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Value for the Soul

Rules wine imbibers live by.

By Francis Fecteau

The cure for a fearful populace is generosity—with ourselves and with others—and, I say, let it begin with our palates. Nothing good ever came from fear, and generosity resounds 'round and 'round. These are tough times, but if you repeat the phrase "tough times" enough, this bit of self-deceiving skullduggery makes you believe that *all* times are indeed tough and that somehow *all* deprivation is necessary. We compromise, cut back and trade down, and as necessary as it might seem at the time, we forget to allow ourselves a wee bit of glee. It's a matter of priorities; I cut corners with Kirkland brand toilet paper and detergent. But, were I to drink certain wines, my soul would dim a little, as would the convivial glow at my dinner table. Fortunately, it's not hard to drink well for less by following a few simple rules.



Rule 1: Read the label. Wine labels often contain a terrific amount of valuable information. The more specific a label is regarding the wine's origin, the more distinct the wine is likely to be. Think of the region it refers to as well. Is it warmer or cooler? Warm-climate fruit will be higher in sugar and therefore higher in alcohol, thus producing a richer wine. Grapes from cooler places will be lower in sugar, lower in alcohol generally, and show that tartness most of us associate with acidity—meaning a more refreshing, food-friendly wine. Further, imports often carry qualitative language which indicates fruit quality: Reserva vs. Grand Reserva, Premier Cru vs. Grand Cru, Chianti vs. Chianti Classico, for example.



Rule 2: Don't fear the unfamiliar. Most consumers stick to familiar terrain: Cabernet, Chardonnay, Merlot or Pinot Grigio, etc. Be fearless. Walk the unfamiliar aisle that you've always ignored and read the "shelf talkers" (there's a Spanish cabernet blended with Tempranillo for \$12 that drinks like something considerably spendier). Twenty dollars (most often less) goes further in Spain than anywhere else in the wine world. My personal favorite, Grenache—or *Garnacha* as it's known in Spain—produces some of the most richly textured, aromatic wines in the world. Sourced from old, dry-farmed terrain in some of Spain's most arid and inhospitable regions like Calatayud and Borsao, they produce gorgeous, concentrated, dark, rich wines for as little as \$7.

Other regions yield wines of similar value and substance; Austria's inimitably refreshing Gmer Veltliner is rarely more than \$15. And the heel of Italy's "boot"—Puglia and Salento—offer up delicious and cheap (rarely more than \$12), plummy reds made from Primitivo and Negroamaro. The southeast corner of France, specifically Languedoc-Roussillon and the Ardeche, produces terrific rosés; refreshing whites; and deep brooding reds—few of which ever exceed \$13. Labels tell stories even if you don't understand the language. Again, read the shelf talkers at the wine stores. Utah wine brokers are required to include the national retail price, and by comparing the published price on the note with the store's price, the astute shopper can stretch dollars further.

Rule 3: Support the little guy. Those floor-stacks at the liquor store on 400 south? Well, industrial wine-makers deliberately overinflate their price to the state, only to roll it back for the illusion of value. Small domestic producers (fewer than 10,000 cases annually) in Utah are actually marked up less, thanks to the Utah Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control's surprisingly progressive "small-winery exemption." Many sell for one-third less in Utah than anywhere else in the United States.

Hard times, indeed, but it doesn't mean we can't still come out ahead, drink well, and maybe stick it to The Man while we do it. Cheers.

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