



GREAT VALUE WINES

TEXT PETER FORRESTAL

# KEEP THE CHANGE

Maximum drinking pleasure at minimum cost is Peter Forrestal's mantra as he applies simple but priceless tips to track down 20 of the best-value reds for under \$20. The selection is impressive.

It doesn't take an economic crisis to send us galloping off in pursuit of a brilliantly priced red – a delightful quaffer to enliven the midweek spag bol, the Friday night barbecue or the Sunday night stir-fry – but now few of us will be turning our backs on a bargain.

However, just because a wine is cheap doesn't make it a bargain. A wine only becomes a bargain if its quality is fantastic in relation to the price. So it's possible to get great value for \$20 and dreadful value for \$6 a bottle, or vice versa.

Obviously, the more you know, the better placed you are to make buying decisions. So in the tasting notes below, we've told stories about some of the wines and the characters who make them, and

slanted that information so that it helps explain why those wines are bargains.

It is important that you know you like a wine so, in an ideal world, you should taste it before purchasing. Or at least try a bottle before you buy several. Of course, this is easy when buying from a wine merchant but it's a bit trickier when sourcing the wine direct from the producer.

If a grape variety or a region is out of fashion, then it's likely to be undervalued and there are bound to be some excellent bargains. Two grape varieties that haven't been fashionable in Australia (or anywhere) are petit verdot and durif, although both can result in terrific, full-flavoured reds, especially from Australia's

warmer regions, and are worth looking out for. It's also worth searching for newly established wineries or labels that are selling for a good price while they're eager to make their mark. Likewise, watch out for wineries with extensive vineyard resources that have access to sizeable quantities of estate fruit so that they can control viticulture and allocate the best fruit to their wines.

Here we give the heads up on 20 great reds for everyday drinking that have shown quality and consistency over the past three years.

**2006 BLUE PYRENEES MERLOT, Pyrenees, A\$18**

Personally, I'm not a fan of merlot but, *Sideways* notwithstanding, it has such a good reputation as a ripe, seductively fleshy red that I'm always delighted to have one to recommend. It's generally felt that for the most part the wrong clones have been planted and then used in Australian merlots; certainly many winemakers are now working on replacing unsatisfactory clones. Blue Pyrenees senior winemaker Andrew Koerner believes that when French company Remy Martin established the winery in 1963 they planted the best merlot clones. The 2006 is





sourced from the Blue Pyrenees estate vineyard and is dense, powerful and rich with concentrated blackcurrant and chocolate flavours. The neat integration of fruit, oak and tannin makes it pleasantly approachable.

**2004 BULLER BEVERFORD DURIF,  
Swan Hill, A\$12**

Beverford is the Swan Hill label of the famous Rutherglen family, with Richard Buller as winemaker responsible for the operation. The value of the maturation process is perfectly illustrated in this wine, with it now drinking beautifully. This 2004 Durif has all the density of flavour, weight and power you'd expect from the variety and these balance the substantial tannins. There's still surprising freshness and succulence, deeply concentrated, rich, ripe dark-berry flavours and a lingering aftertaste. Time, too, has given the wine a pleasing softness.

**2007 DE BORTOLI DEEN VAT 1 DURIF,  
Riverina, A\$13**

The 2006 was in my top 10 wines for *Quaff 2009* but this is even better. It picked up two trophies from the Rutherglen Show (deep in the heart of durif country), winning gold medals there and in Hobart, and won a slot in the Top 40 at the NSW Wine Awards. Not bad for a wine at this price. For at least the past five years, De Bortoli in the Riverina has been making some of this country's finest budget-priced wines. I think the current crop is the best ever. It's hard for winemakers to get recognition when they are making such large quantities of inexpensive wine, but I'm doffing my hat to senior winemaker Julie Mortlock, to Roberto Delgado who made this wine and Sam Brewer who made the equally good 2007 Deen Petit Verdot. What I love about the 2007 Deen Durif is the way it

combines softness and approachability with the power and density of flavour of the variety. There are some delicate aromatics, even violets, then deep, powerful blackberry and bramble flavours, vibrancy and succulence before a lingering supple finish.

