

20 Wines Under \$20: For When the Weather Is Sultry

The needs are different when it's hot and sticky: Lighter-bodied wines, more whites and rosés than reds, refreshment rather than solidity.



By Eric Asimov

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Few things influence the choice of wine as much as the weather.

Food is one, of course, if you think of wine primarily as an accompaniment to meals, as I do. But what you choose to eat often depends on what's happening atmospherically, barometrically and meteorologically — that is, the weather partly determines what sort of thing you want to eat, and therefore indirectly what you drink.

It's not as simple as whites in the summer and reds in the winter, although the balance ultimately tilts in that direction. Many people are still eating foods that call for reds in the summer, but fewer, and eating a greater variety of fresh vegetables and other lighter dishes that will go better with whites and rosés.

More important than the color of the wine is its weight. Regardless of red or white, I'm looking for lighter-bodied wines, just as the heavier stews and casseroles have been set aside for now in favor of lighter preparations. Wine is food, too.

That is why, when I went wine shopping in New York for a late-summer edition of 20 under \$20, I ended up with 14 whites and rosés, and just six reds. That felt seasonally proportional, at least for me.

The bottles I found came from nine countries. I could have added more, as I also tried delicious wines from Armenia, Cyprus, Croatia, Austria, Argentina and Australia. I didn't include those bottles because they seemed to be available only in New York City, but I mention them as an indication of how the wealth of wonderful wine options continues to expand.

Not that all the wines I am recommending will be available everywhere. Most of these wines are produced in small quantities, and because of the fragmented nature of America's distribution system for alcoholic beverages, some will be available in some parts of the country, and others elsewhere.

Regardless of whether you can find these particular bottles, you will give yourself the best chance of finding equally satisfying wines if you do two things:

First, you need to find the best wine shop in your area. It may be less convenient than a trip to the supermarket. But you will be rewarded by a far better selection of bottles, chosen by people who care about wine, rather than shelves stocked largely with processed wines and other mass-market products.

Second, as I have argued for many years, the best values in wine are in the range of \$15 to \$25. You can certainly find good wines for under \$15, but they are far fewer, and often less inspirational, though certainly enjoyable.

Many people have taken issue with me, asserting that they are perfectly happy with the wines they buy for less than \$10, even less than \$5. To which I say, that's great. If you are happy, that's all that matters. But we have the same kind of choice we do when shopping for food: spending less for industrially raised meats and chemically farmed produce, or paying a little more for ingredients that were grown or raised conscientiously, and with more flavor and texture.

These are individual choices, often a matter of priorities and budgets. I choose to spend a little more if it gives me a better chance of drinking wine that expresses a place and a culture, made from grapes farmed in a sustainable manner by people who are treated well. Spending \$20 won't guarantee a bottle that meets those goals. But spending \$5 pretty well assures bottles that will not.

Many of these 20 bottles are new to me. A few are old friends that I've written about before but that still fit into that \$15-to-\$20 range. Here they are in no particular order, along with the price I paid for them.



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Aphros Vinho Verde Loureiro 2020 \$18.96

Aphros is one of the more interesting of the new wave of producers in Portugal. All of its farming is biodynamic. Bottles that are labeled “Phaunus” tend to be more experimental, fermented in amphorae and cloudy in the glass, for example. I’ve very much enjoyed those wines. Others, like this Vinho Verde, seem more conventional, though they are uncommonly pure and delicious. This white, made entirely with the loureiro grape, is crisp and dry, with aromas of flowers and refreshing citrus flavors. (Skurnik Wines, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Rekalde Getariako Txakolina RK Rosé 2020 \$19.96

In warm weather, I can never get enough Txakolina, the leading wine of Spanish Basque Country. This is a Getariako Txakolina, from the area around the town of Getaria, where the wines are known for their light natural carbonation. The RK is one of a growing number of Txakolina rosés, a category that more or less did not exist until 10 or 15 years ago, when Ameztoi’s Rubentis rosé became highly popular in the United States. This bottle — produced by Hiruzta Txakolina, largely for the American market — is tart and refreshing, gently spritzy, with chalky flavors of citrus and red fruits. (Summit Selections, Staten Island, N.Y.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Van Volxem Mosel Riesling “VV” 2018 \$16.80

Van Volxem is an ambitious estate on the Saar, a tributary of the Mosel and an area known for wines that are both delicate and complex. This entry-level bottle is nearly dry, with just a small amount of sugar remaining from fermentation to add a bit of roundness and depth. It’s deliciously tangy and stony on the palate, with flavors of peach and citrus. (Vintus, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Domaine Filliatreau Saumur Lena Filliatreau 2019 \$19.96

