

Turn to Washington for great Cabernet values

Jon Bonné

Sunday, August 9, 2009

It's a tough year for lovers of collectible Cabernet. Flat-screen TVs, cars, all matter of durable goods are seeing their prices slashed, but when it comes to wine there is what you might call institutional resistance.

It's not just that wineries don't want to cut into potential profit. It's the time-honored belief among American wine types that prices are a status symbol: Like upward mobility, they only go in one direction. So wine piles up unconsumed - older bottles in buyers' cellars, new bottles in warehouses.

I suspect if a cash-for-clunkers program was created for expensive wine right now, aiming to wipe away the backlog, the government would be scrambling for another few billion dollars.

What to do, then? You might look north.

Washington has long been a Cabernet outpost for savvy Cabernet lovers, and with few exceptions, the quality for the money from the Northwest right now is excellent. Consider that in light of the unflinching prices on many California Cabernets, even as sales for some wineries are down sharply. Rare is the Cab producer willing to meet the market. If you've seen deals, they've probably been on restaurant wine lists, where discounts can be subtly passed along without moving the needle on retail price.

Certainly Washington's ripe, stable 2006 vintage, which comprised most of our recent panel tasting, offers plenty of value, the only shortfall being bottles under \$20. But between \$20 and \$50, there were many quality selections.

For this tasting, I was joined by Melanie Mancini, sommelier and beverage manager at One Market restaurant in San Francisco, home to an all-American wine list; and by Jason Lefler, wine buyer for Solano Cellars in Albany, whose shelves host an abundance of Washington labels.

The brands included some names known well to Washington fans: Mike Januik, who cut his teeth as head winemaker at Chateau Ste. Michelle, and Jean-Francois Pellet of Pepper Bridge, each made two wines. And it was gratifying to once again encounter Mike Sauer's Red Willow vineyard, one of the state's pioneering sites, another reminder to keep an eye on the western Yakima Valley.

With about 45 wines tasted, the hard part was narrowing the field. It came down more to price than anything else. Nothing in today's recommendations exceeds \$100; all but two are less than \$60.

If there's any criticism, it's that some of the creeping indicators of ripeness - higher alcohols and stewed fruit flavors - that appeared in 2005 could still be detected. But mostly there was an abundance of balanced, well-tailored wines. That's a welcome find at a time when everyone is trimming their buying habits down to size.

2006 Abeja Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$42): A more toast-dominant profile right now than its 60 percent new oak would suggest. But there's cocoa and coffee nuance to it, and a suave kirsch tone amid lots of notably ripe blackberry. Very stylish, but well done.

2007 Amavi Cellars Walla Walla Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$28): A remarkable deal from one of Washington's outperforming labels, made by Pepper Bridge winemaker Jean-Francois Pellet. Clear Cabernet notes of graphite, cassis and sage, with a supple, coating texture that skillfully robes robust tannins.

2006 Andrew Will Ciel du Cheval Red Mountain Red Wine (\$52.50): A polarizing wine that blossomed with decanting. Paprika, iron, loam and ethereal brambly blue fruit, like a wild blueberry patch. Red Mountain tannins are distinct but help bring together an energized, well-stitched effort.

2006 Betz Family Winery Clos de Betz Columbia Valley Red Wine (\$44): Master of Wine Bob Betz has a lesser-known talent with Merlot, which constitutes 47 percent of this blend (along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Cab Franc and Malbec). A touch sanguine, with intense mineral, black olive and a bright blackberry tone. An elegant, soft-spoken effort with a finessed structure.

2006 Chateau Ste. Michelle Ethos Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40): A bit raw at first, with harder tannins dominating. Grows more supple and cassis-driven, with lifted green olive hints. But a stern oak note does remain. Give it time.

2006 Columbia Winery Red Willow Vineyard Yakima Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$30): The sort of energetic, graphite-tinged Cabernet that has made Washington exciting. Lifted currant notes and dry-earth tannins round it out.

2006 DeLille Cellars Chaleur Estate Red Mountain Red Wine (\$75): Subtle, with big cocoa and dust tones atop sappy cherry fruit. A more prominent grip steps forward, with the tannins adding a welcome tension to the generous fruit layers.

2006 Novelty Hill Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$25): One of two wines here made by Mike Januik. More perfume and mineral presence, with softer cocoa notes, glossy blackberry fruit and a leathery definition.

2006 Januik Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$30): A fine, dialed-in effort. Takes a moment to open, but a pleasant smoky tone emerges, with leather and a distinctive earthy hint. Slightly charred blackberries dominate the fruit, with dense, luxurious tannins.

2006 L'Ecole No. 41 Walla Walla Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$39): One of the area's pioneers is in excellent form in this all-Cabernet expression from a mix of some of Walla Walla's top sites. Robust cassis and black fruit flavors are accented by savory pencil lead and olive in a darker-hued, well-proportioned wine. The winery's Perigee blend (\$49) is also excellent.

2006 Leonetti Walla Walla Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$85): Gobs of chocolate and olive-like extract, and an unquestionable sensuousness. Lots of oak in the mix, per the winery's style, but the mineral lift and density give it plenty of complex power. Right on point.

2006 Pepper Bridge Walla Walla Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$55): More muscle and alcohol, though it's reined in with scents of dried tobacco and branches, and a tannin-edged load of cassis. Impressive grip; in need of time.

2006 Buty Champoux Vineyard Horse Heaven Hills Cabernet Sauvignon-Cabernet Franc (\$55): The tasting's standout, this high-wire act of a Cab is packed with racy, dense plum fruit and herbal distinction thanks to 11 percent Cabernet Franc, plus a lovely lilac hint that extends its elegance.

2006 Waters Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$50): Lots of big roasted fruit, with some herbal notes and blocky tannins that need air. Grows more integrated and bright, with a curious hint of celery seed.

Jon Bonné is The Chronicle's wine editor. Find him at jbonne@sfchronicle.com or twitter.com/jbonne, and read his blog on sfgate.com/wine.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/08/09/FDF2193I85.DTL>

This article appeared on page **K - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle