any others: **WARRES Traditional Late Bottled Vintage** (\$16.79), **DOW's Boardroom Tawny** (\$13.15), and **DOW's White Port** (\$8.75). The Warres LBV is made just like a vintage Port but is bottled after four years in wood instead of after two. It is not filtered or fined so it throws a sediment in the bottle and therefore must be decanted (like a vintage port). Because of the two extra years in wood, it matures a bit faster than a vintage Port. The thing is it tastes like a good vintage Port at a pretty much everyday price. Dow's Boardroom Tawny is a fine, rich Tawny Port featuring a nice mix of dried fruit and nutty flavors with a good balance. I tend to drink more of the Warres in the winter and more of the Dow's in the summer.

The Dow's White Port gets a special mention. Although I buy a lot of it, I don't even treat it like wine. Instead, it is the main ingredient in my favorite cocktail: 3-4 ounces of white Port served on the rocks with the juice of one lime. The fresh, refreshing flavor is reminiscent of that of a Margarita. Delicious.



SPEC's Notices

SAVE THE DATE for these upcoming classes (details to follow via email and at www.specsonline.com)

Thursday, April 12 – The Good Wines of Bordeaux

Monday, April 23 – Burgundy Basics

Monday, April 30 – Burgundy Vintner Dinner @ Chez Nous

Monday, May 7 – The Great Wines of Bordeaux

Tuesday, May 15 – Introduction to Spanish Wines

Find out about SPEC's upcoming events is via email! Add your name to our email list when you sign up for a **SPEC's KEY**. If you already have a **SPEC's KEY**, just send an email with your name and home phone number or SPEC's Key number to bear@specsonline.com.

For more on events, please log onto

www.specsonline.com and click on **UPCOMING EVENTS** or call **SPEC's** at 713-526-8787.

PRIVATE MINI STORAGE WINE STORAGE

Refrigerated **55**^o year round

713-781-5250

2890 West Sam Houston Pkwy South
(between Westheimer and Richmond)

Spaces to Accomodate 8 to 144 cases

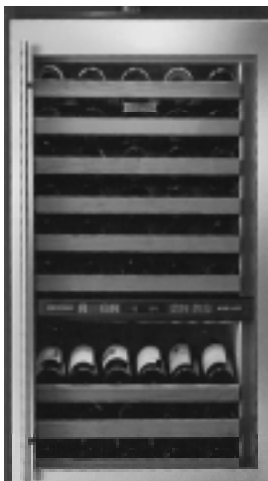
Professionally Managed - Open 7 Days

Monday- Friday 8:00am - 6:00pm

Saturday & Sunday 9:00am - 5:00pm

Existing location @ 2420 Louisiana across from SPEC's

PRIVATE MINI STORAGE



There's a right way to store and serve wine. And there's a wrong way. The new Sub-Zero 400 series winestorage is committed to the right way.

Freed Appliance Distributors

4660 Pine Timbers, #130 Houston, TX 77041

713-462-5869

New Santa Cruz Mtns. & Monterey County Wines

If you're on the look-out for something new and unique, here are some esoteric, hard to find new Santa Cruz Mountains and Monterey County wines that offer real character and flavor in unique styles. These distinct, terroir driven wines come from Dan Kravitz' Hand Picked Selections and are available in Houston only at SPEC's.

SOQUEL Chardonnay, Santa Cruz Mountains, 1997

12x750ML **\$22.30 \$246.96**

Elegant and balanced Chardonnay with fine mineral and oak notes to go with its forward fruit nose. Full of flavor. with plenty of mineral and oak but with ample ripe but balanced mixed tropical, banana, and tree fruit. Hint of tropical lime in its acid balance. Very well integrated with fine development. Has a fine balance. Long and alive in the mouth. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 92 points.**

TROUT GULCH Pinot Noir, B. Turgeon Vineyard - Santa Cruz Mountains, 1997

12x750ML **\$23.21 \$254.67**

Here's a classic ripe Pinot Noir with lots of cherry fruit and hints of mixed red berries and spice with a fine, dry chocolate-earth component and a touch of oak. Long and flavorful with a fine feel in the mouth. Delicious. Fine. **SPEC's Score: 89 points.**