Domaine Filliatreau, a large estate in the Saumur region of the Loire Valley, farms organically and biodynamically. It makes a wide range of whites and reds. The Lena Filliatreau cuvée, named for the wife of the proprietor, Paul Filliatreau, is entirely chenin blanc and an excellent value, fresh and floral, with a touch of honey and chalky mineral flavors. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Folk Machine California White Light 2019 \$18.99

Some wines have cute animals on their labels. Others have pastoral scenes, or a drawing of a chateau. This wine has a bunch of light bulbs, fitting for a wine that's all brightness and light. It's an unlikely blend of tocai friulano from Mendocino, riesling from Arroyo Seco, verdelho from Suisun Valley and sauvignon blanc from Potter Valley, that's brisk and lively, with floral and herbal aromas and flavors. Folk Machine, a label from Kenny Likitprakong's Hobo Wine Company, specializes in moderately priced, easygoing bottles that are nonetheless interesting. You can never have too many of those.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Mountain Tides Wine Company California Petite Sirah 2019 \$17.74

I've never really grasped the appeal of the petite sirah grape. It has a long history in California as part of mixed black vineyards, in which different grapes were grown and fermented together, each adding particular characteristics to the blend. Petite sirah's contribution was a deep, dark color and firm tannins. It works in blends. As a varietal wine, petite sirahs are conventionally dark and tannic, even if not particularly alcoholic, and rarely interesting to me. Mountain Tides, a husband-and-wife team, took it on itself to offer what it called a new perspective on petite sirah. It makes an array of organically grown, single-vineyard wines, which I haven't seen, along with this bottle, made from a combination of sites. It's intended to be fresh and delicious, and it is. The tannins have been tamed, though the wine is structured. It would be great with a grilled skirt steak.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Henry Fuchs Alsace Pinot Blanc Auxerrois 2019 \$17

Pinot blanc gets top billing on this bottle's label, but auxerrois is the dominant partner, making up 95 percent of the blend. It's confusing to say the least, as "pinot blanc" in Alsace can refer both to the grape and to a blend. In fact, Alsatian wines labeled "pinot blanc" can theoretically be 100 percent auxerrois. Well, how often do you have the opportunity to drink a wine that's 95 percent auxerrois, especially auxerrois from an organic grower like this estate? It's dry and rich, floral and slightly honeyed. I would drink this with roast chicken or sautéed pork chops. (Peter Weygandt Selection/Weygandt-Metzler, Unionville, Pa.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Aslina by Ntsiki Biyela South Africa Chardonnay 2020 \$19.96

Last year I wrote about Aslina's cabernet sauvignon and mentioned that Ntsiki Biyela, the proprietor, who happens to be South Africa's first Black female winemaker, also made a terrific chardonnay. Well, here it is: It's straightforward yet lovely, with energy, focus and subtlety, a modern chardonnay made with care and precision, without any of what the French call maquillage, unnecessary makeup to hide its true face. (Wines for the World, Dover, Del.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Loxarel Clàssic Penedès Sànicer Brut Nature Reserve 2016 \$15

Several efforts are underway to differentiate conscientiously produced cava from the run-of-the-mill stuff that dominates the category. The Clàssic Penedès appellation is one of them. Those producers under this classification must make their own wines, instead of buying them. If they grow grapes, they must farm organically, and the wines must be aged at least 15 months after the initial fermentation. Loxarel farms biodynamically, and makes this wine with the three classic cava grapes, parellada, macabeu and xarelló (of which Loxarel is an anagram). For a \$15 wine, this bottle has great delicacy and finesse. (Classic Wines, Stamford, Conn.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Celler Credo Penedès Miranius 2019 \$18.99

Speaking of xarello, Recaredo, in addition to being one of the top cava producers in Catalonia, dedicated to conscientious, biodynamic farming and meticulous production, is also an ardent proponent of xarello, perhaps the key component of the best cavas. Under the Celler Credo label, Recaredo makes a series of still wines that show off the subtle qualities of the xarello grape. Miranius is the entry-level bottle. It's brisk and fresh, yet richly textured, with dry, stony, lightly honeyed flavors, and it's just 11.5 percent alcohol. "Even we don't know the limits of this grape," Ton Mata, whose family owns Recaredo, told me in 2014. (Rosenthal Wine Merchant, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Ampeleia I.G.P. Toscano Rosso Unlitro 2020 \$19.99/1 liter

I love this wine. I wrote about the 2018 vintage last year, but it's well worth revisiting. This bottle, from the Tuscan coast, is a blend of alicante nero, as grenache is called in that area, with mourvèdre, carignan, sangiovese and alicante bouschet. The blend doesn't seem particularly Italian, yet has a specifically Tuscan quality of sweet-bitter earthy, cherry flavors. It's fragrant and graceful, and would take well to a light chill. (Bowler Wine, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Ktima Tselepos Mantinia Moschofilero 2019 \$16.96

