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- **ESSAY ON VALUES**
- **VIEUX TÉLÉGRAPHE PA**
- **ZIND HUMBRECHT TRILOGY**

OPEN • TUESDAY-SATURDAY 11 A.M. TO 6 P.M. CLOSED • SUNDAY & MONDAY

MARCH 2006

WHERE ARE THE BARGAINS TODAY?

WOULD I EVEN BRING IT UP if the correct answer were Chile or Australia, for example? For the first time in recorded history the greatest values in the wine world are coming out of France. I am not a francophile, but I love French wine, so this is a rare occasion: France's fine wines can be purchased relatively cheaply.

I am not talking about the bulk-process French wine that you find on the shelves of a corner liquor store; nor am I talking about French wines that are shipped without temperature control, that arrive here cooked almost to death before you can get a corkscrew to them.

I am talking about artisanally produced wines from all over France that have been selected and shipped with care by a bunch of caring importers, including me.

Why have French wines lost their place as the most expensive? Let's leave aside Romanée-Conti, Yquem, and a handful of others, just as in California you would not use Screaming Eagle to generalize about prices.

First, French wines are handicapped by their labels. Americans shy away from wine names they cannot pronounce or comprehend. They feel safer saying Merlot, for example. Varietal labeling has won the day because it is almost as simple as red, white, and rosé. And consider that the world's greatest Sauvignon Blanc value does not even say Sauvignon Blanc on the label. It says CHEVERNY, the village where the Sauvignon Blanc is produced. But stand on a street corner in New York and ask passersby, What is a Cheverny? Would one in a million know? Now try Irouléguy, Apremont, Bouzeron . . .

Then there is the question of vintage variation. I don't know about you, but as for myself, diversity is a necessity and taste-alikes are a bore. In hot-climate countries with irrigation and temperature control you can pretty much make the same vintage every year and mask any deviations with a dose of new oak. Remember, in France irrigating vineyards is illegal, so every year nature designs a new wine for us to get to know. Monotony is not a problem.

French wines are well priced because the public chooses blockbusters over finesse, slam dunks over teamwork, service aces over strategy. And again, hot, dry climates irrigated can produce blockbusters year in and year out. But I go back to diversity. Does Coca-Cola care about diversity? No, and neither do wine marketers. But how can a true wine lover not like more choice, more styles, more flavors? France can make blockbusters, too, but it also makes just about every other style you can possibly imagine. Muscadet, anyone?

And there is no getting around it, most Americans still talk dry and drink sweet. A truly dry wine seems austere next to a sweet one. The sweetness of New World wines is increasing in both “dry” reds and whites because the market likes it. That Chardonnay that is described as Montrachet-like because of its richness might have four to five grams of residual sugar purposefully left in it. A Montrachet, however, feels rich thanks to its *terroir*. Legally it cannot have over two grams of residual sugar. White Burgundy is the only Chardonnay in the world that legally must be dry. Comparing a dry Chardonnay from Burgundy to a slightly sweet Chardonnay, 99% of the population will think the sweet one is more “luscious.”

Legally the French cannot jump on the bandwagon and follow such fads. They are controlled and must preserve certain traditional qualities.

And French wines remain reasonably priced because their own market is having problems. With the police waiting outside restaurants with their alcohol testing kits, they have really dealt a whammy to France’s restaurant business and consequently the wine market. In Paris, with its Metro and taxis, the restaurants are packed and the good wine flows, but out in the countryside, where one must drive home, patronage is down 30% and so are wine sales.

I could go on, but I want to change course here. A recent S.F. newspaper article questioned whether French wines can compete in the under-\$12 market. Given the selections the reporter tasted, I might have agreed with him, but the article prompted me to survey the wines we stock. On that day we had over twenty French and Italian selections at \$12 or under. Hand-crafted wines. All shipped in temperature-controlled containers. If the newspaper had set its limit at \$15, I would have had tons more to fit into their bargain category. Yet we hear shoppers here say, “I always thought you only sold expensive wines.”

Now compare the quality available today from any other country at \$10, \$15, or \$20 per bottle. Consider the questions of diversity, flavor interest, versatility at table, and so on.

Now think about this: What is the average price for a Merlot these days? A Cabernet? A Chardonnay? Vieux Télégraphe, tried and true, a great vintage, is offered herein at \$43.50 per bottle. Is that not pretty close to today’s average price for a Merlot or Chardonnay, for example?

Or, how do our *premier cru* red Burgundies compare pricewise to the average Oregon Pinot Noir?

Is aging potential still worth something these days? Almost all of our under-\$12 wines will not only last, they will improve with age if you let them.

The idea that French wines are expensive is obsolete, for the time being. This is a rare moment in the wine market. In this writer’s opinion, the best costs less. Live it up while you can.