SALAMANDRE Pinot Noir, Santa Cruz Mountains, 1997

12x750ML **\$33.15 \$363.72**

Stylish, medium-weight, medium-red Pinot Noir with more fruit and flavor than color. Shows plenty of sweet mixed cherry fruit, subtle spice, notes of minerally earth, and supple oak with enough tannin to keep it balanced. Finishes long, fresh, and lively. Complex and evolving but still light and refreshing in the mouth. Fine+. **SPEC's Score: 90 points.**

RIVER RUN Syrah, Los Lobos Vineyards - Monterey County, 1996 12x750ML

\$14.29 \$158.26

This spicy, ripe, moderately oaky, juicy, red raspberry and white-pepper-scented Syrah features a well-focused medium-weight style and a fine feel in the mouth. It has good length with fine, balanced fruit flavors lasting to the end. Fine. **SPEC's Score: 89+ points.**

SALAMANDRE Syrah, Ventana Vineyards - Monterey County, 1998 12x750ML

\$26.52 \$290.92

Sweet, oaky, juicy, densely flavored Syrah featuring juicy ripe, black raspberry and blackberry fruit with notes of white and black pepper and an almost lush earthy richness. Feels rich and full in the mouth but maintains its balance. Good weight and length. This is lovely Syrah. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 91 points.**

SOQUEL Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains, 1995 12x750ML

\$26.52 \$290.92

Rich and ripe in the mouth with fine ripe juicy black cherry and blackberry fruit accented with classic Cabernet cedar and tobacco notes. Fills the mouth with fruit and flavor along with ripe tannins and supple, dusty oak. Fine feel in the mouth with good length to the dusty dry but fruit-oriented finish. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 91 points.**

Spec's SPIRITED PICKS

Here are four Scotch Whiskies and one new Canadian Whisky that are well worth your notice.

GLENMORANGIE Madeira Wood Finished 12 Year Old Single Malt Scotch Whisky 86° 750ml \$45.70

Instead of, or rather along with the more traditional Bourbon and Sherry casks, Glenmorangie finishes some of its fine highland malts in old Port barrels and old Madeira barrels. This Madeira wood finished expression of the 15-year-old Glenmorangie offers what, for me, is the best combination of the classic highland malt character with the subtle, complimentary wood and fruit flavors from the finishing barrels. Notes of dried fruit and nuts come through along with apricots and citrus peel with good vanilla and oak notes. This is a fine full-bodied, satisfying whisky with a sweet richness and a lingering, complex finish. It is fine from the flask or for earlier on in the evening. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 93 points.**

GLENDRONNACH 15 Year Old Sherry Cask Aged Single Malt Scotch Whisky 80° 750ml \$41.82

Before I found Glendronnach, I'd tasted enough single malt Scotch to know I liked it but the Glendronnach was the first malt I really fell in love with. The current expression is rich and rounded and sweet with Oloroso Sherry flavors, a full body, and a rich dark color. It is a long, elegant satisfying whisky that tastes great straight or mixed with a little water. On a really cold day, it's a fine choice to sip from a flask but most of the time, it's best as the last drink before turning in for the night - rich and satisfying. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 93 points**

GLENFIDDICH Solera Reserve 15 Year Old Speyside Single Malt Scotch Whisky 80° 750ml \$37.99

This newest expression of Glenfiddich offers a supple, balanced, well-integrated very drinkable whiskey showing good Sherry wood character married to Bourbon and even Cognac notes. The solera process blends 15 year old Bourbon-cask-aged, Sherry-cask-aged, and European-oak-wine-cask-aged Scotch with a reservoir of older Glenfiddich whiskies. These marry and then half is pulled off to bottle. The rest is left in the reservoir to age. The next year the reservoir is refilled with a fresh blend of fifteen year old whiskies that are left to marry with the solera before, once again, half is pulled off to bottle. This is great elegant sipping whiskey, whether from a flask or a glass. It has a long subtle, complex finish with wood and faint fruit holding on and on. It is delicious and satisfying without feeling heavy or tasting at all hot. Outstanding. **SPEC's Score: 96 points.**

SPRINGBANK Campbeltown 10 Year Old Single Malt Scotch Whisky 92° 750ml \$66.39

Tastes and smells like a crossing of three-quarters highland malt with one-quarter Islay malt. It has just enough peat and iodine character to keep it interesting and on the edge but not so much as to overwhelm the lovely highland-style weight and texture. This is full of good rich flavors and has a long finish, with its smoky iodine component, that demands your attention. Springbank may not be the girl you ultimately want to marry but she makes for a great fling. Really Fine. **SPEC's Score: 90 points.**

