

Pros' guide to bargain shopping

With \$70 in hand, 3 sommeliers scour the shelves for a week's worth of wine and then share their secrets

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It had been nearly an hour in the aisles of Cost Plus World Market, a stone's throw from Fisherman's Wharf, and Christie Dufault was starting to get anxious. A Coppola Black Label Claret had been added to the cart, tentatively. A 2006 Muscadet looked promising, but not promising enough.

Getting tense as minutes ticked on, Dufault gazed at a bottle of Relax Riesling. Nope, not quite right.

"This is harder than I thought," she said.

The Claret went back on the shelf.

It's once again time for The Chronicle Wine section's Bargain Bonanza, and Dufault, wine director at San Francisco's Quince restaurant, was one of three volunteers who took up my challenge: Buy a week's worth of wine (at least seven bottles worth) from supermarket aisles for \$70 or less (before taxes), an average of \$10 per bottle, without topping \$15 for any single wine.

In the past, we've rooted out top values and sung their praises. But in the seven months since our last Bonanza, even the Bay Area has encountered some reasons to pinch pennies. Mortgages have been dissolving like a cork in a 19th century Bordeaux. The economy is as flat as 4-day-old Asti Spumante. So it seemed like a good time to think about the process of deal-hunting, not just the end result.

To truly drink well on a dime, you need to use your wits. Bargain wine is really about strategy, in which case, who better to help discuss strategy than sommeliers? You might think these folks get paid to buy wine, but more pointedly, they get paid *not* to buy wine - holding out to find the stuff that

people will actually drink.

So I asked three prominent sommeliers to try their hand at drinking well on a budget. Dufault serves highly allocated Burgundies in a refined Pacific Heights setting. Scott Tracy, wine director for La Toque in Rutherford, hunts down the best from his Napa Valley backyard for innovative wine pairings. Jonathan Waters, wine director for Chez Panisse in Berkeley, prefers wines with the same sustainable, small-farm values embodied by restaurant founder Alice Waters (no relation).

Our goal was not only to find enough wine to last a week - one bottle per night seemed like plenty - but also to strategize about how to stretch a variety of wines across a week's worth of meals. That meant wines could be used over multiple days, if we thought they'd last that long. It also required our three accomplices to think about how the week would unfold. Do you start with easy-drinking whites and save the hearty reds for a weekend barbecue?

Using the actual retail prices found on the shelves, each found plenty to fill their shopping cart. I took Waters to Berkeley Bowl, where he sought out wines that echoed the types of honest, small-production bottles he prefers for Chez Panisse. After choosing seven, he had nearly \$10 left over and happily added an eighth. I brought Dufault to Cost Plus, where she offered an object lesson in the wine-aisle equivalent of window shopping before settling on seven bottles, with enough cash left over for a couple bottles of beer. Tracy agreed to meet me at one of Napa's less glitzy destinations: Trader Joe's, where he managed to cart away an impressive nine bottles without breaking the bank or falling back on Two Buck Chuck.

A few common themes reverberated.

Everyone chose a sparkling wine - and all were among the winners in their lineups, further proving a lesson I learned in college and never forgot: Even cheap bubbles are a hit.

Despite a proliferation of mass-produced Cabernets and Chardonnays - what once were called fighting varietals - few big-name corporate wines made it into mix. Only Waters consciously avoided them, but I suspect the results reflect the innate curiosity of sommeliers, whose jobs largely hinge on hunting the new.

It explains why all three gravitated toward obscure grapes and winemaking regions, demonstrating

that obscurity itself makes for good value. Waters gleefully uncorked a bottle of Bulgarian Traminer as we prepared a salad with arugula grown in his backyard.

"The more adventurous you are, the more you'll find better value," he suggested.

Other varietals were ruled out simply by the price limit, like Pinot Noir. Despite the sudden appearance of oceans of cheap Pinot to accommodate its newfound popularity, all three steered clear. That's no surprise, considering the true Pinot lover's heartbreak in tasting the cheap knockoffs these days that rely on everything from doses of hearty Petite Verdot grapes to bulk wine bought from the Italian countryside. Dufault snuck some in by selecting a \$10 Pinot Noir Rosé from Sonoma County, but after eyeing a Bogle Pinot Noir for \$13, Tracy demurred. "I wouldn't buy an inexpensive California Pinot," he said. "That's just asking for disappointment."