HOW FRENCH!

YES, AN EVENING MEAL that begins with Chablis and ends with Beaujolais. How French. How many times did Colette drink thusly, and just look at her books and love life. Who's to argue? Not to mention how George Sand seduced Chopin the pianist after Chablis with oysters and Beaujolais with Polish sausage. And did not the German army invade yet again exactly after the king's minister opened a *second* bottle of Morgon? So one can go too far.



Chopin

Ours is not just any Beaujolais. Ours is the most-talked-about Beaujolais in the kingdom. The Bushdom? I am referring to Marcel Lapierre's no SO₂/no filtration *grand cru* Morgon, the most natural wine out there.

2004 CHABLIS DOMAINE SAVARY

I am generalizing: the French wine press seems to have singled out Savary as the top producer of the *appellation* Chablis *contrôlée*. They like Vincent Dauvissat and our Raveneau for the first and second growths, and Savary for Chablis.

Savary's 2004 tastes just like the wine books say Chablis is supposed to taste. I would add one helpful hint: the bouquet really grows and expands with some air, so you might want to uncork it an hour or so before dinner, or splash it into a decanter, or just sit back with a glass and watch the wine blossom beneath your very nose.

\$19.95 PER BOTTLE **\$215.46** PER CASE

2004 MORGON MARCEL LAPIERRE

The great vineyards of the Beaujolais have a soil predominantly of decomposed granite. I mention it because behind or within the cherry-like Gamay fruit of Lapierre's 2004, you will find a granite core. This is a suave, subtle, seductive wine.

\$19.95 PER BOTTLE **\$215.46** PER CASE

*Buyers of a mixed case, six Chablis/six Morgon,
will receive the 17% Colette/George Sand discount.*

AUBERT DE VILLAINÉ

NADÈGE LANIER-GARDE runs my French office in Beaune. Last year Aubert de Villaine invited us to his domaine in Vosne-Romanée, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, to taste the 2004s.

Just recently Nadège took a group of our distributors to Bouzeron to taste the wines de Villaine makes there, which is also where he and his American wife Pamela reside. Nadège wrote this report to me:

I did not take concise notes on each wine, but the quality of the new Bouzeron wines is thrilling: wines of pleasure, the Pinot Noirs stylish with delicious strawberry and raspberry fruit.

As usual, I began by looking for any technical flaws. I found none, and it reminded me of the purity and perfection of the Romanée-Conti wines and how the tasting with you last summer stood out in my wine experience. His 2004 Mercurey and Bourgognes are really

classy, full of pure pleasure. Elegant, well made, perfectly balanced; just the right ripeness, the right acidity, tannins, the right everything. Indeed, I was amazed by their purity and charm. But why am I surprised? They are true de Villaine wines, which means, exactly as they ought to be. My respect towards such a talented winemaker (or should I say wine master, in the best sense of the term) deepened. He is a maestro and his team, or staff, really knows how to play the tunes.

I thought that the Mercurey shows a wild side, quite masculine and structured.

Each of Aubert's appellations are now available. Your good taste will be satisfied.



		BOTTLE	CASE
2004	BOUZERON ALIGOTÉ	\$16.95	\$183.06
2003	BOURGOGNE BLANC "LES CLOUS"	28.00	302.40
2002	RULLY "LES SAINT JACQUES"	28.00	302.40
2004	BOURGOGNE ROUGE "LA DIGOINE"	28.00	302.40
2004	BOURGOGNE ROUGE "LA FORTUNE"	22.00	237.60
2004	MERCUREY "LES MONTOTS"	32.00	345.60



Winter pruning at Vieux Télégraphe

— PRE-ARRIVAL OFFER —

2004 CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE
ROUGE • DOMAINE DU
VIEUX TÉLÉGRAPHE

THE MOST FAMOUS Vieux Télégraphe is the 1978. (For my view on older VTs, see pages 205–209 of *Inspiring Thirst*.) Their 2004, which I have tasted several times since the harvest, makes me think of that 1978. In other words, buy two cases instead of one, tenths and magnums instead of fifths only, and some methuselahs for your kid's tuition. If possible.

You can see the wine's incredible depth in its dark, brilliant robe, and it has a lovely, rich aroma, very Vieux Télégraphe, with its sun-ripened fruit and dusty stones.

Here is a vintage that will drink well over at least thirty years. It is ample on the palate; mouth-filling doesn't quite say it. It is rich in tannin, yet you have the impression that your mouth is mostly filled with flavor. It is not "super-extracted" to the point that you wonder if the grapes had any actual juice in them. Let's call it huge and juicy, a Châteauneuf aristocrat that does not lack charm and harmony. Highest recommendation.