**2007 FRASER GALLOP ESTATE  
CABERNET MERLOT,  
Margaret River, A\$19.95**

Nigel Gallop doesn't do things by halves and only became involved in the wine industry because he wanted to produce outstanding wines. Not surprisingly, he involved Keith Mugford as a consultant during the establishment stage of his Margaret River vineyard in Metricup Road and opted to plant an unirrigated vineyard. Production has been slow and yields low. The winemaker is Clive Otto who made many superb wines in his time at Vasse Felix. This and its more expensive sibling both won gold medals at Melbourne. The 2007 Fraser Gallop Estate Cabernet Merlot shows the quality of the vintage and its origins in Wilyabrup: it is fragrant and rich with bright redcurrant-pastille and cassis flavours, a tight structure and grip to finish. Impressive and approachable now but will improve with short-term cellaring. A bargain price for a gold-medal winner.

**2006 HARDYS OOMOO SHIRAZ,  
McLaren Vale, A\$16**

Arguably our most consistent budget-priced red, this McLaren Vale shiraz has been of silver-medal standard or better every year since its first release in 2001. Hardys chief winemaker, Paul Lapsley, says: "The key to producing high-quality wine at this price-point comes down to viticultural management and obsessive and meticulous behaviour at vintage by the winemaker ... tasting in the vineyard, assessing physiologi-

cal ripeness. This will ensure the best aromas and flavours are achieved in the finished wine." In 2006, the Oomoo has rich, ripe, sweet blackberry, plum and dark-chocolate flavours made more complex by some black-olive notes. There's a succulent fleshy texture and substantial yet soft and approachable tannins in a deep, robust red.

**2006 KINGSTON ESTATE PETIT  
VERDOT, Riverland, A\$13**

It's the sheer seductive fleshiness combined with an incredible density of flavour that makes petit verdot from warm regions so irresistible. Kingston's Bill Moularadellis loves the variety's softness and its fine, grainy tannins. He is so convinced of the variety's future in the Riverland that he has planted the world's largest vineyard of petit verdot, 95 hectares in total. This vigorous red from 2006 is sourced from Kingston-on-Murray, Langhorne Creek and the Murray Darling, and is a great example of the variety at its best: ripe, super concentrated yet soft, showing blackberry, brambles and mulberry flavours, some balanced oak, fleshy, velvety texture and substantial yet balanced fine-grained tannins. It is succulent, powerful and very approachable.

**2007 MCWILLIAMS HANWOOD  
SHIRAZ, Riverina, A\$13**

The Hanwood range has been a strong one for McWilliams because it consistently delivers terrific value for money. A secret to this success has been the policy of blending up to 20 per cent of fruit from premium areas with its Riverina base – in the case of shiraz and cabernet this has traditionally come from the company's vast fruit sources



in Coonawarra. What this blending does is change the fruit profile of the Riverina wine – which tends towards lighter, red-berry flavours – by adding the richer, weightier, dark-berry flavours of the cooler area. I prefer the 2007 Hanwood Shiraz to the previous release (the 2005) because I find the tannins on the 2007 finer and more approachable. It's clean, fresh and vibrant, has lively spicy red-currant, blackberry and dark-plum flavours, and pleasing firmness and power to finish.

**2007 MIKE PRESS CABERNET SAUVIGNON, Adelaide Hills, A\$13**

Mike Press devoted a lifetime to working for the big boys but stepped down as chief winemaker for Mildara Blass in 1998, thinking that he and wife Judy could enjoy retirement growing grapes near Lobethal in the Adelaide Hills. When the big companies refused to pay more than an uneconomic \$300 per tonne for fruit, Press decided he'd be better off making his own wine and finding ways to distribute it.