PIKE CREEK Double Barreled Blended Canadian Whisky 80° 750ml \$33.99

Far and away the best, richest, most complex Canadian I've tasted to date, this Pike Creek is traditionally made Canadian whiskey

finished in used Vintage Port casks still wet with the wine they held. It makes for a smooth supple spirit that asks to be sipped straight. The nose teases you along with Tawny-Port-like aromas of dried fruit and nuts to accent the nice citrus, vanilla, and winter spice character of the spirit. A little on the light side (as compared to small-batch Bourbon or malt Scotch), it has the potential to sneak up on you with its delicious flavors and very drinkable style. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 92 points.**



From Spec's Humidor . . .

ALLOCATED CIGARS -

**ASHTON VSG* - Equadorian Wrapper.
Great Finish. In Stock!**

**PADRON ANNIVERSARIOS* - In
stock now!**

**Must have 200 SPEC's KEY Points per stick for
allocations of these cigars.*

**HUGO EXCALIBUR - The new Cameroon
"1066" series is in stock!**

**SANTA DAMIANA - The very definition
of the flavor provided by a fine
"Connecticut Shade-Grown" wrapper.**

**PARTAGAS SERIES "S" - Cameroon
wrapper gives it a nice, medium-weight
finish. Excellent.**

**ACID - A unique, herbal aromatic cigar
with an array of strengths created by
Scott "Acid" Chester..**

**ST. LUIS REY - Close out prices.
Limited supply.**

**GRAYCLIFF - Maybe the finest cigar in
the world.**

Visit **SPEC's INCREDIBLE WALK-IN HUMIDOR** to see these and hundreds of other fine cigars. SPEC's stocks a large selection of high-quality cedar-lined humidors, travel and pocket humidors, Colibri and Prometheus lighters, and cigar scissors and snips. **And all CHEAP! Don't forget SPEC's 5% discount for cash!**



TWELVE-UNDER-\$12.00

Sometimes you don't really want a "great" bottle of wine. Sometimes you just want a cheap bottle of wine and it wouldn't bother you at all if it were to taste really good. Not only do we understand,

we're in the same boat. We're always looking for that really good, really cheap bottle. "Really good" means the wine tastes like it costs more than it does. "Really cheap" always means under \$12.00. So here are twelve of our favorites, all priced under \$12.00.

KIM CRAWFORD Unoaked Chardonnay, Marlborough (New Zealand), 1999 6x750ml \$11.99 \$66.87

Fresh and crisp but juicy Chardonnay with lovely pure fruit flavor. Lots of tree-fruit and a hint of green banana with a lime-acid back-bone. Bright and lively in the mouth. Grows and develops as you drink it. Has good malolactic richness but the well-focused, unoaked Chardonnay fruit keeps it alive. Delicious and refreshing and super versatile with food (unlike most wood-influenced Chardonnay). Fine+. **SPEC's Score: 90 points.**

HERMITAGE ROAD Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, Limestone Coast (S. Australia), 1998 12x750ml \$11.87 \$135.32

Fine Cabernet Fruit but with plenty of ripeness and a good balance. Long and lively in the mouth with plenty of crushed black-and-red-berry fruit and notes of black pepper and sweet wood. Nice bit of chewiness and good texture but maintains a lively feel. Rich and satisfying but not too heavy. Fine+. **SPEC's Score: 90 points.**

GEORGES DuBOEUF, Macon-Villages, 1999 12x750ml \$7.67 \$85.11

Fresh, flavorful, crisply balanced no-oak Chardonnay featuring fine pure green-banana-and-mineral Chardonnay fruit flavors and a surprising level of richness. The fruit is kept in focus by both the refreshing tropical lime acidity and the terroir supplied mineral note. This is another super versatile Chardonnay that can be paired with anything from oysters on the half-shell to grilled pork loin. Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 87 points.**