Mantinia, in the Peloponnese region of Greece north of the city of Tripoli, is particularly known for its moschofilero, an unusual grape that, like pinot gris, is more accurately called pink rather than white. Indeed, as you pour this wine out, a tinge of pink shines through the otherwise pale yellow color. Despite the lush, rich texture, it is well focused, full of refreshing floral, herbal and citrus aromas and flavors. It's just right for a seafood dinner. (Cava Spiliadis, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Maison Noir Oregon Love Drunk Rosé 2020 \$19.96

After achieving one of the top jobs open to wine servers — head sommelier at Per Se in New York — André Hueston Mack left restaurants to become something of a serial entrepreneur, with food and wine shops, a book and a wine brand, Maison Noir. This rosé is mostly chardonnay with 23 percent pinot noir, a blend you rarely see outside of Champagne. Regardless, it's delightful, straightforward and bright, not complex but definitely a feel-good bottle.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Brand Pfalz Riesling Trocken 2019 \$16/1 liter

The Brand brothers, Daniel and Jonas, make terrific wines in the unfashionable northern reaches of the Pfalz region of Germany. They are also great values. I can't imagine a better \$16 bottle of riesling than this one — it's an entire liter of dry, stony, tangy, herbal deliciousness, made from young vines of organically grown grapes. (Vom Boden, Brooklyn, N.Y.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

ColleStefano Verdicchio di Matelica 2020 \$17.96

I've become a big fan of Verdicchio di Matelica, and of this wine in particular. The Matelica zone, in the Marche region of Italy, is farther inland and higher in elevation than the coastal Castelli di Jesi zone, a better-known area for verdicchio. This wine, made from organic grapes, is strikingly energetic, with whiplash acidity and saline, mineral and herbal flavors. It would be superb with numerous summery pastas, whether white clam sauce, pesto or fresh tomatoes. (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

A Los Viñateros Bravos Itata Volcánico País 2020 \$17.99

A Los Viñateros Bravos consistently makes excellent wines from old vineyards in interesting terroirs, generally in the Itata region of Chile. This bottle is made with país, better known in the United States as mission, planted around 1900 in volcanic basalt soils. It's earthy and mildly tannic, with deep, intriguing flavors of red and black fruits. I would love this with burgers or ribs. (Ripe Wine Imports, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Vincent Paris Sélection Vin de Pays des Collines Rhodaniennes Syrah 2019 \$16.99

The Collines Rhodaniennes area essentially corresponds with the Northern Rhône Valley, home to storied appellations like Côte-Rôtie, Hermitage and Cornas, among others. So why would anybody use the Rhodaniennes designation? Several reasons. It might be that a producer is using a grape, like gamay, not permitted in the appellations. Or maybe, as in this case, it's a wine from young vines — easy, delicious and affordable, but maybe not representative of the appellation terroir. Vincent Paris is a stalwart Cornas producer who also makes wines from a few other areas. This bottle, from young Crozes-Hermitage vines, offers all the savory deliciousness of Northern Rhône syrah without requiring aging or much thought. Drink and enjoy. (Polaner Selections)



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Villa Sant'Anna Chianti Colli Senesi 2017 \$18.96

I've been focused on Chianti Classico the last few years, and it's easy sometimes to forget that the Classico zone is just part of the greater Chianti region. The wines from outside Classico vary widely, but sometimes you find a gem, like this bottle from Chianti Colli Senesi, south of Classico between the towns of Siena and Montepulciano. It has typical cherry flavors, with bright acidity. Wines like this need food, whether red meat or pasta with tomato sauce. Villa Sant'Anna is part of a larger farming operation run by Simona Ruggeri Fabroni and two daughters. (Rosenthal Wine Merchant)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Muga Rioja Blanco 2019 \$17.96

Some of the most glorious and singular wines around are the old-school white Riojas from López de Heredia, aged in old oak vats for years before they ever leave the winery. This wine from Muga, an excellent producer that does both traditional and modern very well, is not like that. It's a more contemporary expression, made with the usual grapes, viura, garnacha blanca and malvasia, and it's highly satisfying: rich, bright and lively, with floral and citrus aromas and flavors. (Fine Estates From Spain, Dedham, Mass.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Broc Cellars North Coast Love Red 2019 \$19.96

I've written about Broc's Love Red before, but this is a different Love Red. That's because bottles that are intended to be moderately priced and easygoing rather than an expression of a particular terroir cannot always rely on the same vineyard, especially when, like Broc, they don't own their own vineyards. When prices for grapes rise too much, or other obstacles present themselves, they find another source. The 2019 is primarily carignan, as was the 2018 I also wrote about. But where the '18 was blended with valdigué and syrah, the '19 adds zinfandel with a little grenache. It's a slightly different wine, but a similar result: a light and lively red that is delicious and refreshing. It will take well to a light chill.

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