



Psst. Hey, Buddy ...

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



"Psst. Hey, buddy ..." is what you expect to hear before you hear the offer of something too good to be true. Of course I remember my old Grampa saying that "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

In the wine world, I have heard about many things over the years that sounded too good to be true. On examination, it

almost always turned out to be so – too good to be true. That doesn't mean that some of these things aren't good deals – it just means they are not quite the deal they are initially purported to be.

One such deal has (in the past) been second - or other alternate labels – of famous wines. Some are famous. Pavillon Rouge is the second wine of Ch. Margaux. Les Forts is the second wine of Ch. Latour. Le Clarence (formerly Bahans de Haut Brion) is the second wine of Ch. Haut Brion. Segla is the second wine of Ch. Rauzan Segla. And so on. The way the story used to go is ...

"Psst, hey buddy. These second wines are really the same wine as the first wine but they're just labeled differently and sold at vastly discounted prices. These wines are a great deal. All the smart people – that's me and you, buddy – know better than to buy the fancy label when we can get the same wine with the other label for a much lower price. All those other guys are suckers"

Like every other such come on, there is a grain of truth in there. The grain here is that (some of) "These wines are great deals." The rest is just so much bunk.

Second Wines

Second wines from famous names are the secondary blends made by many of the big name producers from grapes they grow that do not make the cut for the top wines of the property. While many regions of the wine world utilize this tool, it is best known as it is done in Bordeaux. Ch. Latour makes "Grand Vin de Ch. Latour" but they also make "Les Forts de Latour" (which many people consider to be a second wine masquerading as a second growth). Ch. Lafite has Carruades de Lafite. Ch. Pichon Baron has Les Tourelles de Longueville. These second wines of very prestigious chateaux are fairly well known.

The process is fairly straightforward. Let's use Ch. Rauzan Segla as an example. Let's say that John Kolassa (the general director of the chateau) determines that the best wine he can make at Rauzan Segla uses only 40% of his production. He then looks at the remaining 60% and again tries to, from that remainder, make the best wine those lots can produce. Suppose he comes up with a blend incorporating 2/3 of the remainder. He bottles and labels that wine as Segla and it is sold as the "2nd vin of the chateau". The remaining 20% of the total production is sold in bulk with no right to the Rauzan Segla name.

All of the second wines of all the chateaux are made in much this way. Many chateaux, including Rauzan Segla, have sections of the vineyard that generally do not make the cut for the first wine. Nevertheless these vineyards are part of the estate and the appellation and have a place in the second wine. The point is these are second wines which are unique. They may be the little brother but they are not the great wine of the property. They often taste great and are usually ready to drink before their big brothers. It is also good to note that even as second wines, they may be more expensive than many people's entry-level price for fine wine. Spec's carries and promotes them because they offer a taste of the style and quality at a fraction of the price. Please note that I wrote "a taste of ...", not "the same".

So besides the second wines of the great chateaux of Bordeaux, what else fits the bill? A good California example of this same thing is Innisfree Cabernet Sauvignon from Joseph Phelps. Also, among others, the Block wines do. We have occasionally had the opportunity to buy a large lot of wine that was available on the bulk market at a fire sale price due to any number of reasons (a winery in financial trouble, a lot that doesn't fit into a blend, over production, etc.). That's how the Spec's Winery Direct program (remember those \$10-\$12 Pinot Noirs?) got started. Some are from "fancy name producers" in Napa and Sonoma who are selling some super juice at prices much lower than their normal production prices. We are contractually obligated not to reveal who produced the wines so we developed these "Block" labels to indicate these private selections that we are able to have bottled and share with our customers. These wines are almost always some really good juice that did not make the cut for the reduced production of the winery that made them. Every once in a great while, we get offered that actual top wine in a "shiner" or unlabeled bottle with the winery's cork already intact. In these cases, you will know who made the wine as soon as you pull the cork. A "Calistoga AVA" Block Cabernet Sauvignon will be coming soon. You will recognize who made it. We get a great deal on these wines and so do you.

Finally, we sometimes get offered a really good wine where the producer just doesn't want their name publicly associated with the wine. The wine may be excellent but it is not up to the producer's high standard. In two recent cases, we have bought such bottled and labeled wines under the agreement that we will not reveal in writing or on the internet, who made the wine. We are allowed to tell our customers and the producing properties agree to confirm verbal queries as to origin. Here are my notes on these gems. Psst. Hey, buddy ... have I got a wine for you ...

HAUT CHARMES, SAUTERNES, 2007 (From a VERY famous Sauternes chateau)

6x750ml \$26.99 \$152.28
12x375ml \$14.99 \$169.80

Tech: A blend of 20% Sauvignon Blanc, 80% Semillon fermented and aged in new oak barrels. Yellow-gold-straw in color with good legs. Sweet, full-bodied with balanced acidity and very light phenolics. Offers sweet, ripe, rich, juicy white and yellow tropical and tree fruit with citrus-peach-pear, and lemon drop notes along with apple honeysuckle and orange. Long finish. Succulent, almost lush, delicious.

Lovely-in-the-mouth. Excellent. BS: 91+VHR

KNIGHT'S VALLEY WINERY Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands, 2006 (From a very famous, northern Sonoma producer)

12x750ml \$35.99 \$406.85

Tech: 14.8% Alcohol. 100% Pinot Noir hand sorted, destemmed and hand sorted again on a vibrating table, berry by berry and given a light crushing, fermented using open tops with punch-downs, aged 14 months in French oak (40% new). Native yeast ferment. No cold soak was used.

Purple-red-black in color, with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with balanced acidity and medium plus phenolics. Clean, rich, supple, subtle, much more expensive tasting Pinot Noir. Silky red and some black fruit with super integration. Has more of a bouquet than aromas. Seamless and delicious. Supple, elegant, pure. *Excellent. BS: 94+*.

I can't tell you in writing, but you can ask any of the Spec's wine department guys. Psst. Hey Buddy ... ✨