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## WINE OF THE MONTH!



Pigmentum Blanc 2008 \$10.41 cash

60% Ugni Blanc, 40% Colombard. Its brilliant color with light green tints confirms its freshness and youth. You will be attracted at once by its explosive aromas of citrus fruits, exotic fruits and white flowers. The intensity persists on the palate thanks to a beautiful balance between the freshness of aromas and the fat issued from the well-crafted maturing on lees. It is excellent with seafood, fish, white meat and blue cheese.

If you enjoyed this selection, try others from the same makers:

Pigmentum Malbec 2006 - \$10.67 cash

Pigmentum Rose of Malbec 2008 - \$10.67 cash

## New Year List of Value Wines

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



At the beginning of the new year – or, as I write this, the end of the old year – our thoughts often turn to lists. Lists of New Year's resolutions and lists of holiday bills to pay. Lists of things to do and lists of things my wife wants me to do. Lists of the best and worst this, that, or the other thing from the old year. A couple of weeks back, I made a list of wines I'd tasted in the previous year that I'd like to get for Christmas. The wines on that list all fit into a category I think of as special occasion wines; they were all over \$25.00 per bottle and all but two were over \$30.00 (hey, I've been good this year, sort of). This week, lists are back on my mind and chief among them is the list of bills I have to pay so I am thinking about the lower priced wines - everyday wines (under \$15) and a few weekend wines (between \$15 and either \$25 or \$30 depending on how flush I am

feeling that weekend) – that are my "go to" wines.

This list is far from stagnant. I taste over 9,000 wines each year so there are new things that jump onto the list and there are things that, for any of a number of reasons, no longer make the cut. While none of these are "great" wines, they are all excellent values that make up my regular repertoire of daily drinkers. (All the prices listed are cash bottle prices for 750ml bottles unless otherwise noted. "BS" is short for "Bear's Score" ... but you can take it as a comment on scores in general if you want. All of these wines are either highly or very highly recommended.)

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## BASIC BUBBLES

I like sparkling wine and I drink it on at least a weekly basis. While I love good Champagne, I can't afford to drink it all the time so I have searched out some lower priced alternatives. **ALAN CHRISTOPHER** Brut Blanc de Blancs Sparkling, France, NV (\$7.97 cash, BS: 86+) is my new go to cheap bubbly. It is good enough to drink by itself but cheap enough to mix with orange juice for a Mimosa or with a dollop of PAGES Parfait Amour Crème Violette (\$27.97) for a Kir Violette.

I also keep **VARICHON & CLERC** Blanc de Blancs Brut, France, NV (\$12.74, BS: 90) and **GRUET** Blanc de Noirs, New Mexico, NV (\$13.49, BS: 91) on hand for the everyday occasions that call for fizz (take home sushi, calamari fritti, an aperitif before dinner, a "rinse" after a long day of tasting ...). The Varichon is made from grapes grown in and around Savoy in eastern France. The Gruet is made by an old Champagne family from grapes grown on the high plains of New Mexico.



## "GO TO" WHITE

So I want a glass of white wine and the Mrs. wants red. I'll be drinking red with her in a bit but I want to start with white. I don't want to open anything expensive so I go to one of my go to whites. I have a few. For simple, clean, mineral and dry, I go to **BODEGAS WEINERT** Carrascal White, Mendoza, 2008 (\$12.68, BS: 90VHR), a delicious Argentine (not the first place you think of for basic white wine) blend of 70% Sauvignon Blanc and 30% Chenin Blanc.

If I want low alcohol, sweet and refreshing, I go for **SELBACH** Riesling QbA, Mosel, 2008 (\$13.59 per liter, BS: 88VHR). It is great as a summer aperitif or with spicy Chinese takeout, makes a super refresher after outdoor activities (it is usually the first bottle we open after riding our horses), and is the perfect accompaniment to my favorite fried shrimp recipe.

When I need basic Sauvignon Blanc, my first thought is **Ch. BONNET** Blanc, Entre deux Mers, 2007, a white Bordeaux wine blended from about 65% Sauvignon Blanc, 25% Semillon, and 10% Muscadelle du Bordelaise. It is equally good with oysters-on-the-half-shell, Oysters Rockefeller, or grilled catfish. It also makes a nice aperitif.

