

There are many famous wines selling for over \$100 per bottle and there are far more unknown wines of remarkably similar quality and taste selling for under \$10 and \$20. How do you find the very finest wines for \$5-\$20? If you enjoy expensive wines, this book can save you 25%-75% with no decrease in quality. Consumers of bargain basement wines can improve the quality of their wine by 100% at no increase in price.

Wine and the Informed Palate

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Introduction

This book will be of greatest value to the following people:

- To those who did *not* know that many wines are rated for quality. Until recently, I didn't.
- To those who *didn't* know there are many highly rated wines at disproportionately low prices. Until recently, I didn't.
- To those who never thought of or didn't know how to compare price to quality to maximize value. Until recently, I didn't.

The wine market is a market like any other. Any market has dislocations, which allow those who do their homework to find significant bargains by seeking out value.

Here are the questions I propose to answer along with their short answers.

Seamus O'Bròg

In this book I show what it takes to learn these things:

- How do I save money while enjoying better quality wine?
Search for bargains based on rating.
- How do I learn to tell a good wine from a bad wine?
Education of your taste.
- How do I learn to tell what wines are really superior?
Comparison.
- How can I tell with confidence when a wine is terrible?
Experience.
- If I can't trust advertising, and I can't trust wine salesmen:
 - How can I find good wines without having to taste every wine in the store? Buy rated wines.
 - How can I locate fine wines at reasonable prices?
Search for bargains based on rating.
 - How can I find good wines at bargain prices?
Search for bargains based on rating.
 - Where can I get continuing help pointing me in the right direction? Books, *Independent* Wine Magazines, and for free at on line wine sites.
<http://www.wine.com> for example
 - How do I sort all this out? It takes effort, but only a modicum thereof. Perhaps 30 minutes per month at first. Later only 30-60 minutes once or twice per year.

The Lesson of Olive Oil

There is a great lesson I learned a long time ago from olive oil.

There is such a thing as extra virgin olive oil.

Olive oil is available in 3 liter cans. They're big cans like the cans paint thinner comes in.

It is not unusual to pay \$28 for the finest extra virgin olive oil. That comes to almost \$0.28 per ounce. If you buy similar quality extra virgin olive oil in pint containers, it can cost \$8. That comes to \$0.50 per ounce.

I love olive oil. I eat a green salad every day if I can. I love fresh salad ingredients. Also, it greatly helps my digestion and seems to help me eat less.

Partly to save money, partly because I like my own better, and mostly because it's so easy, I make most of my salad dressing at home. You just take a clean wine or whisky bottle with a good cap; pour in about 1 ounce each of cider vinegar, balsamic vinegar, water and wine. You pour in whatever spices you like, then fill the bottle to about 85% with olive oil. The other 15% is shaking room so you can blend the oil and water.

Most salad dressing is 2 or 3:1, oil to vinegar. I like mine 4 or 5:1. I like the dressing to be very thick and cling lavishly to each piece of salad.

I go through a lot of olive oil.

Seamus O'Bròg

I knew that the premium extra extra virgin olive oils are very fine. They do not have a greasy feel on the tongue. They do not have a heavy flavor of olives. They are so fine and superior as to be almost tasteless. ???? !!!!

When I thought about that for a moment, it hit me. Basically I was paying for something that I could neither feel in my mouth nor taste on my tongue. That kind of thing never made sense to me. I don't care how fashionable it may be. Especially since my taste in food is much more of a rustic, Cuisine de Provence sort. I'm not the kind of person who frequents restaurants where they bring you a dinner plate with one bean surrounded by an artful design of sauce. My appetite has much more in common with a farm hand. Not that I can't appreciate modern cuisine. It's just not my thing.

Anyway, as I was first examining the shelves of olive oil, I noticed one brand for under \$7 for a 3-liter tin. Sure enough it said "Olive-Pomace Oil". But rather than extra virgin olive oil, this was pomace olive oil. pomace simply means pulp. I will not tell you that olive pulp oil is the same as extra virgin olive oil. It's not. And in fact, if you look deep enough into it, and you are really squeamish about how things are produced, you might choose not to buy pulp oil. But from what I've seen, the complaints about pulp oil come from its competition. The specific complaints against pulp oil would hold true for anyone who uses extra virgin live oil for frying or sauté.

