



The New Regional Wine Values

Four regions that lead the pack.

By Deborah Parker Wong

Beyond what a beverage director personally determines to be quality, there are few remaining tangible ways to determine the value of wine. Finding the sweet spot—where quality and price are aligned—continues to be a priority for operators who strive to create value in wine programs both by the glass and the bottle. While unfamiliarity can often present the biggest challenge to marketing wines that deliver the best quality for value, food and beverage directors and sommeliers are constantly in search of Old and New World wine values for their programs.

Spain and Portugal continue to be a go-to source of value for several reasons. Many well-priced regions in Spain, such as

La Mancha and Campo de Borja, are historic wine producing regions that have the benefits of being classic growing regions with lower labor costs than many other Old World regions. The majority of these good value regions also cultivate lesser-known, indigenous grape varieties that typically do not command the higher prices of more internationally recognized varieties like cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay. Operators are also looking to emerging regions for authentic wine styles and value.

There are also a handful of standout domestic wine producers who are still able to produce and offer good value wines for on-premise lists. Some of these regions are producing solid second labels; many also have the advantage of also having lower



At Jaleo (above) value wines are a focal point on the list.

operating costs and sometimes benefit from purchased fruit. In the Pacific Northwest, lesser-known regions like the Yakima Valley, midway between Seattle and Walla Walla in Eastern Washington, produce many solid wines at high volume; a dynamic that keeps the relative price to value ratio of the wines in check.

SPANISH REVIVAL

Spain has historically been a solid producer of food-friendly wines by the bottle and the glass. However operators have often looked to better-known—and sometimes costlier—regions such as Rioja and trendy big, red wine blockbuster regions like the Priorat. However other areas of Spain are hitting restaurant lists in a dynamic way.

In his search for wines of value, Marc Sachs hunts for the sweet spot from classic regions. Sachs, who is director of hospitality and beverage at Salvatore's, a regional 100 to 200 seat chain based in Boston with a fourth location slated to open in September, said, "We're seeing some of the best values from Old World regions like Spain that are innovating and relaxing the rules." Sachs often looks to producers from La Mancha and Campo de Borja.

Eighty percent of wine sales at Salvatore's are by the seven-ounce glass, with prices that range from \$5 to \$11. He strives for synergy between the restaurant's cuisine and wine program and he routinely features a selection of lesser-known wines by the glass to encourage experimentation.

Jill Zimorski had been the former beverage director for Jose Andres' Washington, D.C.-based Think Food Group—which primarily features Spanish and Mexican small plate concepts—and is now the wine director for Volt Restaurant in Frederick, Maryland. She had made value wines the focal point of her lists for the group's Jaleo restaurants. The restaurants' shared-plate menus

meant a lower check average and required that Zimorski find quality wines for customers who were not looking to splurge.

"We needed wines that came in at one quarter to one third of the cost of a meal," she said. Her lists emphasized Spanish wines from as many different appellations as possible including La Mancha (located near Madrid), which she cites as delivering some of the best values including those of Bodegas Alejandro Fernandez, a Ribera del Duero producer who expanded to La Mancha. "One of my favorite ways to introduce customers to a new region is to look to a proven producer who has a new project in that area."

Initially, Zimorski offered Spanish wines by the carafe but she quickly moved to a by-the-glass and bottle format, "Seeing wine bottles on the table can be an effective marketing technique, she says. "With the carafes, we were missing the opportunities to upsell and here in D.C., guests are allowed to take an unfinished bottle home with them."

PARTIAL TO PORTUGAL

Portugal has been primarily known for its Port stateside, although many of the country's regional table wines are emerging as unique, great-value offerings. On Block Island off the coast of Rhode Island, Brad and Anne Marthens own the Atlantic Inn, a 21-room Victorian inn that operates seasonally from April through October. Situated on six ocean-front acres, the Inn's 48-seat global, seasonal cuisine restaurant Eli's emphasizes a 3,000-bottle wine list priced from \$35 to \$3,500 and offers tapas nightly on the lawn. With a dozen wines offered by the glass, Brad Marthens cites Portuguese whites including Herdade Do Esporão "V" Verdelho from Alentejo that he lists by the glass for \$8 as one of the best value wines he offers. "Verdelho is a hidden value; it's an easy drinking wine that pairs well with our popular shellfish platter priced at \$49."

