



The Douro Valley presents stunning vistas (and wines).

The Quality Threshold

A quartet of regions that produce value at their price point.

By Deborah Parker Wong

The world's most prolific wine growing regions produce a considerable amount of what can be deemed to be "value wine" for the on-premise sector. However their greatest assets are often found in wines that trade on more than price alone. Sicily—which has historically been one of Italy's most prolific wine-growing regions—and La Mancha, which occupies the very heart of Spain, are two regions that warrant a closer look for both their abilities to produce wines of quantity and for their recent gains in quality.

At the same time, revered regions like Alsace in France and Portugal's Northern Douro region—best known for its Port production—have both been lauded for quality and wine styles that also continue to keep pace with the demand for value.

While no region goes unexplored as operators continue their fervent hunt for wines that deliver solid flavors and values, many restaurateurs continue to have clear-cut expectations about types of wine they prefer to source from select Northern Hemisphere producers.

Strategies for building sales of wines from lesser-known regions continue to revolve around by-the-glass programs and pairing menus, both of which encourage consumers to experiment and help esoteric varieties establish a foothold in wine programs. While the presence of familiar brand names is often cited by operators as a factor that helps build consumer confidence, there is no substitute for a well-informed wait staff that can expertly guide consumers as they navigate an unfamiliar list.

SICILY:

Quality Gains on One of the Mediterranean's Largest Islands

At 50-seat wine bar concept companion to Quince, Cotonga, where wine director David Lynch sells 70 percent of his wines by the glass for \$10 and bottle for \$40, customers are happily experimenting with mono-varietal wines made from indigenous varieties such as grillo, insolia and moscatel (which was traditionally used to make Madeira). Quince is a 78-seat Italian restaurant whose chef Michael Tusk received the 2011 *James Beard* award for "Best Chef – Pacific," and Cotonga is a casual, rustic Italian, wine bar offshoot. "We've seen a shift in wine style from Sicily over the last few years from international blends to indigenous, mono-varietal reds and whites," said Lynch who sees the shift as a signal of evolution for the region. He also notes a vast improvement in the quality of white wines that in the past were often flabby and oxidized.

In New York's West Village, Joseph Campanale, who is the beverage director and partner at Dell'Anima, L'Artusi and Anfora wine bar has witnessed the same evolution. "Sicilian whites are absolutely getting better; they're cleaner, fresher and more varietally correct." At L'Artusi, Campanale's bottle list menus five Sicilian producers, priced from from \$38 to \$92, with one wine offered by the glass for \$18. The ever-changing lists at Dell'Anima and Anfora typically showcases both reds and whites from one or two Sicilian producers and are similarly priced.

Campanale's three operations may be linked by their multi-regional Italian cuisine, but each takes a different approach to merchandising wine. At the 55-seat Dell'Anima, Campanale concentrates solely on listing indigenous grape varietals along with a short history and description; at 120-seat L'Artusi he breaks the list down by region and includes maps along with specific regional food pairings. He takes yet another approach at the 55-seat Anfora wine bar by going deep and showcasing several wines from each producer, noting that both in Sicily and with Italian wines in general, he tends to focus on local varietals that provide great value."

"Many of these wines replicate styles like Piedmont's Barolo or Barbaresco in their tannin structure and expression; the quality is really there." He menus Occhipinti il Frappato, an accessible, medium-weight wine, he says has tremendous fruit and food friendliness, by the bottle for \$79. Campanale also notes that specific terroirs like the eastern area of Mount Etna, a region that many consider to be one of Italy's top producing, cool climate regions, and command higher prices but there are under-valued wines such as the traditionally made Calabretta Etna Rosso 2001, a nerello mascalese wine that is aged for six to seven years before being released, and the amphora-aged 2008 Nero di Lupo Nero d'Avola which he offers by the glass for \$18.



Anfora pairs its dishes with Southern Italian wines.

DOURO VALLEY:

Expressive Reds Define Portugal's Traditional Wine-growing Region

One quality shared by many of the world's best wine values is their reliance on lesser-known, indigenous grape varieties. This holds true for the hilly growing region that is Portugal's Douro Valley, where varieties traditionally used for the production of Port are producing intensely flavored, finely structured dry wines. Drew Hendricks, master sommelier and wine director for Pappas Restaurants based in Houston, Texas which owns in excess of 85 restaurants in seven states. The operation includes Pappas Brothers Steakhouses, Seafood Houses, Burgers and Bar-B-Q; Pappadeux Seafood House, Pappasito's Cantina and Yia Yia Mary's Pappas Greek Kitchen and has a clientele that favors big, rich full-bodied red wines across the board.



Alsace is home to many food-friendly wine wines.