In other words, olive-pulp oil is entirely healthful. More important for me, it has a bit of the taste of olives, which is lacking in extra virgin olive oil. Also, rather than costing 50 cents per ounce, or 28 cents per ounce, olive-pulp oil only costs 7 cents per ounce. And my evaluation tells me that even if the cost

were the same, I'd still buy the pulp oil because I like the flavor better. This is an 86% max and a 75% minimum savings. On top of a 100% improvement in flavor. How much more of a bargain do you want?

I save \$21 about every 3 months. I carry home the same cans of oil. Now the cans are full of an oil I like better. Over 20 years that comes to \$1680, again, without lifting a finger.

Similar savings are to be found in wine, also without having to sacrifice pleasure or quality. And, while I really don't drink a record amount of wine, I use a whole lot more wine than I do olive oil. And the savings are that much greater.

It's up to you. I can lead the way.

Chapter 1: **What Lit My Fuse:**

For me, this all started a couple of years ago when I read a Consumer Reports article. It was an article rating wines. I believe it was specifically rating sparkling wines in an effort to improve the New Year's Eve experience for the Consumer Reports subscribers.

What caught my eye was that the report rated the \$20 California sparkling wine Domaine Carneros slightly higher than the \$150 French Champagne Dom Perignon!! This really attracted my attention and for the most nefarious of reasons!

Bear with me a bit.

First, to be completely honest with you, the reason the Consumer Reports article caught my eye is that, I would never think of buying a bottle of Dom Perignon. For me, it would be a really stupid thing to do. There's no way I can afford to drink Dom Perignon regularly. Sure I could go out and easily buy one or

Seamus O'Bròg

even a half dozen bottles. But then what? I like fine wines. I mean I *really* enjoy fine wines. I enjoy serving fine wines to my friends and sharing fine wines with my friends. And what would I do when I finished those half dozen bottles? I'd probably have to wait *at least* a year before I could even *think* of buying more. What do I do for that year? Forgo drinking wine? Torture myself by drinking inferior wine while I remember how wonderful the Dom Perignon was?

To me, 6 bottles of Dom Perignon equate to about the cost of a week in Jamaica in the middle of winter. As long as I stay in Montego Bay, I don't have the expense of renting transportation for the week. I can easily manage an air-conditioned hotel with pool, 3 meals a day, cocktails, plus airfare and entertainment for \$900. The trade off just isn't worth it. What? A bottle of wine with dinner every night for 6 days, or a week in Jamaica? No contest. I don't care how good the wine might be.

Second, I've long suspected that most wine is mediocre and that price has nothing to do with the taste or quality of wine. These two facts conspire to make wine selection a vast minefield for those who drink wine. While I'm not trying to say there is some huge conspiracy to defraud anyone, no one in the wine industry seems to have much sympathy for the wine drinker. No one in the wine industry seems to be publishing books on how to find fine wines for a reasonable price. No one in the wine industry seems to be publishing books on how to tell which wines are fine wines and which wines are mediocre.

My public library, which is a huge and well-funded township (not city or neighborhood) library, has nothing listed in their regional, shared catalog under "fine wines". There are only 3 titles under "wine". Amazon has a few books but the one which looked

interesting is mostly “this wine is lighter”, “this wine is heavier”, “this wine goes with chicken”, “this wine goes with seafood” kind of thing.

What is to me most important is that no one seems to be able to tell me what a fine wine should taste like. What makes a wine better or worse? What makes a wine world class? What makes a wine definite garbage? How can I feel confident enough so that if I’m given wine at a wine tasting that tastes like crap, I can say, “This wine tastes like crap!”

That is what I propose to do. In this book I show you what it takes to learn these things:

- How do I save money while enjoying better quality wine?
- How do I learn to tell a good wine from a bad wine?
- How do I learn to tell what wines are really superior?
- How can I tell with confidence when a wine is terrible?
- If I can’t trust advertising, and I can’t trust wine salesmen:
 - How can I find good wines without having to taste every wine in the store?
 - How can I find good wines at reasonable prices?
 - How can I find good wines at bargain prices?
 - Where can I get continuing help pointing me in the right direction?
 - How do I sort all this out?

I don’t find you can have any trust in wine salespeople in terms of selecting wine. This is no knock against the sales force. Salespeople are not getting paid to see that you are provided with the finest wines at the lowest price. They are paid to move product. They may sound like they are trying to serve your interests, but they are trying to make a living. They don’t have

Seamus O'Bròg

time or inclination to spend 30 minutes discussing your individual tastes and requirements just to sell you a \$2 bottle of wine. Think about it and you will realize that in this day and age, a wine salesman doesn't have time to spend 30 minutes on you just to sell you a \$20 bottle of wine. He can barely spend 30 minutes on you if you are going to buy a CASE of \$20 bottles. Can you afford to take home a \$240 case of wine and find out you don't like the wine? I cannot.