Bargain bins received unanimous thumbs-up, with a few caveats (see "Bargain-buying strategies" below). Relying on familiar names, though, was a mixed bag. It seemed to work better with some Old World negociants - Dufault banked on major Burgundy house Louis Jadot for one of her splurge wines - than domestic producers, whose wines were solid but not necessarily the great deals we had hoped for. A bottle of 2005 Ravenswood Sonoma County Old Vine Zinfandel was among the most expensive we picked at \$12; while totally drinkable, it wasn't three times as good as the \$4 Nero d'Avola in the same basket.

One big difference between Old and New Worlds was the use of oak. For most imported white wines, and even for some reds, wines often were made using either steel tanks or old oak casks. The economics of oak barrels virtually require anyone wanting an oak flavor in a wine \$10 or less to use oak chips, shavings and other products, the wood equivalent of cheap perfume. By contrast, the \$9 red Talia blend from Sicily, one of Dufault's picks, had coarser edges to its texture thanks to all-steel winemaking, but the fruit flavors were clear and unimpeded.

There was less agreement about another familiar strategy: shopping by labels. Dufault gravitated to several mystery wines thanks to their sleek, eye-catching labels, perhaps believing that forward-thinking design signaled a forward-thinking winemaker. Waters did just the opposite: avoiding flashy packaging in favor of what he called more "authentic" - which I'll translate to aesthetically challenged - designs. "The label sometimes tells you if someone has gone in there with world values," he said,

invoking the specter of wine globalism.

How did they fare? Everyone found plenty of wine to make it through the week. Each basket contained a dud or two, which underscores another bargain hunter's tenet: You'll inevitably taste dishwater on the way to finding nectar, so when you find something good - or at least drinkable - buy all you can carry. Anyone who's ever uncorked a bottle of Charles Shaw in a parking lot will swear to it.

Bargain-buying strategies

Don't rely on familiar brands. Many popular labels aren't so successful with lower-priced brand extensions. Name recognition may pay off when buying in the \$30-\$40 range, but Scott Tracy found it to be less reliable in the bargain aisle: "I was surprised as to how the safety in the names was minimal."

Embrace obscurity. The popularity of Cabernet and Chardonnay in the bargain aisle doesn't forgive the fact they're largely the wine equivalent of junk food - bland and highly manipulated. Behind Jonathan Waters' call to obscurity lies this: In much of the world, everyday wines are made with native grapes, from Plavac Mali to Trebbiano, that require little manipulation. Invest in a solid guide to varieties (Jancis Robinson's book "How to Taste" covers it well) and practice your pronunciation.

Think far afield. The lack of California wines in the mix isn't just sommelier stubbornness. With a few exceptions (and not just the ubiquitous Mr. Shaw) the economics of making wine here rarely favor the under-\$10 category. If you really want homegrown wines, remember such domestic labels as Washington's Columbia Crest. Or mix it up: A \$7 import and a \$13 California bottle still yields an average of 10 bucks.

Change is constant. The bargain aisle, especially at Trader Joe's, is filled with one-time-only offers - buyouts from wholesalers, stock that needs to be cleared and so on. Wait too long and they'll vanish. Given these shifting sands, don't dally when you find a winner. Buy more soon.

Bargain bins are your friend. Though it takes a savvy shopper to navigate them. Vintage (see below) is more important than ever - don't bank on that 1998 Sauvignon Blanc being drinkable, much less grassy or refreshing - but you can be adventurous for just a couple bucks.

Don't forget bubbly. Any of us who survived our college years on \$6 cava will testify to this. All

three experts found something sparkling within their budgets to make things festive.

Know your importers. When encountering mystery wines, all our experts bet that a good importer's palate would prevail. Some of the best offer a polyglot selection: Vin Divino, source of one of Christie Dufault's picks, includes in its portfolio both bargain-priced Italian reds and high-end Austrian Rieslings.

Watch out for vintages. Cheap wines are often cheap because of their age. Sometimes an extra year or two can soften a tough red. But inexpensive whites don't typically last. Double-check the vintage on the label against the one on the shelf. The first time Christie Dufault grabbed a Wrongo Dongo, it was a 2006, as marked; the second, which we bought, was a 2005.

Bigger can be better. The so-so reputation of double-sized bottles isn't undeserved, but if La Tache comes that way, what's the hang-up with cheap Shiraz? Packaging is a major cost factor for bargain wines, and you can save big by purchasing more in one package. Many bag-in-boxes cut a per-bottle cost down below \$5.

- J.B.

Christie Dufault

Wine Director, Quince

Strategy: No-holds-barred window shopping

The hit: 2007 Toad Hollow

The miss: 2007 Zolo Torrontes

It's not a stretch to say I presumably witnessed the first - and last - time that Wrongo Dongo would grace the white tablecloths at Quince. Why was Christie Dufault uncorking this simple red from Spain's Jumilla region?

