



# International Wine Cellar

the consumer's passport to fine wine

## Market Monitor

Recent and impending developments affecting the retail wine market:

An atypically cool late spring and early summer in the Pacific Northwest, conditions widely attributed to the effects of La Niña, will result in a better-than-average growing season from Washington down to California's North Coast growing areas. While a summer without extremes of heat can be conducive to producing wine of high quality, it is already apparent that the success of the 1999 harvest in these areas will largely depend on a dry, warm late summer and early fall.

The immediate future for French wine pricing hinges to a great extent on the size of the 1999 crop. Early reports were that vine loads in most important growing regions are plentiful, but the northeastern quadrant of the country has been plagued by a damp summer and resulting mildew problems.

While the prices of top Bordeaux and Burgundy *crus* and boutique California wines reach new highs, numerous categories less prone to speculation continue to offer distinctive bottles at reasonable prices. Among the best places to look for value in today's feverish market: Bordeaux *petits crus* and *crus bourgeois*, especially '98s; reds and whites from France's Southern Rhône Valley and Languedoc; Beaujolais and the Maconnais; Spain's Penedès region (and some Rioja *crianza* bottlings);

Portuguese red wines from indigenous grapes; Australian shiraz; and Dolcetto, Barbera, and a host of wines from the southern two-thirds of Italy.

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## 1998 and 1997 White Burgundies

*Burgundy lovers who bought the '95s and '96s heavily can afford to view today's outrageously high prices with equanimity. On my annual late spring tour of the Côte de Beaune's best white wine addresses, however, it was hard to taste the '97s and '98s without being painfully aware of their record prices. While there is no shortage of excellent bottles from either of these vintages, neither year is outstanding, and it is difficult to recommend any but the top scorers at the current prices.*

*In terms of the style of the '97 and '98 vintages, there are more similarities between these two years than differences, although generalizations quickly*

Good substance and freshness; firm tannins call for some more time in bottle. **88. 1996 Terium:** The top wine of these collars, made from sangiovese and malvasia nera only in the more important vintages, and impressive in 1996. Deep ruby-garnet color. Nose combines marmalade and tar, the latter obviously from high-toast barrels. Round, rich, and sweet on the palate; shows plenty of weight and texture but no lack of velvet or sensuality. **90.**

**Casale del Giglio, Le Ferriere.** This property is more or less in the same area as Ferretti and was founded with the explicit aim of producing varietal wines of good quality at affordable prices. It is a substantial operation, with more than 175 acres of vineyards. The owners seem to know exactly what they want to accomplish, and the house winemaker, Paolo Tiefenthaler, has already demonstrated a very sure hand with the wines; the best bottles have already gone beyond the estate's original objective. (Vinifera Imports, Ronkonkoma, NY)

**1998 Sauvignon (\$19):** Crisp, refreshing, varietally accurate aroma. Grapefruit and melon on the palate, with a slight and attractive touch of greenness. Shows good acidity for a wine from this latitude. **84.**  
**1998 Chardonnay (\$19):** Light, brilliant gold. Peach and vanilla nose with the oak intelligently applied. Smooth and soft in flavor; attractive texture and length. Very well made. **85.**  
**1997 Merlot (\$21):** Deep ruby color. Ripe, sweet plum and berry fruit on the nose, with balanced oak and attractive spiciness. Strong merlot berries on the palate along with a slight mintiness; good volume and texture. Not a heavyweight but everything is in the right place. **88.**  
**1997 Petit Verdot (\$21):** Dark ruby red. Slightly gamey and tarry on the nose and not as expressive as the merlot. Solid, structured flavors; has the intensity but not the complexity of a major wine. Finishes with gripping tannins. **87.**  
**1997 Shiraz (\$22.50):** Sustained inky ruby to the rim. Multidimensional nose of raspberry, blackberry, chocolate and oak. Good weight and solidity on the palate; a wine of noteworthy density. Sweet fruit and mineral flavors. The best of the varietal wines in 1997. **89.**  
**1997 Madrasaiva:** This is the house's most important blend, though the 1994 vintage of Matar Marutua, a combination of syrah and petit verdot, was an interesting and successful wine. A classic, Bordeaux-style cabernet sauvignon/merlot blend. Rich, deep ruby color. Cassis plus sweet rosemary and thyme in the nose; aromas are expansive and delineated. Sharply delineated avors of ripe fruit balanced by light herbs and a Graves-like oniness. Ample and precise; a wine whose class and finesse do not come at the expense of its thrust and continuity. **90.**

**Castel De Paolis, Grottaferrata.** On this ambitious new estate in the hills to the southwest of Rome, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and vigner have been planted in addition to the standard white varieties of the area. For the red wines, there is cabernet, merlot, petit verdot, and syrah. The red wines have been enjoyable but not particularly distinctive, though in all fairness the vineyards are still very young. The whites, meanwhile, have been heavy and too alcoholic. Franco Mabeai began supervising the winemaking in 1998 and it will be his job to work on and assemble the red wines of the 1997 vintage. His first white wines will shortly be on the market.