Winning a trophy, with fruit classified as D-grade by one of the large wineries, proved a good launching pad for the venture. Further show success (three trophies and seven golds for the 2005 reds) with wines selling on the mailing list for less than \$12, suggests that Mike Press can deliver quality wines at rock-bottom prices. The key to Press' success has been the vineyard's 24 hectares of mature vines and his winemaking experience. The wines are made under contract at Cellarmasters, where he employs some of the tricks he's learnt over the years. With new oak at a premium, the cabernet is

rotated so that each batch has some time under the influence of the best oak. Press has chosen to market directly via cellar door and mail order, passing on the distributors' margin to customers in cheaper prices. This is possible because of his reputation, the show record of his wines and lower costs.

The 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon is a soft, round, silky-smooth Adelaide Hills cabernet, much riper than I would have expected, with blackcurrant and mulberry flavours, neatly integrated oak and supple, velvety tannins. It has a concentration and elegance that belies its price.

**2006 OPTIMISTE PETIT VERDOT, Mudgee, A\$15**

This is the label of Sharlene and Steve Dadd sourced from their two-hectare Mudgee vineyard. They face the trials and tribulations of all small producers, in part fired by a commitment to promote the virtues of petit verdot. Steve Dadd says: "We've learned that we need to show enormous patience and some nerve to leave it hanging on the vine long enough for the flavours to really come through. It's always our last fruit picked and usually under gathering storm clouds. The high natural acids and small tough berries, however, help to keep it in shape longer than just about any variety I know." I had seen the wine in one of several tastings for this article and liked it for its density of flavour – blackcurrant and mulberry, and seductive velvety texture, although I queried its sizeable tannins.

**2005 PETER LEHMANN CABERNET MERLOT, Barossa Valley, A\$19.95**

Some people just get it, and the team of

winemakers and viticulturists at Peter Lehmann are a perfect example. They have an approach to making wine that involves attention to detail, rigour, refusal to compromise and a refreshing honesty in talking about what they do, which may well have rubbed off from the great man himself. This was an excellent vintage; the winery has vast resources of fruit and they know how to make the style. If you are looking for consistency, this is a label you can trust. In 2005, it is soft, round and succulent, all too easy to drink with ripe redcurrant, red-cherry and dark-plum flavours, good weight and excellent integration of sweet fruit and oak.

**2006 RUTHERGLEN ESTATES SHIRAZ VIOGNIER, Rutherglen, A\$19.95**

Rutherglen Estates is a large commercial operation with five vineyards totalling 358 hectares in the region. This wine is sourced from a single block of shiraz next to the viognier on the 20 hectare home vineyard, which is approaching maturity now that the vines are 10 years old. The key to making a wine of this quality at this price is the company's access to reasonably priced fruit. Chief winemaker Nicole Esdaile works hard to make the fruit soft and accessible: 48 hours of cold soaking before fermentation helps produce bright fruit flavours. Fermentation takes places at lower temperatures than most and Esdaile uses a lot of aeration to avoid reduction during the winemaking process. This is a rich, ripe and concentrated wine with some floral blueberry notes, dark plum and mulberry flavours, smooth fleshy texture and an elegant tannin backbone.



**2007 SANDALFORD ELEMENT  
CABERNET SAUVIGNON,**

**Margaret River, A\$14**

A lot has been happening at Sandalford in recent years and I can't remember a time when their range of wines has been so consistently good, helped by having access to substantial volumes of quality fruit at reasonable prices. Chief winemaker Paul Boulden has several secrets with this entry-level cabernet. First, the base of the wine is Swan Valley cabernet which is sourced from low-yielding 50-year-old vines. This is essentially dry grown, yields between four to six tonnes per hectare, and gives the wine an attractive, sweet-fruit character. The other surprise with this wine is that 30 per cent is sourced from the company's Margaret River vineyard in an excellent cabernet year. This gives the wine some leafy complexity that you don't expect at the price. The 2007 Element Cabernet Sauvignon is soft, round and wonderfully approachable; medium-bodied, ripe, juicy, raspberry and blackberry flavours with some tobacco-leaf notes. This is succulent, silky smooth and neatly balanced.

