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Appel on Wine: For that same Vino-Mart price, you can get a really good wine

By JOE APPEL

"We don't always realize our potential," Bobby Kacher says. "Great *terroir* has the potential it has, and it's our job to bring it out. But we're all born with a certain potential, just like *terroir*." It's a tremendously resonant statement from a very important person in the world of wine, and it signifies the complex interrelationship Kacher sees among place, people and wine.

Kacher imports monumental wines from Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Alsace, Burgundy and elsewhere, but his everyday wines light up my heart because they bear no trace of boredom, mass production or afterthought, and there simply are no better wines I know of in the \$10- to -\$15 range. To buy some Top 40 hit of a \$12 wine from your local Vino-Mart when there are Kacher wines to be had is borderline criminally ignorant.

"I've always wanted to be judged on my basic level," he told me. "In some ways, there's more work there, it's more interesting, because the microclimates aren't as rarefied."

His winemakers agree: "When you stand in Andre Brunel's cellar," Kacher said, "and taste his VdP ('country wine') Grenache and then his Chateauneuf, you really think, 'Do I see a \$50 difference?' The great growers are going to make great wine at all levels. It's in their blood, their skin, their DNA. He was trained to make noble wine, so he's going to apply what he knows – what he *is* – to every wine he makes."

Brunel Grenache VdP Vaucluse 2008, is \$10! A 3-D model of the real Provence, it's unfiltered and dusty but super restrained. Unlike too much overly jammy, off-kilter modern Grenache, the fruit is so well-integrated and graceful, with an evening-soft finish, violets and lilacs (and Red Twizzlers). It's \$10! It's \$10!

Since the early 1970s, when, like fellow independent-minded wine importers Kermit Lynch and Neal Rosenthal, he hit the backroads of France in search of The Real, Kacher has been bringing natural, handmade, character-laden wines to these shores.

Gournier Merlot is another example of an inexpensive wine showing individuality and presence way beyond its price (\$11). This is a true-blue Merlot in unfiltered, walnuts-and-cocoa glory, spackled with a little mud. The overly rounded-off quality of modern Merlot that allowed "Sideways" to give it such a bad name is absent here, revealing the pepper, violets and life at the varietal's core. It's back-of-the-barn stuff, but graceful still. The 2007 I tasted recently was day-um fresh; the now-available 2009 must be stunning.

Of that wine, Kacher told me, "I've put the Gournier in decanters after a few years of aging and served it to friends, with food that has garlic, thyme, rosemary, and it's amazing how people react they see all kinds of complexity."

He often does that at home, since "It matters so much to me that the consumer has a good experience *at table* when they pour one of my bottles. I often serve a simple Ugni Blanc at home without showing the bottle, and they think it's a grand Sauvignon Blanc."

Ugni Blanc, the main grape in Armagnac, is most of the **Domaine de Pouy 2009**. This is just easy, bright and fresh white wine, as sharp as broken glass and that exciting, rippling with ricocheting citrus. With 10.5 percent alcohol and some *petillance*, it'll gobble-up clean, direct foods from oysters to sauteed greens. **Ten bucks.**

A much weightier, wealthier white is the **Becassonne 2009**, a white Cotes du Rhone (**\$15 to \$16**) that drives deeper every sip. Deep almonds, almost frangipane and earthy to the core. For winter fare like mushrooms, beans, smoked things, saffron and cream, this is what you want. Dazzling finish.

One more: **Le Clos 2008**. A blend of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignan and Grenache, it is the perfect, everyday balanced red wine, for **\$12**. It's peppery, rustic, granular, angular and above all human wine. Soft tannins hang out in the back with the plummy fruit, maintaining order. For heart-filled foods: lentils, caramelized onions, stew.

From the same Domaine, the **Corbieres 2007** costs an extra dollar and brings a foresty spirit. Let it breathe for 30 minutes or more, and the fruit comes together in extraordinary ways, turning in the end to something like roasted beets. It kicks at first, then becomes stately.

All Kacher wines are distributed by SoPo Wine Co. The man himself will visit Portland Nov. 12, hosting a dinner at Havana South.

Joe Appel's day job is doing lots of different things at Rosemont Market and Bakery. His blog, soulofwine.com, continues the conversation, and he can be reached at: soulofwine.appel@gmail.com

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