**1998 Frascati Vigna Adriana:** A single-vineyard selection, with some merlot in the blend. Fresh in color, with some pale gold along with straw-yellow. Ripe, fragrant aromas of apricot and hawthorn. Medium weight; balanced acidity gives crispness and elegance to which the wine's sweetness and perfume. **88.**  
**1998 Seive Vignale:** A well-fermented chardonnay/sauvignon blanc blend. Fairly deep gold color for a young wine. Strong vanilla component on the nose. Luminous but a bit low in acidity, and rather ready for so young a wine. Professionally made but a bit New Worldish in personality, difficult to identify as an Italian wine. **86.**

**Colle Picchioni, Marino.** This was the first producer to demonstrate that a Castelli Romani wine could be something more than a beverage for quaffing. Paola di Mauro has been working with Riccardo Cotarella since 1997 and the wines are now notably fresher and more modern in style. (Winebow Inc., Hohokus, NJ)

**1998 Marino Gold Label (\$17):** The house's best appellation white wine, now with 60% malvasia in the blend. Lightly golden color. Classically spicy malvasia aromas of nutmeg, herbs, and Mediterranean underbrush complemented by the lightest touch of oak. Decent texture and length on the palate, clean and balanced. Much improved from past vintages. **83.**  
**1996 Vigna del Vassallo (\$27):** Cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc along with pinot noir and sangiovese. Solid garnet color. Richly herbaceous but without a trace of underripe vegetal aromas; elegant and wafting. Soft and silky in flavor; solid if not particularly muscular but offers lovely finesse. A real success in a vintage as difficult as 1996 in this part of Italy. **87.**

**Falesco, Montefiascone.** This is the operation of brothers Renzo and Riccardo Cotarella and it is located just across the border from Umbria near Lake Bolsena. Grapes are purchased for the wines, mostly from Umbria but partly from Latium as well, though there is also a small percentage of proprietary grapes from Umbria. Giving the wines an exact geographical origin is obviously impossible, so I have decided to review them according to their mailing address, which is in Latium. (Winebow Inc., Hohokus, NJ)

**1998 Vitigno (\$11):** A blend of sangiovese, cabernet, and merlot in equal parts, and intended as a wine of both substance and immediate appeal. Dark ruby. Sweet and lightly spicy on the nose. Larger in frame and dimension than in the past; good dense fruit and spice, succulent and pleasing. **87.**  
**1997 Montiano (\$30):** One hundred percent merlot and one of central Italy's top wines since 1992. Blackish ruby color. Roasted, toasted aromas are jammy without any loss of freshness. Superlatively sweet in flavor, with a light merlot herbaceousness; precise and delineated, with a texture of noteworthy richness. **91.** I still believe the 1993 to be the best vintage of this wine, closely followed by the 1995, but this is very good indeed.

**Ferretti, Cori.** This new estate, to the southeast of Rome but well beyond the zone where Frascati and Marino are produced, is in an area not known for its viticulture. The owners have the very good fortune to have found one of Italy's top young winemakers, Alberto Antonini, not yet 40 but with a career that already includes stints at Frascobaldi, Col d'Orcia, and Antinori, plus Mondavi and Au Bon Climat. A chardonnay and a basic red blend are both made, but the wine to watch is the cabernet/syrah blend, Colle Amato.

**1997 Colle Amato:** Very dark, almost inky, in color. Warm nose of blackberry, cassis, white pepper, meat, granite and iron. Round, firm and savory on the palate, with good fruit complexity. Nice shape and continuity. **88.**

**Fontana-Galardi, Sessa Aurunca.** This is something of a joker in the deck, since the estate is located in Campania, though just over the border with Latium in the province of Caserta. But the outstanding quality of the wine, along with its unusual character, merits close attention from true wine lovers. The first vintage, 1995, was very good (**89**), and the second, the 1996 (**95**), was, along with the Sagrantino Montefalco 25 Anni of Caprai, the best wine released in Italy in calendar year 1998.

he phenomenal 1997 is shaping up as Italy's best wine in 1999. Winebow Inc., Hohokus, NJ)

**1997 Terra di Lavoro** (\$35; fall '99 arrival): Aglianico and piediroso (the wine once contained some cabernet), with more than a passing resemblance to Monteverrano, though this is Latour to Monteverrano's largaux. Essence of ink in color. Immense, full-throated nose of black fruits, leather, and game. Almost more than a liquid on the palate, more to eat than to drink. And yet the texture offers compelling elegance, with the wine's countless strands and layers shing and overlapping. An awesome wine of unfathomable depth, adises on the palate. Riccardo Cotarella has surpassed himself with his effort. 97.