Dufault, wine director at the posh Pacific Heights restaurant, pinned credit on a relative who, years ago, decided to play Stump the Sommelier at a barbecue. "My cousin was just like, 'You're going to

drink this stuff?' " she recalls. "To my surprise, it was lip-smackingly good."

As she stalked the aisles of Cost Plus, Dufault hoped to juggle a mix of regions and styles. So many options caught her eye that nearly every wine in the final cut was banished from the cart at one point or another before being redeemed.

What made the cut? A couple were no-brainers. She gave a thumbs-up to the **2006 Louis Jadot Macon-Villages (\$9.99)** both because she trusted the producer (Dufault believes Jadot to be one of Burgundy's better negociants) and because the region is underrated. Even with a weak dollar, this area of southern Burgundy produces great Chardonnay deals. She decided she'd save it for a proper dinner: a roast Marin Sun Farms chicken, with a final glass for a cheese course afterward. "It's correct, it's minerally, it's chalky," she remarked. "It's got the Chardonnay flesh."

She leaned heavily on Sicily, Spain and South America, all wise ideas. Sicily offered up the **2005 Talia (\$8.99)** red (2006 is the current vintage), a blend of indigenous Nero d'Avola, plus Syrah and Merlot, chosen in part because the importer, Vin Divino, has a portfolio full of affordable stuff, and in part because the wine shares a name with her husband's goddaughter. It was rustic, with tannic structure, right for a pizza delivery. That contrasted with the **Wrongo Dongo (\$7.99)**, a project from Spanish importer Jorge Ordonez that harnesses the lesser-known Monastrell grape. That, she said, would wait for a weekend barbecue or a plate of ratatouille.

She wanted something fresh and carefree, a recovery wine after a long Monday. From Portugal, the **2007 Aveleda Vinho Verde (\$5.99)** was fresh but slightly metallic. It was serviceable, but Dufault wished she had instead located one from another producer, Broadbent. More fun was the **J. Laurens Cremant de Limoux (\$11.99)**, made in France's western Languedoc, her sparkling pick. She pegged it as the week's special wine.

A final white pick, the **2007 Zolo Torrontes (\$9.99)**, proved the perils of even what appears to be a sure bet. Dufault was swayed by this aromatic white grape during her visits to Argentina, and quality is generally high across most versions. Because the Zolo was the latest vintage, it won out in her deliberations, but we found it heavier and more alcoholic than most.

Standing in the store, she gazed at rows of California Pinot, most priced above \$25, and sighed. "Too

expensive. Sorry, people. Not everyday wines." But salvation came in the form of the **2007 Toad Hollow Rosé (\$9.99)**, a bargain even by rosé standards - and, unlike many pink wines on the shelves, a current vintage. The wine, from the Healdsburg winery founded by Robin Williams' brother, Todd, was a huge hit. (No surprise: It was a standout from our rosé panel tasting this spring).

One final bonus bit of excitement: Dufault contemplated a 3-liter bag-in-box of a red Bordeaux, NV Chateau Lhorens, which I disqualified because it was on final discount at \$16.50, hence about to disappear. It was simple, but properly Bordeaux-like and a jaw-dropper at the equivalent of \$4.13 per bottle. We opened the spout and poured a bit into Quince's fine stemware. Another first, no doubt, in that setting.

Christie Dufault's list:

2007 Toad Hollow Eye of the Toad Sonoma County Dry Pinot Noir Rosé (\$9.99)

2007 Fincas Patagonicas Zolo Mendoza Torrontes (\$9.99. Importer: Epic Wines)

2007 Quinta de Aveleda Aveleda Vinho Verde Branco (\$5.99; HGC Imports)

NV Domaine J. Laurens Cremant de Limoux Brut (\$11.99; Vigneron Imports)

2005 Talia Rosso Sicilia IGT Red (\$8.99; Vin Divino)

2005 Bodegas Juan Gil Wrongo Dongo Jumilla Red (\$7.99; Jorge Ordonez Selections/Henry Wine Group)

2006 Louis Jadot Macon-Villages Chardonnay (\$9.99; Kobrand)

Lagunitas India Pale Ale (2 bottles; \$1.89/bottle)

TOTAL: \$68.71

[Print Christie Dufault's list](#)

Scott Tracy

Wine Director, La Toque restaurant

Strategy: Leverage Trader Joe's bulk-buying power, preferably sticking with California

The hit: NV Blason de Bourgogne Cremant de Bourgogne

The miss: 2006 Bogle Vineyards California Merlot

Scott Tracy got the hardest assignment of all - to root out great cheap drinking in the fancy heart of Wine Country.