I don't drink a lot of basic Chardonnay but sometimes it is the only thing that will work. If I am having crabcakes or roast pork or a simple veal chop, Chardonnay is often the best bet and my best bet for a barrel-fermented, full-ML, oak aged (all the bells and whistles) Chardonnay is **CA' MOMI** Chardonnay, Sonoma County, 2007 (\$14.98, BS: 91). It fits the bill and fits the budget.

My last go to "white" may cause some sneering in geek world but go with me here: **BELLA SERA** Pinot Grigio "Il Rosato" IGT Veneto, 2006 (\$8.17, BS:86+) What is this? It is NOT a white wine with a little red wine added to make a "blushing rosé." Rather, it is what real Pinot Grigio is really all about. This temperature-controlled, stainless-steel-fermented-and-aged (no oak) 100% Pinot Gris gets its copper color naturally from the Pinot Gris grape skins which do have some reddish pink color. Tasting of ripe pears and limes with a hint of mineral, it is light and refreshing and perfect for quaffing on a hot evening while taming the heat of the grill. Yes, it is imported by Gallo and yes, it is "grocery store" wine. Nevertheless, it is still delicious.

## RELIABLE RED

I need solidly reliable everyday red wines in the same way I need good beef or good music. I could live without them but I would really miss them. My everyday red picks have to include Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache, Syrah, Zinfandel, and Malbec. It seems like a lot but I drink a lot of red wine and I like to have good reds that go well with the various foods I like to cook and eat.

Grenache and Syrah are best with rich winery tasting braised meats – short ribs, pot roasts, osso-buco, lamb shanks, etc. – that need fruit and earthiness to show their best. Three of my regular choices in this range are **BECKMEN** Cuvee Le Bec, Santa Ynez, 2007 (\$16.90, BS: 90+, a blend of 44% Grenache, 28% Syrah, 20% Mourvedre, and 8% Counoise), **St. COSME Cotes du Rhone** "Les Deux Albions" 2007 (\$18.27, BS: 90+, a blend of 40% Syrah, 15% Mourvedre, 15% Carignan, 20% Grenache, 10% and Clairette from Cairanne, St. Moritz, and Plan de Dieu), and **d'ARENBERG** Stump Jump Shiraz, McLaren Vale, 2008 (\$10.08, BS: 90, 100% Shiraz). Depending on my budget and whether I want more Grenache or more Syrah, one of these three usually handles an everyday braise. The Beckmen and the St. Cosme are also top choices to serve with a mixed grill.

I love good Pinot and since Sideways, it has become increasingly difficult to get good, cheap Pinot Noir. Pinot Noir is the most versatile red in that it tastes good with almost everything red wine can go with and can be served with a number of foods that challenge virtually all other reds. My go-tos here are a bit higher-priced but they are worth it. From New Zealand, I like **BLIND TRAIL** Pinot Noir Central Otago 2007 (\$19.50, BS: 90), from California, I like **BELLE GLOS "Meomi"** Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2007 (\$23.73, BS: 91) and from Burgundy, I like **St. MARTIN Marsannay** Grand Vignes 2004 (\$19.58, BS: 91). Any of these three are likely to end up in my wine bag when the Mrs. and I head out to one of our favorite BYOBs (La Vista, Vietnam, Lucio's ...). All are equally likely to go with a salad and salmon off the grill at home.

For me, basic Zinfandel is a cinch. I look for a bottle of **JRE Zinfandel** Sonoma County 2007 (\$14.99, BS: 90, 87% Zinfandel and 13% Petite Sirah) made by Texas' native son John Robert Eppler. And yes, that cowboy and horse on the label do look familiar but no, I had nothing to do with making or blending this wine and was in fact quite surprised when he started using that label. Flattered, but quite surprised. Nevertheless, that wine could have a tastefully nude Linda Carter (from her Wonder Woman years) on the label and I still wouldn't drink it if it weren't really good. This one is (really good) and is one of my favorite wines for pizza or to pair with pasta and red sauce dishes. For a note on my latest go-to Malbec, look at this week's wine of the week: **CA' de CALLE Reserva, Luján de Cuyo** - Mendoza, 2008, (\$14.56, BS: 91+, about 75% Malbec, 20% Tempranillo, and 5% Syrah). Robust and still young, this delicious Malbec is the perfect companion to simple grilled beef dishes but also goes very well with pasta dressed with olive oil, salt, pepper, and Parmesan cheese.