With an average ticket price of \$100 per person, Eli's has a deep inventory of Old World classics and a high percentage of bottle sales, but Marthens looks to Paso Robles, Mendocino and Lake county producers for by-the-glass values from California. He lists Steele Federal Hill "Zif" zinfandel from Mendocino for \$11 and Sebastiani Paso Project Red Blend for \$7.

REDISCOVERING CALIFORNIA

Despite the reputation that California has had in recent years for pricey and iconic wines, there are an increasing number of value wines being produced and often in regions that are off the beaten track.

At Brothers and Sisters, a 32-seat contemporary California cuisine restaurant in San Francisco, wine director Carlin Karr looks to Edmunds St. John which sources fruit from Mendocino, Paso Robles and El Dorado County in the Sierra Foothills for their labels.



Ken Wagstaff (above) is wine buyer and manager at Wayfare Tavern in San Francisco, where dishes such as Loch Duart Salmon with Potato Salad and Sea Beans are served (right).



Karr singles out the winery's gamay noir, offered by the bottle for \$33 and by the glass for \$9, as the sweet spot for California value on her list. "Edmunds St. John is producing low-alcohol, higher-acid wines that are bright and lively with floral undertones." Karr lists 100 labels and 20 wines by the glass with wine pairings making up half of her sales. From Spain, Karr features a De Ventura Mencia from the Ribeira Sacra region by the glass for \$11 and at \$45 a bottle.

Ken Wagstaff, wine buyer and manager at Wayfare Tavern, a 100-seat restaurant launched by Chef Tyler Florence in San Francisco, points to Paso Robles producer Foxglove whose value-oriented chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon he believes are ideal for his program. Wagstaff, who lists Foxglove's cabernet sauvignon by the glass for \$10 and by the bottle for \$40, says that, "Their cabernet sauvignon is the perfect barbecue wine, it's all about fruit without lavish oak or being highly extracted." Foxglove represents value for Wagstaff who intentionally crafted a wine list that would leverage what his clientele already knows, in this case, California cabernet sauvignon, and requires less hand selling. "Our approach requires a list that has some familiarity," he said "we want customers to feel at home and we're not trying to teach; the list is designed to sell itself."

WASHINGTON STATE'S BARGAINS

At Elliott's Oyster House, a 250-seat restaurant on Seattle's waterfront that balloons to 400 seats during peak season, general manager Tom Arthur manages a list of 250 wines and offers 35 by the glass, priced from \$6 to \$13. With the restaurant's emphasis on seafood, sixty percent of Arthur's wine sales are

devoted to white wines and forty to reds. He lists Yakima Valley producer Hogue Cellars Chardonnay and Pinot Gris by the six-ounce glass for \$6. "Hogue definitely over delivers for the price," says Arthur, "I routinely blind taste to edit our by-the-glass list and Hogue Chardonnay is a benchmark." Two thirds of wine sales at Elliott's are derived from the by-the-glass program and Arthur markets wines that win big at the local Pacific Coast Oyster Competition, including Hogue's Pinot Gris above the oyster selection on his menu. "I look for wines that are clean and bone dry so they don't overwhelm the oysters."

Wayfare Tavern's Wagstaff sources merlot grown in Yakima Valley from Charles Smith, a former rock band manager turned winemaker, whose tongue-in-cheek second label The Velvet Devil he lists by the five-ounce glass for \$9 and at \$36 by the bottle. "The Velvet Devil Merlot is a soft, spicy wine that's not too tannic; it's ideal fried chicken and burger wine and works well with our braised pork dish. It's a versatile wine that over delivers for the price." He first became aware of Smith's portfolio of value wines like The Velvet Devil and Kung Fu Girl Riesling through the winery's flagship K Vintners wines.

When asked where they will look for value going forward, operators like Karr are keeping a close eye on California's Amador and Lake Counties, "There are talented winemakers working in these regions and I anticipate that we'll see many more artisanal value wines from them in the near future." ♦

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