**2007 SECOND NATURE CABERNET  
SHIRAZ MERLOT, McLaren Vale, A\$18**

The links with Dowie Doole might be a bit obscure, but at least this new second label is likely to be better supported than Hooley Dooley. Consultant winemaker Brian Light has been around for a while – the self-confessed graduate of the school of hard knocks knows the marketplace and the McLaren Vale – and he produces the wine with the experienced team at Boar's Rock.

They make the wine to fit a price and a profile – they want fruit flavour and soft tannins – and the blending is done with this in mind. In 2007, it was cabernet sauvignon (39 per cent), shiraz (36 per cent) and merlot (25 per cent). Light believes that this substantial amount of sweet-fruited merlot gives the blend a lift.

He accepts that they put more effort into the vineyards than was the case 10 years ago. They only use fruit from mature vines for this blend and have access to cabernet that is 30 years old, to shiraz that is 30 to 40 years old and merlot that is 10 to 15 years old. Much of this wine is barrel matured, which helps the tannins to soften and become better integrated. The six months in bottle has improved the wine, so that it is robust without being over the top.

The 2007 Second Nature Cabernet Shiraz Merlot has ripe, sweet fruit with raspberry, marzipan and licorice flavours, a lovely velvety texture, good weight and very approachable tannins.

**2007 TALINGA PARK CABERNET  
MERLOT, Riverina, A\$10**

The key to Nugan Estate's success, especially its ability to over-deliver on this wine, is the 590 hectares it owns in the Riverina, King Valley and McLaren Vale. This is used for its more expensive Nugan Estate range (under-\$15 Cookoothama) as well as the sub-\$10 Talinga Park. Talented young winemaker Daren Owers has control of the growing and, most importantly, the picking times of the fruit. In 2007, this cabernet merlot, a 60/40 blend was sourced from the Riverina (60 per cent), Murray Darling (20 per cent) with the addition of 20 per cent from cooler Wrattobully. The latter portion adds depth to the Talinga Park and gives it some darker berry flavours. The 2007 Talinga Park has aromatic redcurrant jube, red cherry and blackberry flavours, silky smooth texture and a fine, soft, balanced finish. Great easy drinking.

**2007 THORN-CLARKE SHOTFIRE  
SHIRAZ, Barossa Valley, A\$19.95**

One of the surprise packets of my tastings for *Quaff 2009* was the quality of Thorn-Clarke's entry-level Sandpiper range. Add the proven quality of the well-priced Shotfire wines and the Barossa has a new superstar. The key to Thorn-Clarke's ability to deliver on quality is its 290 hectares of vineyards which allows the company to produce all of its wine from estate fruit. Although the vines are not ancient, they range in age from 12 to 30 years old and thus are comfortably mature. With attention to detail in the vineyard – especially to yields – Thorn-Clarke is now able to produce reasonable volumes (about 25,000 cases) of both the Shotfire and Sandpiper ranges. The 2007 Shotfire Shiraz benefits from being aged in French and American hogsheads (40 per cent new) for about 15 months. It has fragrant vanilla-bean aromas, rich, ripe, concentrated dark chocolate, licorice and allspice flavours, attractive fleshy texture and substantial though elegant, silky tannins.

**2007 TRENTHAM ESTATE PINOT NOIR,  
Murray Darling, A\$12.50**

Finding a pinot at this price that has good varietal character is a rarity. Judging by the past two vintages, the Murphy brothers at





Trentham Estate in the Murray Darling seem to have discovered the secret. Winemaker Anthony Murphy puts it down to a lot of work in the vineyard, especially with clonal selection. They have moved away from the Champagne clones they planted earlier and now rely on NV6, D5V12, 114 and 115 planted on drought-tolerant root stock. In the vineyard, they work hard to get the fruit ripe, keeping it shaded so it won't get burnt but not too shaded so that the green characters disappear. In the winery, the grapes are de-stemmed and cold soaked in a tank for five days to encourage the cherry characters in the wine. The 2007 Trentham Estate Pinot Noir is soft and silky smooth, fragrant with ripe, sweet fruit, intense strawberry and red cherry flavours with a hint of spicy gaminess and a soft, delicate finish.

