

A Grenache with Panache

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



If you're one of those people who believe the first duty of wine is to be red, and your palate outstrips your pocketbook, you've got a problem.

Cabernet Sauvignon? Well, King Cab certainly makes some terrific wines, but the best examples (or even just good ones) can be terrifically expensive, and at our price point it's mostly industrial-grade swill that tastes like sugar- and lumber-infused grape juice.

Pinot Noir? The thinking drinking man's wine does offer a few value bottles, but there, too, prices start high and go stratospheric. Less pricey Pinots can be decent daily quaffs but lack much in the way of varietal character and that elusive, magical blend of flavor, aroma, and texture that captivates cork dorks everywhere.

Affordable Merlot typically has all the flaws of inexpensive Cabernet, except more so. Zinfandel, Syrah, Sangiovese, Malbec all have their pluses and minuses, but good luck finding one for \$12 and under that doesn't have that mass-produced, vint-by-numbers sameness.

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Which brings us to Grenache. Though widely planted in Europe and the essential component of Côtes-du-Rhône and the more refined Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Grenache doesn't get much love as a single-varietal wine. Except in Spain. That's not too surprising, as it's thought Grenache (or Garnacha) was first established in the northern reaches of Spain, and is still one of the country's chief red wine grapes.

Garnacha's characteristics are lush cherry-berry fruit; hints of spice, olives, and tobacco; soft tannins and acidity; and (often) higher alcohol levels. Like any wine when made on an industrial scale, it can be undistinguished and merely acceptable, but Spanish vintners have proved adept at closing the palate-pocketbook gap, something those of us on a budget can appreciate.

Start that appreciation with the **2014 Proyecto Garnacha de España La Garnacha Salveje**. The title is a mouthful, and the wine is too, a lovely, elegant ode to the pleasures of Grenache, grown in vineyards all over northern Spain.

Aromas are of ripe red cherry-berry fruit with plummy overtones, hints of fresh herbs and toast from five months aging in French oak barrels. Those aromas carry over to the palate, where bright acidity and soft tannins provide perfect balance to the ripe fruit. It was the class of this month's tasting, and a wine I'd buy by the case.

If the Proyecto Garnacha was the Big Dog of the tasting, the **2013 Tres Ojos** was the, well...dog. An unpleasantly earthy, mushroomy nose gave way to what tasted like grape juice steeped with fresh limes -- tart, sour, bitter. Buy another bottle of Proyecto instead.

The rest of the wines we sampled fell somewhere between those two extremes, delivering gobs of potent, ripe fruit, decent value, and accessibility if not a lot of excitement. The **2015 Borsao** was typical, a full-bodied wine rich with black 'n' blue fruit, a little earthy, a little spicy, adding hints of toasty oak, olives, and tobacco.

The **2014 Castillo de Monséran** fit pretty much the same bill, but with less heft, lower alcohol (13 percent as opposed to 14.5), and more pronounced acid and tannins.

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Also on the lighter side was the **2014 Campo Viejo Rioja Garnacha**. With its almost candied, cough syrupy fruit and overall blandly inoffensive flavor profile, it's the kind of competently made, affordably priced industrial wine that lines the shelves of grocery stores from sea to shining sea.

If you're the kind of red wine drinker who drives a nitro-fueled funny car to the store for a quart of milk, you'll like the **2015 Pallas Old Vines Garnacha**. Its port-like 15.5 percent alcohol announces itself at first whiff, joined by aromas of blackberries, cassis, herbs, minerals, and toasty oak. On the palate, however, it's rather less intimidating and more refined than that, reminiscent of some old-vine Zinfandels from Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley.

Finally, with a nod to Grenache's propensity to be blended with other grapes, we come to the **2014 Clos de Nit**

. It's only 40 percent Grenache, with Carignan, Merlot, Tempranillo, and Cabernet Sauvignon rounding out the mix. It's a combo that expanded on Grenache's characteristic red and black fruit, adding touches of olives, tobacco, earth, and minerals, as well as a hint of Burgundian barnyard. At \$10, it will make both your palate and pocketbook happy.

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