## Best New Wines from Washington State

A July vacation in Seattle and the spectacular northern cascades was the perfect pretext to visit some of Washington state's top wineries and survey current releases. Or was the mere stuff a pretext for the vacation? No matter. In any case, a major dose of refreshing Pacific air was just what this visitor from the sweltering Northeast needed, even if the arypically cool northwestern summer of '99 has not been quite so enjoyable for the grape growers of Washington and Oregon. It is already clear that the ultimate quality of the 1999 crop will depend on a warm, dry early fall. But it was the '98, '97 and '96 vintages that were the point of my quick tour of Washington's most important growing regions.

**Recent vintages.** There is considerable optimism for the 1998s, and, indeed, the barrel tastings I did in July confirm that the vintage shows strong potential. "It was a hot year, and not ideal for normally cooler sites," explained Quilceda Creek's Greg Goltz, "but at the same time, it was not a year with short hanging times." Lauren Jacobsen, national sales manager for Ridge Cellars, described 1994 as a great vintage, "but 1998 is better than great." Indeed, the best '98s show unusual opulence and density, along with sappy crystallized fruit and a compelling wild berry character and adequate supporting acidity—although at least one winemaker told me that acidity levels in '98 were the lowest to date. If the vintage has an Achilles' heel, it will be in wines made from fruit picked too quickly: many growers harvested early because sugar levels were already high, but in many cases the flavors were not yet thoroughly ripe.

But don't overlook 1997 while waiting for 1998. The earlier year's wines are entering the market with less fanfare but 1997 is a vintage that yielded nicely balanced wines from a growing season Goltz characterized as having offered "average" (i.e., more typical) conditions: "A bit cool but with hanging times." Acidity levels were sound, grape sugars were healthy, and tannins appear to be firm but not excessive. This may be the kind of vintage that gains in stature as the wines age in bottle.

A lot of the current red wine releases are from the hitmare 1996 vintage. This was the year in which a savage January frost wiped out numerous vineyards (the damage was worst in Walla Walla Valley, where merlot and sangiovese were particularly hard-hit), leaving growers who are dependent on purchased fruit—and this group includes most of the state's series—scrambling to find grapes, often from second-rate sources, and driving prices sharply higher. Numerous wineries

clearly compromised quality just to have wine to offer, so there are many disappointing bottles from this vintage. Yields in many sites were tiny, but the fruit that remained ranged widely in quality. The high ratio of skin to juice due to the limited quantity of small berries led to some overly tannic examples. On the other hand, some of the strongest current releases I tasted this summer are red wines from this difficult vintage: these bottlings offer terrific concentration without losing their balance.

**Vineyard and yield control.** Perhaps the most promising recent development on the Washington wine scene has been the realization on the part of an increasing number of winemakers that low yields are the key to making world-class wines. And the key to low yields is controlling one's own vines and raw materials. I asked several winemakers and other Washington insiders what percentage of the state's bottlings come from fruit that is controlled from the outset by the man or woman who makes the wine. They all agreed that the answer was very little, perhaps as little as 1%. But the old mindset is beginning to change, as a number of producers are purchasing established vineyards or buying and planting their own. To cite just one prime example: Gary Figgins of Leonetti Cellar purchased 40 acres of land around his house in Walla Walla and has already planted 12 acres of merlot and cabernet franc. In addition, he has planted several varieties in a superb, higher-altitude, south-facing 19-acre vineyard nearby. Despite the fact that he is in the process of building an expensive new winery and barrel cellar, Leonetti plans to maintain production at or slightly above current levels, replacing most of his purchased fruit with his own grapes to further improve wine quality.

**The bugaboos of new oak and acidification.** While today's Washington State wines are better balanced than ever before, I still find a preponderance of overoaked examples, as well as wines whose excessive acidity (in most cases added) has compromised their appeal. Too often, a high percentage of new oak barrels—often from rather coarse American oak—is still used to mask substandard raw materials. Aging powerful, highly concentrated juice in new oak is one thing, but perpetrating American oak barrels on cabernet or merlot cropped at five or six tons to the acre is asking for trouble.

In my July tastings, I also ran across too many wines that showed a distinctly hard edge. Especially when combined with excessive oak, high acidity has a tendency to produce a rigid texture, and to dry out a wine's middle-palate flesh and finishing fruit flavors. Acidification is certainly the culprit here, but other contributing factors include underripe fruit and phenolic harshness due to clumsy handling of the grape skins.

In theory at least, most of the state's established vineyard sites yield fruit with decent natural acidity—even if growers are now letting the fruit hang longer for greater ripeness. (Most of the state's top vineyards are located east of the Cascades, in the irrigated high desert of the Columbia and Yakima river valleys. Although daytime temperatures during the summer months can be scorching, nights are generally cool, especially during September, which helps the grapes retain acidity.) Unfortunately, however, the fruit-preservation, wine-by-the-numbers philosophy of many of the U.C./Davis-trained winemakers who founded the Washington wine industry has typically caused them to automatically add acid to bring down pHs and give their wines the constitution to be keepers. "But