

TAUNTON DAILY GAZETTE

Wine Talk: Great value in summer bubbly

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In a perfect world, we would spend our summer afternoons refreshing and reviving the palate with a glass or two of fine champagne. The problem with that picture is the bar tab. For many, champagne is a luxury not to be indulged on a daily basis because the cost is prohibitive.

There are numerous alternatives that are nearly as satisfying at a fraction of the cost. The following are but a few suggestions that help you stay cool through the dog days of summer without draining your wine budget.

Cava: This is the top tier of sparkling wine from Spain and must be made using the "champagne" method, with a second fermentation, to be labeled cava. Most cava is produced in the Catalonia region of northeastern Spain from a variety of grapes, including parellada and xarel-lo. The Spanish cava producer Freixenet is in fact the largest sparkling-wine producer in the world. Cava is lighter and less complex than champagne, though there are exceptions. Most cava retails for less than \$20 a bottle, and much in the \$10 range. A well-made cava will be crisp and refreshing.

Prosecco: This Italian bubbly has enjoyed a renaissance of late and is growing in popularity in the United States due to both quality and tremendous value. Prosecco DOC is made in the Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia regions of northeastern Italy. It is produced around the areas of Valdobbiadene and Conegliano. Style varies from brut to extra dry, with extra dry being slightly sweeter. Two favorite producers are Biondi Santi and Adami, which reside at the most expensive end of the prosecco hierarchy. But Bolla also makes delicious prosecco that retails for less than \$15.

Blanquette de Limoux: There is considerable evidence that Limoux, in the Languedoc region in the south of France, was the birthplace of sparkling wine. Legend has it that Dom Perignon stopped to rest at the Abbey Saint-Hilaire, near Limoux, as he made his pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. It was there that he found the monks making sparkling wine from the local mauzac grape. A second fermentation, Cremant de Limoux, is made from chenin blanc and chardonnay grapes. The delicious Saint-Hilaire Blanquette retails for less than \$20 a bottle.

Domestic bubbly: Sparkling wine in the United States has improved dramatically as a category over the past decade, with now being made in upstate New York (Chateau Frank) and Long Island (Sparkling Pointe). While both are quite good, neither has the value I would look to California, where the vast majority of domestic sparkling wine is produced. The top producers, of course, that rival champagne in price, but also do a very good job at the entry level. Two that are reliably good and fairly priced are J. & B. Valley Brut Prestige (\$18 average price at Wine-Searcher.com) and Gloria Ferrer Brut (\$17 average price). And if those prices seem steep for everyday sipping, the Korbel Brut Rose (\$10 average price) is one of the best at that price point.

TASTING NOTES

Wines are rated on a 100-point scale. Wines are chosen for review because they represent outstanding quality or value, and simply as a measure of this reviewer's enthusiasm for the recommended wine.

Bella 2010 Zinfandel "Barrel 32," Sonoma County (\$55) -- Having been a harsh critic of modern zinfandel, with its overripe, jammy flavors, it's only fair that I stand up and applaud when a modern zin knocks it out of the park, as "Barrel 32" does. This is a stunning wine made in limited quantities from the best barrels of zin culled from each vintage's production. Only 170 cases were made, hence the hefty price tag. The wine is well worth it. Silky and seductive on the palate, it shows remarkable length, with spicy wood notes, beautifully integrated tannins and a touch of minerality that complements its absolutely delicious character. Rating: 96.

Sbragia 2012 Sauvignon Blanc, Dry Creek Valley (\$20) -- To my way of thinking, the brilliant winemaker Ed Sbragia has shown his appreciation for sauvignon blanc. When making all of those wonderful cabernets, chardonnays and merlots that were his specialty, the longtime winemaker at Beringer Vineyards, Ed went for a fairly strong oak barrel influence when he worked with sauvignon-based wines at Beringer were very good, but I much prefer the lighter oak footprint Sbragia shows with his own wines at Dry Creek Valley. This vintage exhibits a delicious and inviting note of white peach, with tropical and citrus nuances, and is

with good weight on the palate and a long, lingering finish. Well done, Mr. Sbragia. Rating: 92

Bella 2010 Zinfandel, Maple Vineyards, Dry Creek Valley (\$38) -- The richness and weight of Bella's Maple Vineyard are impressive considering the ripeness and alcohol by volume (less than 15 percent) are modest by modern zin standards. This complex layers of red and black fruit, with that much-sought-after "brambly" quality found in many top zins. It's spicy, smooth, balanced, with structure that is firm rather than fat, making it that slightly rare zin that is versatile with an array of culinary with roast chicken or grilled leg of lamb, and enjoy. Rating: 91.

Balverne 2012 Rose of Sangiovese, Chalk Hill (\$20) -- With its pale color and subtle fruit, Balverne's rose of sangiovese essence of the fine but delicate rose wines produced in the south of France, where sipping rose on a summer afternoon is all. New World rose tends to be more intense and darkly colored, but winemakers Margaret Davenport and Doug Nalle exercise restraint with this delicious rose from Sonoma County's Chalk Hill district. Rating: 88.

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