ECHELON Viognier, California, 1999 12x750ml \$11.45 \$125.44

(Made from fruit grown mostly near Clarksburg.) Super fresh, well-perfumed, nicely-balanced classic Viognier that offers tingly honeysuckle and mixed fruit with hints of pear, peach, and apricot emerging from the swirl. The perfume hints at the exotic. The wine is quite refreshing with fine length, focus, and purity. This is a great bang for your Viognier buying buck. Fine. **SPEC's Score: 88+ points.**

HUNTINGTON Earthquake Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley, 2000 12x750ml \$9.99 \$110.96

Fresh, focused, crisply balanced Sauvignon Blanc featuring juicy ripe fruit in the white peach, green pear, and gooseberry range over notes of just cut grass and grated citrus peel. Fresh and lively in the mouth with a refreshing feel. The crisp acidity keeps it balanced and alive making it lovely as an aperitif wine and really versatile as a match with food. Fine. **SPEC's Score: 88 points.**

CUVEE DE PENA, Vin de Pays des Pyrenees Orientales, 1998 12x750ml \$4.99 \$56.88

A typical blend of 50% old-vine Carignan, blended with Grenache, Mourvedre, and Syrah, all grown about 25 miles north of the Spanish border and 25 miles inland from the Mediterranean, this medium-weight, well-balanced, unfiltered cuvee shows good richness and a nice mix of dark grapy-juicy fruit and subtle spice, black pepper, and earth notes. It finishes clean and dry with a final note of chewy tannin. Very Good and a consistent **BEST BUY. SPEC's Score: 86 points.**

Special for SPEC's KEY holders:

Buy a mixed case consisting of one 750ml bottle of each of our **March 12-UNDER-\$12** selections for only **\$101.77**, a savings of **\$8.04** over SPEC's already low cash bottle price. **UPC: 00000404186 - Special price effective 3/5/01 thru 4/4/01.**

ECHELON Merlot, California, 1999 12x750ml \$8.39 \$93.11

(A blend of 76% Merlot, 18% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Syrah, and 3% Petite Sirah grown in Arroyo Seco and Lake County) Here's a delicious balanced but juicy Merlot featuring lots of dark cherry flavor with hints of cherry jam and cassis liqueur, plenty of richness, and good sweetness of fruit. Medium long and just a bit chewy, it shows a fine mix of fruit and weight. Very Good+. **SPEC's Score: 87+ points.**

FOREST GLEN Shiraz, California, 1998 12x750ml \$7.71 \$86.20

With all of its ripe black raspberry fruit on both the nose and the palate and notes of white and black pepper and a cassis perfume, this medium-weight, fairly rich Aussie-style California Syrah shows a fresh, lively texture and good length in a refreshing, well made package. Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 86 points.**

CARTRIDGE AND BROWN Cabernet Sauvignon, California, 1999 12x750ml \$10.56 \$117.22

Medium-bodied Cabernet Sauvignon featuring lots of juicy cherry Cabernet fruit with hints of pepper, spice, and candied cherries. Softly balanced and almost sweet with fruit. Hard to pin down all the flavors but the wine is very tasty in an easy drinking medium weight style. A fine everyday drinking Cabernet. **SPEC's Score: 88+ points.**

COPPOLA Rosso, California Red Table Wine, 1999 12x750ml \$7.93 \$86.80

A blend of Zinfandel, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Sangiovese, this is a juicy, but fresh tasting spaghetti-with-red-sauce / pizza red wine for everyday drinking. It is full-bodied, quite ripe, and wide open with plenty of dark grapy-cherry-berry fruit and a soft, satisfying, low-acid, supple texture. Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 86+ points.**

CRICKLEWOOD Pinot Noir, Oregon, 1998 12x750ml \$9.39 \$103.07

Here is a tasty but cheap Oregon Pinot Noir that overs fine cherry fruit along with an elegant earth and mineral complexity in a light-to-medium-bodied style featuring a touch of chewy tannin and a refreshing balance. Finishes dry and clean. Serve cool (55°). Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 86 points.**

R.H. PHILLIPS Merlot, Dunnigan Hills (California), 1998 12x750ml \$7.87 \$87.38

The nose reveals plenty of cherry and plum fruit nicely accented with Pinot Noir-like cola and subtle woody notes; more fruit in the mixed berry range kicks in on the palate. Medium-weight, nicely balanced, and long in the mouth, this is a well-made flavorful Merlot that finishes clean. Serve cool (55°). Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 87 points.**