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Austerity whites

Only once have I been criticised for the subject matter of my columns on this page. Some years ago a member of the traditional British wine trade ticked me off for stooping to mention some of the bargains then available at mass market retailers. At the risk of riling him, I propose to spend this weekend examining relatively inexpensive wine. Many readers of the FT must be all too aware of the prevailing mood of austerity. And even those who don't need to save pennies must feel at times that they should.

I have been quizzing those who buy large quantities of mass market wine professionally and have enjoyed the euphemisms. "Value wine" is a popular one for wines at the bottom end of the price range. (For the record, I firmly believe there is value at just about every price level apart from the stratospheric.)

All are agreed that it is much easier to find - oh, let's be brave - cheap wine that is red than its white counterpart. For a start, white wine is much more transparent. Any winemaking faults or slight taints tend to be all too obvious, and the main ones in cheap white - apart from the classic old-fashioned faults of oxidation and too much sulphur - are an excess of acidity from underripe grapes, a lack of flavour from excessive yields and, nowadays, occasionally heavy-handed use of oak chips that leaves whites (and some reds) tasting oily and of macerated matchsticks. As Marks & Spencer's wine buyer Belinda Kleinig admits, they have to look at far more lots when buying or blending suitable

whites than of reds.

And even after the disastrously short 2012 harvest in so many wine regions outside North America, there is much greater availability of cheap red wine than of cheap white. Prices are keener in Iberia than almost anywhere else and Spanish bodegas are still awash with bargain Garnacha and Tempranillo which, as Laura Jewell, Tesco's in-house Master of Wine, puts it, have "more character than their equivalent, highyield Airen white counterparts". After all, the Garnacha that is still Spain's most planted grape and of which there is no shortage of old bush vines delivering concentrated flavours in a wellmatched warm climate, is the highly respected Grenache of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, hardly a workhorse. But in most Spanish wine regions, other than sherry country and the plains of La Mancha - long planted with the characterless Airen grape, historically destined for distillation into brandy - pale-skinned grapes were always in a minority. Only the far, damp northwest is serious white country, and production costs there are too high to be of interest to a supermarket buyer looking for basic white.

France has always been a red wine producer too - and old-vine Grenache in Languedoc and especially Roussillon can also offer some of the best red wine value in wines carrying such names as Côtes Catalanes and Pays d'Oc. There was a brief period when the Languedoc white Picpoul de Pinet looked pretty good value but popularity and the shrunken yields of 2012 have put

paid to that.

Although it has now been joined by tragically underpriced Muscadet, by far the most important hunting ground for seriously inexpensive white French wine - albeit with fairly high acidity thanks to the Armagnac grapes traditionally planted there - has been Gascony. But even here prices have risen over the past couple of years. There was a time not so long ago that wines labelled Gers or Côtes de Gascogne were retailing for under £4. But that general supermarket base price, for wines of all colours, seems rapidly to have risen to closer to £7, thanks partly to routine increases in UK duty on wine in successive budgets. Initially these Gascon wines, typically based on Colombard and/or Ugni Blanc (called Trebbiano in Italy), were piercingly tart and thin but quality has risen considerably recently. I found Gascon wines the best value of all in a recent tasting of whites under £10 that Tesco has to offer, with a St-Mont blend of local, recently revived, indigenous Gros Manseng, Arrufiac and Petit Courbu varieties particularly appealing to the ampelographic archivist in me. But the newish blend of Gros Manseng with the Sauvignon Blanc of Bordeaux also works well.

I have been trying to find the best white wine value available currently in the UK. This generally but by no means exclusively means hunting on supermarket shelves. Even the specialist importer of natural and nearly-natural wines Les Caves de Pyrène, which specialises in supplying restaurants but will sell to





consumers from its base in Artington, Surrey, has some bargains to offer, as you can see from my list of favourites on this page. Ditto adventurous independent importing retailers such as Lea & Sandeman. In France, the Loire is generally underpriced and it is even possible to find the odd bargain white from Alsace co-ops.

Italy is rather different from France and Spain. It has long grown oceans of Trebbiano and Sicilian white wine grapes such as Catarratto but, since the worldwide craze for Chardonnay transmogrified into one for Pinot Grigio, it has more recently and mysteriously had oceans of Pinot Grigio available, much of it tasting very cheap indeed. Alas the 2012 harvest has provided an excuse to raise Pinot Grigio prices. M&S buyers (called "winemakers") have put a lot of work recently into revamping their Italian range and I was particularly impressed by the whites, which seemed free of the vaguely dull and industrial character that can dog cheap white. Each was distinctive and so full of fresh fruit that I had to check these were commercial samples ready for the shelf rather than preshipping, untreated tank samples.

Buying at this level can be as much about currency as about quality, which is partly why Australia and largely why South America do not

feature here. But South Africa, with its extensive plantings of Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc, can be fertile hunting ground for "value" whites - not least because South Africans themselves have long undervalued their whites.

Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com Twitter @JancisRobinson

La Vieille Ferme Luberon

The diffusion line of the Perrin brothers of Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf du Pape. A blend of Bourboulenc, Grenache Blanc, Ugni Blanc and Vermentino grapes reduced from £7.99 to £5.99 by Waitrose.

JANCIS'S WHITE WINE BARGAINS

Sogrape, Winemakers' Selection NV Vinho Verde, £4.59, Sainsbury's

Gruppo Italiano Vini, Winemakers' Selection NV IGT Sicilia, £4.79, Sainsbury's

Guy Anderson Wines, Winemakers' Selection El Pozo Bueno 2012 Rueda, £5.49, Sainsbury's

Toscana Bianco 2012, £5.99, M&S Boekenhoutskloof, Porcupine Ridge Sauvignon Blanc 2012 Western Cape, reduced from £7.99 to £5.99, Waitrose

Zalze Bush Vines Chenin Blanc 2012 Coastal Region, reduced from £7.99 to £6.39, Waitrose

Calvet Limited Release Sauvignon Blanc 2012 Bordeaux, £6.79, Waitrose

Tapada de Villar 2012 Vinho Verde, £6.99, M&S

Grecanico 2012 IGT Terre Siciliane, £6.99 M&S

Vignerons du Pallet, Tesco Finest Ch Palatio Sur Lie 2012 Muscadet-Sèvre et Maine, £6.99, Tesco

Dom de la Fruitière, Sainsbury's Taste the Difference Sur Lie 2012 Muscadet-Sèvre et Maine, £6.99, Sainsbury's

Ackerman, Les Jardiniers Sauvignon Blanc 2012 IGP Val de Loire, £6.99, Sainsbury's

Producteurs Plaimont, Tesco Finest 2011 St-Mont, £6.99, Tesco

Boekenhoutskloof, Porcupine Ridge Viognier/Grenache Blanc 2012 Western Cape, £8.99 reduced to £6.99, Majestic

For stockists see wineseacher.com

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