“We’re always trying to introduce our customers to something that may not be on their radar,” states Hendricks. At the company’s high-end Houston and Dallas steakhouse locations he offers Quinta do Crasto’s entry-level Douro red, a fragrant blend of tinta roriz, tinta barroca, touriga francesca and touriga nacional, by the glass for \$12 and by the bottle for \$48. “Customers who enjoy cabernet sauvignon are only beginning to understand what the Douro region has to offer and by listing these wines by the glass, we’re introducing them to tremendous values that don’t go unnoticed.”

Port houses like Prats & Symington, which produces several Douro red dry wine blends including the Chryseia and Post Scriptum labels from their Quinta de Roriz estate and Sogrape’s Casa Ferreirinha Esteva and the estate blend: Qunita da Leda, offer plenty of quality and value. “These wines are polished,” said Suzanne Lerescu, sommelier at Restaurant Latour, a 40-seat restaurant at the 235-room Crystal Springs Resort in Hamburg, New Jersey, who manages a cellar of 8,000 labels and lists wines

from \$35 to \$35,000. “When we find a good deal, we always extend that value to our guests.”

“There are many occasions when we want a full-tilt, dark-fruited wine that is layered, perfumed and bursting with personality and Douro blends are it,” maître’d Will Costello at Addison in the 248-room hotel Grand Del Mar in San Diego, Ca. Addison’s three-, four-, six- and ten-course tasting menus are priced from \$90 to \$225 and are offered with wine pairings for and additional \$75, \$90, \$125 and \$150 respectively. He lists Quinta do Judeu’s Touriga Francesca blend “Manuel do Talho” by the bottle for \$75. “I’m looking for wines that are inky black and unctuous.” The restaurant’s creative tasting menus give Costello plenty of opportunities for pushing the limits. “There are occasions when we desire a full tilt, gritty and dark-fruited wine that is layered, perfumed and bursting with personality and this wine fits the bill.”

ALSACE: A Sun-Laden Haven Where Wines Have Great Food Synergies

“Alsace is a culturally mixed region and it remains overlooked by the majority of consumers who have what amounts to a phobia about sweetness,” said Quince’s Lynch. His success with Alsatian wines hinges on several factors including the broad scope of the cuisine at Quince and the restaurant’s tasting menu-format which places a greater emphasis on wine pairings than other locales.

“With our four- or seven-course tasting menus priced at \$95 and \$125 [with an additional \$65 and \$75 for wine pairings respectively] there are many opportunities for pairing aromatic whites like riesling and pinot blanc.” Quince’s bottle list offers half a dozen producers from Alsace that range in price from \$42 for the 2009 Schoech Pinot Auxerrois “Vieilles Vignes” to \$330 for a 2001 Trimbach “Clos St. Hune” Riesling.

Lynch believes that some of the best and most consistent value wines from Alsace can be found in the entry-level wines being produced by the region’s biggest names, such as Hugel and Trimbach, while the potentially lesser-known and smaller-production wines of producers like Albert Mann, Lucien Albrecht, Albert Seltz and Domaine Weinbach also represent outstanding quality for value. Lynch lists the Albert Mann Riesling for \$70 and views off-dry whites as the “next frontier” for consumers and sees by the glass and wine pairings as the key to growing consumer awareness of the style.

At the Addison Costello looks to producer Albert Boxler for riesling and pinot gris for rich, focused wines that demonstrate



Sicilian wines sell very well at L'Artusi.

quality and value at under \$80. “What I look for from this region are wines that keep alcohol in balance with fruit, have great amounts of minerality and, generally, a touch of residual sugar.” The restaurant’s tasting menus give Costello plenty of opportunities to cover a range of wine styles from dry to lusciously sweet. He points to the off dry Vin d’Alsace riesling wines from Domaine Rolly-Gassmann for being fragrant and complex with elegant, rich fruit, spice and minerality that list for between \$45 and \$60.

LA MANCHA:

Bottle Aging is a Value Add for These Classic Wines

Indigenous varieties often seem to have the upper hand in one of Spain’s largest wine-producing region as well. La Mancha produces single-varietal wines made from tempranillo and

garnacha and other internationally grown varieties including cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah which are frequently included in blends. When crafted in a modern style and given the additional three-year aging requirement for the reserva category, these wines represent some of the best values to be found in the global wine market. Costello points to producer Telmo Rodriguez for wines that are typically listed between \$30 and \$40 “Rodriguez makes knockout wines from the low end to the high end and never sacrifices on quality. We have had his wine on our by-the-glass list from the day we opened the doors at Addison in 2006.” Rodriguez produces Mano a Mano, a 100-percent tempranillo from La Mancha, one of many wines that Costello says, “is readily available and never fails us.”

Wine values like those sought by Costello serve as proof of the old maxim “you get what you pay for.” With quality on the rise in Sicily and La Mancha and consistently good in Alsace and the Douro, it’s a buyer’s market in these regions for mono-varietal and blended wines that showcase indigenous varieties. ♦

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