**2007 XANADU DRAGON CABERNET SAUVIGNON, Margaret River, A\$16**

Xanadu and its chief winemaker Glen Goodall have found their feet after the takeover by the Rathbone group. Production has been pegged back substantially and there's a renewed focus on the Margaret River. Cabernet did particularly well in 2007 and so Xanadu have produced a varietal wine rather than the usual cab merlot blend. Most of the fruit (88 per cent) was estate grown and the wine was matured for 12 months in mostly French barriques (35 per cent new): luxury treatment for a wine at this price point. And it shows. The 2007 Dragon Cabernet Sauvignon has violet perfumes, rich, ripe, concentrated, dark cherry jube and black-currant flavours, smooth fleshy texture and neatly balanced, fine-grained tannins.

**2005 WYNDHAM ESTATE GEORGE WYNDHAM SHIRAZ GRENACHE, Southeast Australia, A\$19.95**

My favourite of the three George Wyndham wines released from the 2005 vintage, with an amazing show record for such a modestly priced red: three trophies from the Sydney and National shows and five gold medals. Happily for consumers, there's six months supply in retail land. It's a shiraz-dominant blend (60 per cent), with that variety coming mainly from the Barossa and McLaren Vale,



plus smaller portions from Padthaway and Langhorne Creek. The grenache is from smaller, older vineyards in the Barossa and McLaren Vale. It was matured in old oak, with chief winemaker, Nigel Dolan, stating: "Never let grenache get anywhere near new oak." Dolan also believes that the 2005 reds are better than the 2006s. The 2005 George Wyndham Shiraz Grenache is fragrant and supple with ripe, deep, blackberry and mulberry flavours, fleshy texture, heaps of power combined with softness and finesse.

use of oak, with a clear emphasis on preserving freshness, and so care is taken in choosing the older oak in which the wine is matured. Likewise, the parcels are chosen so that cabernet's mintiness is not dominant; there is strong shiraz to match and ripe merlot as a counterbalance. The 2006 Wynns red blend is one of the best for a long time: it's succulent with ripe, concentrated, juicy, redcurrant and cassis flavours, attractive fruit purity, silky smooth texture and a fine, elegant finish that lingers.

**2006 WYNNS COONAWARRA ESTATE CABERNET SHIRAZ MERLOT, Coonawarra, A\$19**

The substantial vineyard renovations in which Wynns has been engaged have had a positive effect on the quality of this bargain red. As the company has such significant vineyard resources at Coonawarra, winemaker Sarah Pidgeon has the luxury of having plenty of parcels from which to chose, even for this 50,000-case blend. She has responsibility for a classic Australian red that has been made by the company since 1969 and is the antithesis of a bin-end blend. The elements of the style that has evolved over four decades influence how this wine is made. For example, merlot has been unfashionable in recent times yet it has always been an integral part of the style. In choosing the parcels of fruit, Pidgeon's key criterion is softness. The blend requires the restrained

**2007 YALUMBA GALWAY VINTAGE SHIRAZ, Barossa Valley, A\$15**

Made by Yalumba since the 1940s, the brilliant 2007 celebrates the Galway Vintage Shiraz's 60th anniversary by being named *Quaff 2009's* Wine of the Year. As I considered it the best wine available in Australia for less than \$15, I have to include it here. Yalumba is now performing stunningly in all segments of the market, from cask wines to its super-premium, single-vineyard Barossa shiraz. If you are looking for consistently good budget-priced wines, Yalumba is a safe bet. The Galway Vintage was supervised by Andrew La Nauze through a tricky, drought-affected growing season that resulted in low yields and, no doubt, contributed to the wine's concentration. The 2007 Galway Vintage shows attractive spicy aromatics, rich, ripe, blackberry-pastille, mulberry and dark-plum flavours, velvety texture and a fresh, clean finish that lingers.







- Australian Gourmet Traveller Wine  
01/03/2009  
Page: 72  
Section: General News  
Region: National Circulation: 23462  
Type: Magazines Lifestyle  
Size: 1096.00 sq.cms  
Frequency: Bi-Monthly



