

Economy Uncorked

Sleuthing out the recession-proof wines

I ambled into the office to find Mole in a mope. For those who don't know, Mole is my pal/sidekick here at Investigations (tho' I sometimes wonder who's the side and who's gettin' the kicks). Thing is, Mole's one of the merriest guys in the world, most times. Sure, hurt a child — like the monster who zapped a 16-month-old with a stun gun — and Mole morphs into a raging nutcase, but usually he's a gangsta of love, Cupid's cousin, even looks sorta like Cupid, but extra-large. We call him the Round Mound of Merlot 'cause he's round and fully packed with sweet, juicy flavors and sometimes seems kinda simple, but he's not.

So Mole in a mope makes me worry, and this was clearly a full, fuming fret, complete with banging beakers and slamming cabinets in our tasting lab. I strolled in, smiling, arms akimbo, ready to dispense a hug (not something I do often or well), piped a cheery note: "Hey, hey, what's all the trouble, bubba?"

We're not sure of the stats, but guess that thousands are maimed annually by flying corks.

He stopped, turned to me. His big, round baby-blues looked misted. His lower lip quivered. He spread his arms, hands open, a gesture that swept the whole room, croaked, "Sleut', I t'ink mebbe weah done, outta da biz, finito, kilt, morto."

"Wha'?" I responded, therapist-style, helping him find his direction.

"It's da Bushie economy. Da dollah's in da terlet 'n wine's jes gonna be fer da rich peeps again. Lookit." He held up a trade sheet, wines and prices. "Useta be we'z could get nice Italian fer OK bux? Now? Good barbaresco, \$325. Swell Barolo, shuah, but \$1,400? Decent Burgundy, white 'r red, 90 bux. Even Oregon pinot noah, at least 30 bux. Reg'lar peeps can't have none when deah ticketed like dis. What're we gonna do, Sleut'? We gonna staht pimpin' vinos fer da swells?"

Ouch. He was right; in fact, I had some other numbers that added to the bad news — domestic prices ratcheting up behind inflated oil and gas prices, a shrinking economy, the specter of recession. I bit my tongue, tipped my fedora back on my head, gripped his shoulders, willed sincerity into my peepers, assumed my best motivational-speaker voice, laid it on: "Nah, pal, we're not done for, just taken some shots. When the goin' gets tough, whatta the tough do?"

"Dey get goin'," he responded, on cue. "We don't just work harder..." "We works smahta." "Noses to the grindstone!" "Shouldas da wheel!" "Life gives us lemons..." "We makes limoncella!"



Whew. Mole was rollin', for now. We pulled some corks. A Valentine report:

Tough times demand careful shopping, checking oddbins and closeouts, looking in all the strange places where wine lurks. We won't find the "greatest wine in the world" at affordable prices, but we can trip across tasty bargains. Tucked away on a supermarket shelf, we spot decent pinot: **Lindeman's 2007 Pinot Noir Bin 99** is fresh, simple pinot noir with a nice raspberry center, good balance. From Australia, it won't set off bells and fireworks in pinot-world, just drinks easy and goes home for \$7.99.

Trader Ho has smart buyers with good feel for the common palate and pocketbook (why they've made a zillion bux on Three Buck Chuck). **Trout Trilogy 2003 Merlot** comes from good land, the Horse Heaven Hills of the Columbia Valley: good, deep color; round, ripe flavors of dark cherries with a coffee note; pleasant, food-friendly, easy sippin', all in a \$9.99 jacket. Label might seem goofy, but it honors the Big River's dwindling trout, nice, green sentiment.

PC/MoC is closing out **Gerard Metz 2005 Pinot Blanc**, from Alsace, at mere \$10.99, probably making room for the new vintage, so we might just see a few remaining bottles at this ticket. Still, this is serious good juice. Pinot blanc's just coming out of the shadow of chardonnay, but this dry white can be surprisingly versatile, fit for a wide spectrum of food. The Metz version offers a creamy mouthfeel and juicy pear/apple/quince flavors, slides right down.

The Basque region of Spain has long been a vortex of political ferment as some Basquos want independence from Spain. A recent cease-fire has eased some of the strain, enough for Basque wines to enter the world market and stir consumer curiosity. **Xarmant 2006 Txakolina** (closest pronunciations I've found would be something like shar-MONT CHOC-o-lee) is a pretty little white wine, low in alcohol (11.5%), crisply acidic, slightly spritzzy, with elusive flavors (tangy apple/mineral meld), there and gone. Served with a halibut stew, txakolina stood up like a little soldier. Might need help finding it; the mo-derne label is almost unreadable (tho' kinda cute), but we get a palate-expanding experience for \$12.49.

Last note, Lovers' Day bubble bargain: From New Mexico (I swear), **Gruet Brut** has the fine bubbles and crisp apple flavors we want for tasty toasting, and for \$14.95 it's a steal. Temperature note: cold preserves the bubbles but too cold costs on flavors, so serve cold but not frozen. Opening note: While loosening the cage, keep your thumb on the top of the cork. We're not sure of the stats, but guess that thousands are maimed annually by flying corks (kidding — sheesh).

That's our word from the icy grip of recession-ridden winter. Mole and I hope you have someone sweet near you and "youse can cuddle, be warm, sip good wine." **EW**

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