Also I don't find I have much success with wine tastings. First, the wine tasting at your local liquor mart on a typical Saturday is just put on by a Rent-a-Demo-Person. It's the same person who was demonstrating the Veg-o-Matic yesterday at Target and the Channel perfume at Saks the day before. They likely know even less about wine than the sales people at the store and it's been my experience that 90% or more of what they are pushing is inferior. I mean really bad. It may be \$10 or \$15 per bottle, but it's usually the bottom of the barrel in terms of quality. That's why they are giving you free samples and pushing you and it out the door. That's the only way they can get rid of the stuff.

At the other end of the spectrum is the wine tasting that's put on by the grower or the bottler or the wholesaler of a particular wine. Usually they have a line of somewhat better wines. The last tasting I went to of this type offered something like 16 different Rieslings, all of the same year. It was a better quality wine, but the selection was too narrow. Of the 16, half a dozen were just different sweetness. Another half a dozen were quality variations of letting the grapes stay on the vine longer or shorter periods. If you keep your cellar stocked with a collection that's so huge you can afford to have six different variations of the same year of the same grape of the same wine this might be of

use to you. That tasting was interesting but not at all practical for me.

My friends think I have tons of room in my home because I live alone in a three-bedroom condo. But how much wine can you cram into an apartment with no basement? 12 to 20 cases will fill up a closet. And when I finally do find a fine wine at a real bargain price, I like to buy at least a case. I want to make the effort of the research worth my while. And if the wine was *that* big of a bargain, I want to make sure that I get at least a case before other people find out what a bargain it is and snap it up.

While I have little room to store wine, I want to have great variety. When the mood for a good wine strikes me, I don't want to have to run to the store, talk to the salesman, see what they have, buy a bottle and play wine roulette. If I decide I want a wine with dinner, I like to be able to think of what I have. I like to pick something I'm already familiar with. I like to know that I can select a wine I'm already absolutely sure I will enjoy.

Not only do I want a selection of wines to go with various foods, I also want to have a glass of something to compliment the moment. If it's late and I've grilled a steak, I want a full-bodied red wine. If it's cold and I'm curled up watching TV, I like a glass of Port. Summers, I like something cool and white. Most of the time I just like a refreshing glass of sparkling wine. It doesn't hurt to stock 6 to 10 different wines for different occasions and it doesn't hurt to have at least two variations of each to ward off boredom of the taste buds. That would be 15 to 20 cases of wine, and that would fill a closet handsomely.

It has worried me that if I publicize this easy method of finding inexpensive, quality wines that these bargains may begin to

Seamus O'Bròg

disappear. I've decided that this is something about which I need not worry.

Fortunately, there are at least two considerations that are working in our favor to prevent supply problems. And naturally if supply is abundant, happily, the price will not soar. The first thing in our favor is that most people know nothing about the taste or quality of wine. They probably know so little they cannot even tell you what sort of wine they like. It's not that people are lazy or stupid; they're just not educated about wine. Nobody has explained things, so for them, everything about wine is just hit or miss. And because everything is hit or miss, they don't remember a thing from one bottle to the next. That's really sad, but that's the way it is for most people. Even the ones who try to appreciate wine and drink a couple of bottles a week just can't keep it together on a regular basis. The world of wine is just too vast and varied. You can't do it on your own. You need help, even beyond the help I will give you. And I'll show you where to find that for free also.

But as I say, this works in our favor. There are many fine wine bargains out there, which will stay out there because they are not recognized as bargains. No one knows that the wine is high quality and so from its price tag it is just perceived as cheap wine.

The second consideration working in our favor is that wine making is a science and most wines are a blend. What this means is that in a great number of cases, if a producer turns out an exceptional wine, he can reproduce his triumph. That is if he has half a brain, and if he has kept good records. Perhaps he cannot reproduce the wine exactly, but remarkably well.

You see, grapes are not just simply grown, stomped, fermented, bottled and sold as wine anymore. The wine industry is just that. An industry. There are wine makers without vineyards and grape growers without cellars and every possible combination in between. Grapes can be grown, crushed, the juice stored and marketed at will. Wine can be made from grapes directly out of a bottler's vineyard. Wine can be made at an operation in the middle of the city, which can buy the raw materials it needs to feed its vats, kegs and cellars.