The prospects were daunting, even at Trader Joe's. Not only were two popular California brands, Bogle and Ravenswood, among the most expensive picks, they also fell short on the price-quality ticker when we sat down to taste. Is it unseemly for a \$4 Nero d'Avola from Sicily to overshadow homegrown picks? Maybe, but when it comes to TJ's, that's how you gotta roll.

That Nero d'Avola, by the way, the **2006 Archeo (\$3.99)**, a Trader Joe's exclusive, didn't exactly scream with Old World terroir - some bubble gum and crushed grape notes saw to that - but Tracy found it plenty solid for pizza or meatloaf. "I think it's very hard to be mad at it," he said.

For that matter, he had few quibbles with the **2006 Bogle Vineyards California Merlot (\$8.99)**, though a lack of distinct Merlot character left him wondering whether shoppers would opt for it over 4 1/2 bottles of Charles Shaw. It certainly paced the **2005 Ravenswood Sonoma County Old Vine Zinfandel (\$11.99)**, which had the same friendly sweetness as the Nero d'Avola but, as the most expensive wine in the basket, wasn't a great candidate for a repeat buy.

That, ultimately, became our benchmark. As Tracy noted, a savvy Trader Joe's buyer - and, he admits, it's where he first shopped in his formative wine years - tries a whole lot of cheap stuff, buys the good ones by the case and lives with the crapshoot nature of the selections. Which explains how we ended up with the **2004 Rosemount Estate Chardonnay Semillon (\$3.99)**. A simple wine to begin with, and after four years still a virtual relic, near (or way past) the end of its run.

Barely more charm came from another Chardonnay-based effort, the **2005 Louis Latour Grand Ardeche (\$6.99)**, which despite the name is basically everyday wine from the hardscrabble Ardeche region of eastern France. Latour is an esteemed Burgundy negociant, so the wine's dual nature - fat and cheaply oaky, then sharp and ashy - seemed like indecision between French austerity and the American fondness for butter. "It's two-faced, like some character your superhero has to defeat," Tracy said.

A better choice was the **2006 Castinera Albarino (\$7.99)** from Spain's Rias Baixas. Tracy liked the freshness and fresh lime notes and matched it to grilled shrimp or ceviche. And he was virtually gaga over the sparkling **NV Blason de Bourgogne Cremant de Bourgogne (\$8.99)**, essentially a private label made for supermarkets by a French co-op. It showed plenty of character for a proper Champagne-method wine, enough that Tracy slotted it eagerly for a Sunday brunch with brioche, ham and poached eggs.

Still, the homegrown mandate was tough. Tracy contemplated a 2006 Cabernet from B.R. Cohn but abandoned it upon seeing the wide-reaching North Coast appellation, hence the bargain price. He had done so well with his initial picks that he had yet to clear \$50, which led him to eye a 2002 Napa Valley Cabernet from Angwin's Spelletich Cellars. Though it was a great deal at \$20, it busted through our usual \$15 bargain cap and was vetoed. But it raised an important point: Buy enough \$4 Nero d'Avola and you earn room to splurge.

Tracy was a bit bummed, but soon enough we came upon an alternative: the **2005 Chateau Candelaire (\$12.99)** from Bordeaux's Canon-Fronsac, west of the Right Bank city of Libourne, made by Chateau La Marche-Canon. Undeniably Old World in style, it showed off sappy cherry amid camphor and burnt leaves. Tracy liked its balance and pronounced it the "feast wine" for his hypothetical week of bargains.

"Just because we're in the Napa Valley," he added, "doesn't mean people drink Napa Valley wine on their day off."

Scott Tracy's list:

2006 Castineira Rias Baixas Albarino (\$7.99)

2004 Rosemount Estate South Eastern Australia Chardonnay Semillon (\$3.99)

2005 Louis Latour Grand Ardeche Vin de Pays des Coteaux de L'Ardeche Chardonnay (\$6.99)

NV Blason de Bourgogne Cremant de Bourgogne (\$8.99)

2005 Ravenswood Sonoma County Old Vine Zinfandel (\$11.99)

2006 Bogle Vineyards California Merlot (\$8.99)

2006 Archeo Sicilia Nero d'Avola (\$3.99) //cqing name-jb//

2005 Chateau Candelaire Canon-Fronsac (\$12.99)

TOTAL: \$65.92

[Print Scott Tracy's list](#)

Jonathan Waters

Wine Director, Chez Panisse

Strategy: Great values from sustainable, small producers

The hits: 2006 Targovishte Traminer, NV Dibon Cava

The miss: 2007 Calina Carmenere

First, a bit of disclosure on Jonathan Waters' hand up. For his quest, I directed him to the Berkeley Bowl Marketplace, where it turned out he already knew wine buyer Simon Ball and scored recommendations before we went shopping.

