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Best wines of 2013

Let these great releases of the year guide you through the next one and beyond

December 22, 2013 | By Bill St. John, Special to Tribune Newspapers



I infrequently write about or recommend very expensive wines. They may be worth both gestures, but I feel it is more my [job](#) to help you find wines that you'd enjoy in a regular life, less my job to tease.

Nonetheless, I thought that, nearing year's end, it'd be [helpful](#) to call up the memories of those both tremendously good and very dear wines that I was graced with over the past year as a way, actually, of recommending wines for a normal day.



(Bill Hogan, Chicago Tribune)

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Great wines point us in the direction of what matters in wine overall, whatever the [price](#): one of the world's more delicious crafts.

2009 Inman Family Winery Pinot Noir Olivet Grange Vineyard, Russian River Valley, Sonoma, Calif., \$65

The current release of this wine is the 2010 vintage, but it is the 2009 that I tasted with winemaker Kathleen Inman earlier this year. It's a terrific pinot noir, with spice notes bubbling out from underneath the cherrylike fruit. What's special about this wine, however, is the way it incises — that's the only word for it — through the palate. It's as if the fruit were more a laser beam than a tactile substance.

Inman doesn't pick her grapes "by the numbers." Her grapes tell her when they're to be picked. At harvest time, she goes around the vineyard plucking this or that grape and then feels if the skin still adheres to the pulp. At the moment just when the skin begins to slip against the pulp, she picks. Listening to the vineyard in this way, I'm guessing, is as close as a winemaker can get to letting the grapes hop into the vat on their own.

2009 Coup de Foudre Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, Calif., \$95-\$100

This is one in a stable of wines that a fellow in Napa Valley named John Schwartz has brought to fruition. Others include the three red wines Amuse Bouche, Au Sommet and Vin Perdu, made by Heidi Barrett, and a sparkling wine from the hands of Dick Peterson. This wine comes from winemaker Kent Jarman. The wines [sell](#) from \$100-\$300 a bottle; there's a dry rose for \$80.

What makes them worth this kind of money? Pedigree, for one thing: great grapes from great vineyards and great, some famed, winemakers. You'd expect, at this price and from this place, [working](#) by and large with varieties such as merlot and cabernet sauvignon, that these wines would be perfect exemplars of the "Big Flavor" reds of California, hugely extracted, in-your-face.

Instead, for all their saturation and dark, brooding fruit, they're ethereal, like a 350-pound lineman sprinting down the field seemingly on tippy-toes. The 2009 Coup de Foudre's several fairly prominent features are tied together seamlessly; you know there is so much on your tongue, but it's whispering through.

2010 Bodega Chacra Pinot Noir "Cincuenta y Cinco" Patagonia, Rio Negro, Argentina, \$60

This wine is made from grapes grown at the very limit of a vine's possibility, in one of the driest, most forlorn regions of far, far Argentina, from a vineyard planted in 1955 (hence the moniker). Only someone planting pinot would have gone there then.

It registers at 11.3 percent alcohol, barely squeaking "I am wine." It is diaphanous, like smelling and drinking a bouillon of pinot noir, gorgeously pretty, with lifted fruit that flicks, tricks, teases you back to the glass. It's the old vines, the marginal climate, the skilled, minimalist winemaking; they conspire to send only the edges of the picture so that you may color in the rest.

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2005 Duval-Leroy Blanc de Blancs Clos des Bouvieres, Champagne, France, \$70

I thought it was only pinot noir that could deliver the layered power that is aged Champagne; it's really only chardonnay that can do that. Chardonnay is all bones; you can pile stuff on them: chalky minerals; wafts of toast and dried, candied fruit; pan-browned nuts; those zillions of tiny bubbles clinging to everything until they run dementedly into your mouth for their final pops.

This wine was not this way when it was born, some eight years ago. Time layered on the complexity, hung the tasties on the skeleton's limbs. Only time does those things to great wines, but the bones gotta be strong from the get-go.

2011 Taylor Fladgate Vintage Port, Portugal, \$100

If tasting this wine, it would really be great if you were a parent. This wine is raw promise. It's the most compelling, most inspiring wine that I was gifted to taste all last year, and it is nowhere near out of its diapers.

Many of us will be long gone when the buds of the 2011 port vintage flower open to their fullest in, say, 2050. But it has now what it takes to prove its future beauty happening then: a tarry density of fruit and viscous agglomeration of tannin that is presently already electric. How can so much in a wine be so dynamic, so stimulating? It's mass as line, sleek and long with endless flavor.

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.

Bill St John has been writing and teaching about wine for more than 40 years.

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