\$522.00 PER CASE FIFTHS

*(Inquire about tenth, magnum, jeroboam,
methuselah, salmanazar, and nebuchadnezzar.)*

2005 CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE *BLANC*
DOMAINE DU VIEUX TÉLÉGRAPHE

"Remarkably fresh and balanced with a minerality and relief that typifies the great aging vintages, and a feel-good velvet creaminess." Those are Daniel Brunier's notes on their dry white, 2005.

This is the first time I have offered their white pre-arrival, but I thought that fans might appreciate an opportunity to pay the lower PA price.

\$429.00 PER CASE FIFTHS

*Pre-arrival terms: Wines available in half-case lots;
half-payment due with order, balance upon arrival.*

DOMAINE ZIND HUMBRECHT

THE CROWN JEWELS *chez* Zind Humbrecht are the single-vineyard wines, some of the loftiest examples of the vintner's art, collector's items that seem to age forever, like the finest white Burgundies. Small production wines, difficult to obtain, worth every cent, those on a tight budget can only dream . . . until now.

I have always regretted the lack of entry-level Alsatian wines, inexpensive examples of real quality that might introduce the pleasures of Alsace's finest to novices or to those on a budget. I don't know if Olivier Humbrecht will ever do it again, but in 2004 he created some varietal bottlings that are considerably lower in price than his single-vineyard classics. It is quite an opportunity to enjoy the mind-blowing artistry of one of our greatest talents.

Later this year you will receive our pre-arrival offering of his 2004 single-vineyard wines. Fireworks in the bottle, folks, and after tasting these three varietal bottlings, I expect people will be lined up for them.

2004 RIESLING

Alsace is on the border of Germany and France, and this Riesling of the greatest purity acts like a blend of German and Alsatian Riesling. Lively, balanced, dry, and refreshing, it is only 12° alcohol and it descends well, if you know what I mean. It is a versatile Riesling, and remarkably good with Asian-style cuisine.

\$18.95 PER BOTTLE **\$204.66** PER CASE

2004 GEWURZTRAMINER

A fabulous nose that captures the captivating fruit of the grape variety with about as much class as most people will ever experience. The rose-petal perfume is ravishing.

\$18.95 PER BOTTLE **\$204.66** PER CASE

2004 PINOT GRIS

These are not blends of cast-offs. Olivier *fashioned* these beauties. This one is a blend of his Pinot Gris Vieilles Vignes, Heimbourg, and Clos Windsbuhl! Loaded with smoky varietal character.

\$18.95 PER BOTTLE **\$204.66** PER CASE

DELICIOUS REDS STARRING GUIDO PORRO

PORRO IS MAKING SOME of the most exciting yet still traditional wines in the Piedmont, and he shows more pizzazz with each vintage. The flavor intensity he obtains without any mean tannins or sumo-class heaviness is, in my book, Porro's claim to fame. He delivers classic Piedmont wines in renditions as juicy and delicious as I have ever encountered.

You will not find better by spending more, but feel free to go ahead and try.

2004 DOLCETTO D'ALBA "I'PARI"

Lower your sniffer into this big bucket of berries, black and blue. Then wrap your palate around a texture that should be written into law.

What a big, luscious country beauty. If ever a wine deserved to be called sexy, this is it. It is practically spilling out of its bodice. Perfect for pizza, pasta, traveling salesmen, and listening to music.

\$14.95 PER BOTTLE **\$161.46** PER CASE

2004 BARBERA D'ALBA "SANTA CATERINA"

Again, a gorgeous nose, deep and expansive, with some strawberry . . . well, it is a parade of berries that seems to glimmer aromatically. This is a great example of the Porro style: big, luscious, yet it seems to settle down upon your palate with finesse.

\$14.95 PER BOTTLE **\$161.46** PER CASE

2004 PAESAN

This is Porro's creation, not for the market, but for his own pleasure. He blends Barbera with Nebbiolo, and guess what, the Nebbiolo could have been legitimately bottled and sold as Barolo. In other words, to get the wine he likes to drink, he sacrifices some profit. In this age of grubby, greedy materialism, I hope he isn't arrested.

Yes, he selects his most forward-tasting Nebbiolo from his amphitheater-shaped Barolo vineyard at Serralunga and blends it with his superb Barbera. Slurpingly delicious!

\$16.00 PER BOTTLE **\$172.80** PER CASE

SWEETLY THEY SERVE

2003 VOUVRAY “CUVÉE CC” DOMAINE CHAMPALOU

Here is Champalou’s *trie de vendange*, the ripest grapes, hand-selected off the vine. This late-harvest sweetie was bottled only in 500-ml bottles. I find that you can enjoy a little after-dinner glass or two, re-cork the bottle, and the wine will remain viable in the fridge for about three nights.

So far, everyone here enthusiastically loves the taste of it.