This actually bolstered his first bargain-hunting tip: Get to know your wine buyer. With more Bay

Area supermarkets hiring wine stewards and individual buyers, personal recommendations should be ever easier to get. "If you go home and you don't like any of the wines, then the strategy hasn't worked," Waters said. "But at least it's a good place to start."

To convert our \$70 into eight wines and pocket change, Waters employed other tricks up his sleeve, which to be fair is precisely what you need when diving into the bargain-wine sea. He already knew his sparkling pick, the **NV Dibon Cava Brut Reserve (\$8.99)**, since he has been pouring it at Chez Panisse. And he steered our cart toward wines from less prestigious Old World areas, including Eastern Europe. That's how we ended up with the day's surprise hit: a **2006 LVK Vinprom Targovishte Traminer (\$8.99)** from Bulgaria, a relative of Gewurztraminer that offered pillowy peach and orange highlights atop a mineral, barely off-dry base. Waters suggested serving it with spring vegetables or a cheese course.

His other two whites came from better known regions. A **2007 Chateau Moulin de Ferrand (\$7.99)** hailed from the virtual sea of wine that is Bordeaux's Entre-Deux-Mers area. The traditional blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon offered solid herbal bounce and a slightly hard-edged texture, but Waters found it "absolutely serviceable" and good for an early-week pick to go with shellfish. Ironically, the other white, a **2006 Henri Bourgeois Petit Bourgeois (\$10.95)** - Waters' big splurge - was corked. A replacement bottle of this Loire Valley Sauvignon Blanc revealed it to be fresh, with lots of grass and straw overtones like the wannabe Sancerre that it is.

True to his Chez Panisse compass, Waters stuck with another mission: finding wines made using sustainable methods and, if possible, by small family producers - as he put it, wines with "authenticity." Even at Berkeley Bowl, we had to guess at the provenance of most, but was it a surprise that the single discordant note came from the Chilean project of Jess Jackson's Jackson Family Wine Estates?

One tip-off was a sleek label design on the **2007 Calina Valle del Maule Carmenere (\$7.50)**. Waters disregarded his own warning flag about labels and later regretted it - though he diplomatically noted that many would prefer the Calina to another red wine, the **2006 Obra Joven (\$7.99)** from Ribera del Duero. It was his final pick, after his first seven bottles gave him almost 10 bucks to play with. This all-Tempranillo bottling was a bit hard-edged but amenable to grilled food. Would he opt for the coarser effort, I asked, over a wine made in a deliberately softer modern style? "If I had to

answer this question," Waters replied, eyeing the Obra, "I would say I'd always take this wine."

For a full 50 cents less, we found happiness with another pick from farther down the Duero River: the **2006 Weise & Krohn Valtorto (\$7.50)** from Portugal's Douro region, where Port is also made. A mix of Tinta Roriz (the Portuguese synonym for Tempranillo), Touriga Franca and Tinta Barroca, all used in Port, it charmed Waters with its berry-patch flavors. He commended it to a peperonata stew or even a meaty fish, like sea bass with tomato.

His sole California pick, a **2006 Shenandoah Vineyards Special Reserve Amador County Zinfandel (\$8.99)** fit well within Waters' mandate. The Sobon family grows the grapes organically and this lean, floral bottling clocks in at just 13.9 percent alcohol, a true table-wine Zin. Waters proposed it for a Friday night: a bit sweet, relatively light, just right to start the weekend.

Jonathan Waters' list:

NV Dibon Cava Brut Reserve (\$8.99)

2006 Wiese & Krohn Valtorto Douro (\$7.50)

2006 LVK Vinprom Targovishte Traminer (\$8.99)

2006 Shenandoah Vineyards of California Special Reserve Amador County Zinfandel (\$8.99)

2007 Calina Reserva Valle del Maule Carmenere (\$7.50)

2007 Chateau Moulin de Ferrand Entre-Deux-Mers (\$7.99)

2006 JC Conde Delgado y Otros Obra Joven Ribera del Duero (\$7.99)

2006 Henri Bourgeois Petit Bourgeois Vin de Pays du Jardin de la France Sauvignon Blanc (\$10.95)

TOTAL: \$68.90

Print Jonathan Waters' list

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/07/18/WISD11II7C.DTL>

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