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Which brings us to Cabernet Sauvignon. Along with my go-tos here are almost any of the **BLOCK-series** Cabernets (Which are only in stock as long as the supply lasts, I really like the 925 and the 713 which are both among those currently available) From Napa, I'm partial to **LOUIS MARTINI** Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2006 (\$21.78, BS: 90+), From Alexander Valley, I like **ALEXANDER VALLEY VINEYARDS** Cabernet Sauvignon 2007 (\$14.17, BS: 91), and from both, I'm partial to **TUDAL "50/50"** Cabernet Sauvignon 2007 (\$18.97, BS: 90+, half Napa and half Alexander Valleys). From Bordeaux – which is after all the birthplace of Cabernet Sauvignon, I am a great follower of Ch. Pontoise Cabarrus. The **Ch. PONTOISE CABARRUS** Haut Medoc 2006 (\$17.49, BS: 90, 58% Cabernet Sauvignon, 36% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, and 2% Petite Verdot) is the latest vintage in stock and it is frankly delicious and getting better with each passing month. Just thinking about it makes me wish for grilled lamb chops or some grilled quail. The California Cabs are fine with lamb but may be better with grilled steaks. Incidentally, the California cabs are also great with M&Ms.

**PARTY JUGS**

Sometimes you need a lot of wine and you don't have or want to spend a lot of money. Sometimes I am there as well. I have a go-to Party Jug for those occasions. I use the Magnums (1.5 Liters) of **STONY HOLLOW** Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay (\$7.99). My dad likes these so I taste them fairly regularly at his house and they are quite palatable. Actually, they are more than palatable – they're pretty good and they offer a great bang for your wine-buying buck.

There's my list. Hope it works for you as you make your list for the new year. And finally, Happy new year to you and yours from all of us at Spec's. We're looking forward to seeing you in 2010.



# SPEC'S Events & Classes

The Wine School at l'Alliance Française presents

**WINE 101: A Four-Week Course on Wine Basics**

Please join Spec's fine wine buyer Bear Dalton for this new four-week Wine Basics course. Wine 101 is focused both for those either just developing their interest in wine and for those who feel the need for a good review to help organize their tasting and thinking about wine. This class also would be a good place to start for a service professional looking to move more into the wine side of the restaurant business or anyone looking to move into the wholesale or retail wine trade. As wine from all over the world is now so readily available, the 40 wines we will taste over the four week class will come from all over the world.

**Week 1 (1/5/10):** Starting at the beginning: The basics of tasting. Tasting wine versus drinking wine. Types of tasting. Blind tasting. Playing "The Options Game". Ten wines will be tasted. Additional topics will include proper glassware, wine tools, and the restaurant wine ritual.

**Week 2 (1/12/10):** White wine making and white wine varieties and styles. We will taste ten white wines including Chardonnay with & without oak, off-dry whites, and sweet dessert wine. Topics will include how grape growing and winemaking affect wine style and flavors and how the types of wine represented by those tasted pair with food. We also will talk about wine storage and wine preservation and the concept of terroir.

**Week 3 (1/19/10):** Red and Rosé wine making and red wine varieties. We will taste ten red wines representing a range of styles and varieties Including a new world versus old world comparison. Topics will include how grape growing and winemaking affect wine style and flavors and how the types of wine represented by those tasted pair with food. We also will talk about age-ability and age-worthiness as well as wine keeping and wine collecting.

**Week 4 (1/26/10):** Fortified wines (focusing on Port & Sherry) and Sparkling Wines (ranging from the Charmat bulk process wines – such as Prosecco – to real French Champagne. We will discuss grape varieties, styles, techniques and their impact on flavor. We will discuss decanting and decanters and pairing these unusual partners with food.

The four-week Wine 101 will cost \$200 total per person cash (\$210.53 regular) for all four sessions. The course will meet at 7pm on Tuesday January 5, January 12, January 19, and January 26 of 2010. To reserve your spot for this unique four week class, please contact Jessica Toner at 832-660-0250 or Jessica.Toner@specsonline.com. All sessions of this class will be held at l'Alliance Française, the French cultural center in Houston. Located at 427 Lovett Blvd., l'Alliance is on the southeast corner of Lovett and Whitney (one block south of Westheimer and two blocks east of Montrose).

**WINE SCHOOL CANCELLATION POLICY**

To cancel a reservation, please call Jessica Toner at 832-660-0250 as soon as possible. Reservations canceled before 4pm on the last business day before the event will not be charged. Late cancellations may be charged. No-shows will be charged.

**L'Alliance Francaise is located at 427 Lovett Blvd. (on the Southeast corner of Lovett and Whitney, one block south of Westheimer, three blocks east of Montrose).**