\$48.00 PER BOTTLE **\$518.40** PER CASE

2003 MONTLOUIS “RIVE GAUCHE” ALEX MATHUR

This is the same idea but from the other side of Loire from Vouvray, the left bank, and I recommend this one as an *apéritif* or dessert. There is something about it—it is not cloying or sticky—that is stimulating as a starter.

It smells like a cake right out of the oven with apricots, peaches, and lemon zest. Sweet but delicate, rich but ethereal, a glass before dinner leaves your palate very happy indeed.

\$42.00 PER BOTTLE **\$453.60** PER CASE

1990 SAUTERNES CHÂTEAU ROÛMIEU-LACOSTE

The deep, golden color shows the richness of the vintage and the maturity of this fifteen-year-old Sauternes, whose vineyards are in the Doisy-Daëne/Coutet area of Barsac.

Oh yes, a 1990! How about that? Santa Claus was nice this time. He faxed me to say he had twenty cases of 1990 Roûmieu-Lacoste and did I want any? There are nineteen still available as I write this.

\$66.00 PER BOTTLE **\$712.80** PER CASE



— VALUE OF THE MONTH —

2004 CÔTES-DU-RHÔNE ROUGE
CHÂTEAU DU TRIGNON

AT TRIGNON, just down the road from Les Pallières, I get the impression that Pascal Roux, the proprietor, likes his 2004 a little more than his 2003, but I am not sure I agree. His 2003 shot out of the store, so I am not the only one who went for its grilled thyme and rosemary character. (We have Pascal's other 2003 reds, so you can taste for yourself.) Pascal, however, with his French-trained palate, leans toward the classy balance, structure, and freshness of this 2004.

You know me, when asked which vintage is best, I always say, *best for what?* When you get a yen for that smoked Provençal herb character (lamb and egg-plant's best friend), you will find a lot more of it in the 2003. Critics generally seem to be going for the 2004s. I understand. The '04s are more classic, the '03s a bit . . . special, unusual: Provence under a scorching sun.

Whatever. Here is Trignon's lovely 2004 red Côtes-du-Rhône, and it does just about everything a Côtes-du-Rhône is supposed to do, AND MORE. What's the more? Well, just like Pascal says: unusually balanced and structured for a southern Rhône, and the berry and cherry fruit shows remarkable freshness, like freshly crushed berries. He has produced a wine with southern Rhône flavors, but with a structure and balance that seems more like a northern Rhône.

Drink now or over the next ten years.

\$13.95 PER BOTTLE

\$150.66 PER CASE

DAZZLING 2003
TRIGNONS IN STOCK

	BOTTLE	CASE
2003 SABLET	\$16.25	\$175.50
2003 RASTEAU	17.00	183.60
2003 GIGONDAS (<i>arriving mid-March</i>)	19.95	215.46
2003 CÔTES-DU-RHÔNE "BOIS DES DAMES"	15.00	162.00



MORE NEW ARRIVALS

2004 LES COCALIÈRES *BLANC* DOMAINE D'AUPILHAC

The top Languedoc whites include Grange des Pères, La Grange de Quatre Sous, and Les Cocalières, which is from the site of an ancient volcano combined with oyster fossil limestone. It looks extraterrestrial up there. Sylvain Fadat of Aupilhac grows Roussanne and Marsanne with some Rolle and Grenache *blanc*.

The wine has Hermitage-like aspects. The Marsanne honey leaps out, then the complexity becomes apparent. This dry white tastes as minerally as the vineyard's soil looks. I get some smokiness, stones, hints of exotic fruits, a smidgen of oak, and the length on the palate is that of a *grand cru*.

\$30.00 PER BOTTLE **\$324.00** PER CASE

2003 IROULÉGUY *ROUGE* DOMAINE ARRETXEA

The aroma of this Basque red reminds me of taking the lid off a long-simmering stew of meat, peppers, and herbs. But the pot is not on the stove; it is hanging in a fireplace over coals, so it smells sort of smoky and stirs up my appetite.

The varietals: 50% Tannat, 30% Cabernet Franc, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon.

The result is somewhat Bordeaux-like, with a strong Basque accent. You don't need Basque cuisine with it, but if you want to have some fun, pick up Gerald Hirigoyen's *The Basque Kitchen* for recipes.

You don't need a beret, either, but I do recommend espadrilles.

\$19.95 PER BOTTLE **\$215.46** PER CASE

2003 LIRAC *ROUGE* • DOMAINE DU JONCIER

Never have I tasted a Lirac so ripe, rich, and concentrated. Michael Butler says it reminds him of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. We are talking Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre planted in the big stones.

It drinks beautifully now, so why not tonight?

\$16.00 PER BOTTLE **\$172.80** PER CASE