The wine can be a vintage from a single variety of grape from one year, or the wine can be a blend from various grapes from multiple years. Wine can even be a blend of wines.

This evolution of wine making into a production science is responsible for making fine wine consistently reproducible. Consistently, if not *exactly*, reproducible. The making of fine wine still takes a great amount of artistry, but if the exact ingredients are available to the same artisans at the same facility, very similar results should be obtained. Even if only *similar* ingredients are available, similar results can be hoped for.

So to get back to the Consumer Reports article. My eyes practically jumped out of my head when I saw that they had rated a \$20 bottle of wine higher than a \$150 bottle of wine. While I still don't like to consistently pay even \$20 per bottle, I can realistically afford a couple of bottles of a \$20 wine. I wouldn't want to have to pay that price every time I wanted a bottle of wine, but I could certainly afford to pay that much one time for the experience.

And I could especially afford that price for three, more cynical reasons. Number one, I seriously wanted to taste Dom Perignon,

Seamus O'Bròg

a wine that everyone (in pop culture at least) holds up to be the gold standard of what the best wine should taste like.

Number two; I could learn something from the taste. My palate is reasonably well educated. I am a good cook and can recognize most common spices when I taste them. I have tasted a fair amount of wine and spirits both in the US and Western Europe. I've tasted enough wine to have a clear idea of what I like, what I don't like, and what I find of value in a wine. In fact I've made a bit of wine. I haven't made enough to bother with it any more, but I made enough to understand some of the problems involved. I knew that if I could get a hold of a bottle of really fine wine, that I would not only enjoy each glass, but that I would savor and analyze the flavor with each taste.

The third reason I really, really wanted to get a hold of a bottle of a \$100 class wine was to find out if it was worth the price. If that bottle wound up being just an ordinary wine, or worse yet, that wine turned out to be quite mediocre, I'd know for sure that there was no connection what so ever between price and quality in wine. I'd know that it is all hype. I'd know for sure that the only way to find a fine wine was to buy a bottle and try it and if you liked it and the price was right, you go back for a case. If not, you go back for one more bottle of something else and start all over.

For me, the short answer to the question "Is it worth it? Is it really worth \$150?" is: No. Domaine Carneros, Dom Perignon are all really fine wines. Truly excellent wines. But for me, the fact is that you can find similar, if not identical quality for far less money.

By the way, it's no coincidence that Domaine Carneros turns out to be a very fine wine. Domaine Carneros is the California vineyard of Tattinger, a famous French Champagne maker.

Am I Just Being a Cheapskate?

I used to share a regular Thursday evening bottle of wine with a bond broker friend of mine. He arranged the purchase and sale of bonds worth hundreds of millions, and in some cases, billions of dollars. In general, he could afford anything he wanted.

However, my friend had grown up poor.

One of the things we used to discuss was that there are many generic or house brands of common products which, when you read the ingredient list on the package, turn out to be exactly or substantially the same as higher priced name brand goods. He was almost a fanatic about this and used to bring it up quite often as a way to save large amounts of money on household expenses.

It was an easy system. The ingredient list was always there on the package. All you had to do was read it and compare.

Always, we agreed, there are exceptions and if there was some reason, buying the higher priced item was the way to go. But for most things, there was no difference between the inexpensive and the overpriced other than perception.

On the other hand, there was no convincing him that price was not the ultimate indicator of quality in wine. I think there were two reasons for this. First, there is no handy list of ingredients on a bottle of wine to compare and I think he felt it was not worth

Seamus O'Bròg

his time to search out bargains in wine. Second, I think he was afraid of looking like a piker to his more well-to-do friends if he was less than lavish with his wine dollar.

I can understand this. To each his own. Especially, as I will go into shortly, when it comes to matters of individual taste. If a person uses two different ways of dealing with things in different areas of his life, I can accept this. There is no accounting for taste and personal preference in running one's own life.

On the other hand, if there's an opportunity to save some money and at the same time take advantage of higher quality goods, I am all for availing myself of the opportunity if possible. It's up to you. If you have money to burn, it's your choice. I work too hard for my money. I prefer, at a leisurely pace, to constantly upgrade my shopping skills. All my skills, in fact.

There are many famous wines selling for over \$100 per bottle and there are far more unknown wines of remarkably similar quality and taste selling for under \$10 and \$20. How do you find the very finest wines for \$5-\$20? If you enjoy expensive wines, this book can save you 25%-75% with no decrease in quality. Consumers of bargain basement wines can improve the quality of their wine by 100% at no increase in price.

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