

Reds and Rosés from the Rhône

Written by Bill Citara, BT Contributor
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Red, white, and you: Agreeable wine for \$12 or less

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Finding affordable white wines with some interest and character is relatively easy.

Finding affordable red wines with some interest and character. ... Ah, not so much.

California? No way. Most inexpensive California reds either taste like the bland, varietal-less, mass-produced industrial products they are, or are so grapey and sickly sweet, you could spread them on your breakfast toast.

Australia? Pretty much the same deal. New Zealand? You don't see much on U.S. shelves at our price point.

Italy, maybe? Nah. There are a few lower-priced gems in the ocean of cheap Italian reds, but far too many of them are so bitterly acidic that after a couple of glasses, your taste buds feel like they've been worked over with a tire iron.

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Argentina and Chile? Better, but still a lot of forgettable industrial plonk. And while I like Malbec okay and love Carménère, neither strikes me as versatile and balanced enough for everyday drinking.

Then there's France. I know, when it comes to great food, gorgeous women, and stinky cigarettes, France has it all over everyone else. But while most of us probably think of French wines as breathtakingly expensive nectar for the One Percent, French winemakers are also producing lots of moderately priced vino of real depth and character.

Particularly red wines. Particularly red wines from the Rhône, an ancient wine-growing region that spreads out from the Rhône River for 125 miles. Though best-known for such prestigious and pricey wines as Hermitage, Côte Rôtie, and Châteauneuf-du-Pape, most of the Rhône's production is of easy-drinking, affordable, everyday wines.

Given our \$12 budget, that basically means reds and rosés. Rhône whites in our price range are essentially unicorns. But we did find one. It's the **2014 Les Dauphines**, a blend of Grenache Blanc, Marsanne, Clairette, and Viognier that's highly regarded on the international wine scene. For good reason. It's a terrific food wine, crisp and refreshing, with lively citrus acidity and richer, fuller flavors of white peach and stone fruit, and grassy-herbal undercurrents.

Rhône rosés are more easily available, and if they don't have quite the cachet of rosés from Provençal, they're every bit as deserving a place on your table.

The **2014 Buti Nages Rosé**, for example. It blends two of the Rhône's iconic grapes, Grenache and Syrah, in a pretty, salmon-colored wine with an enticingly creamy texture that deftly pairs lemony acidity with ripe raspberry and strawberry flavors, and a trace of minerals. Skip the **2015 Cave de Rasteau Les Rastellains Rosé**, which dished up just enough off aromas and flavors to make it not worth exploring to the bottom of the glass.

On a brighter note, balance is also the hallmark of another Buti Nages wine, the **2014 Rouge**. Composed of the classic Rhône blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvedre, it shuns oak to

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retain bright, fresh raspberry and red apple varietal flavors. Minerals and herbs and citrus are in there too, giving the wine complexity that oak aging can sometimes obscure.

The same trinity of Rhône grapes also shows up in the **2015 J.V. Fleury Ventoux**. Ventoux is a sub-appellation of the Rhône, sheltered from the cold Mistral winds by Ventoux mountain and the Vaucluse mountain range. Not a lot of complexity in this wine, but it does offer plenty of bracing blueberry, raspberry, and strawberry fruit, with sturdy acidity and just enough tannins to keep all that lush fruit from becoming cloying.

Ditto for the **2014 Famille Perrin Reserve** -- plummy, red cherry, blueberry fruit, good acidity, soft tannins, a long tangry red cherry finish. This one does deliver some earthy notes in the nose, whiffs of mushrooms and olives, but like the Fleury, it's a simple but well-made wine that shows off the accessible, easy-drinking character of Rhône wines.

My favorite of this tasting's Rhône reds, though, was the **2015 Domaine Coudoulis**. At 14.5 percent alcohol it's the biggest of the bunch, but it's so well-structured you don't get that "hot" high-alcohol burn. The wine's inky-purple color is a good indicator of the aromas and flavors to come -- invigorating black 'n' blue fruit with hints of baked apple, cloves, and toast. Yet it's lighter on the palate than you'd expect, and at \$10.49 is a pretty good deal, especially for a wine with real interest and character.

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