There has been a quiet, if not insignificant, interest of late in white wine varieties made from other than the west coast’s two dominant grapes, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Those from the Rhône such as Viognier, Marsanne and Roussanne have made a modest appearance and a smattering of esoteric varieties like Vermentino, Albariño and Ribolla Gialla a more trivial one yet. The truth, however, is that there are other white wines, some with lengthy local histories, waiting to slake the thirst of those in search of something out of the norm. This month, we take a look at several varieties among those often called the “aromatic whites”, in particular Riesling, Pinot Gris, Chenin Blanc and Gewurztraminer. While all have been around for a number of years, their collective star, with the exception of Pinot Gris, has been in decline. We have often wondered why they have been ignored as the latest generation of wine drinkers looks to discover something different and new. It would be hard to argue that a significant number of local versions have achieved quite the same heights as the very best of their European cousins, but as the following pages testify, there are plenty of thoroughly enjoyable examples to be had, most of which hit the mark for fine value smartly. New Zinfandels and Chardonnays also get a look in this issue with notable examples coming from old favorites and fresh faces as well. Those from the highly regarded 2012 vintage continue to impress, and, as more and more 2013s come to market, it appears that notoriously perennial winemaker optimism is, in this instance, wholly justified.

**RIESLING**

Riesling’s vibrant acidity and light-as-can-be manner have earned it an especially devoted following. It has struggled a bit locally to gain new adherents, but the best West Coast efforts, especially those from Washington, are eminently worthy of attention.

**PINOT GRIS**

In large part responsible for lighter wines meant to be simple refreshers, Pinot Gris can make somewhat more serious wines as well, and the top bottlings from both California and Oregon are far more than frivolous quaffers.

**CHENIN BLANC**

It may not be nearly as popular as it once was in California, and there are far fewer labels to be found on retailers’ shelves than in the past, but good Chenin Blanc handily fills a niche that needs filling, and it does so at a very favorable price.

**GEWURZTRAMINER**

Hard to pronounce but easy to like, Gewurztraminer is classically paired with sausages and charcuterie, but it makes a distinctive companion to a wide range of foods. Virtually unknown by a new generation of wine drinkers, it is being kept alive by a handful of devoted vintners.

**ZINFANDEL**

Called the mystery grape by some and California’s workhorse red wine by others, Zinfandel is a permanent fixture on the state’s vinous landscape, and this month’s top picks once again prove that it can succeed famously in a many different appellations.

**CHARDONNAY**

There is nothing clichéd about good Chardonnay, and, with the recent run of fine vintages in California, there is a bounty of well-made new releases to be had in any number of styles.

**BEST BUYS**

There are top-notch Cabernet Sauvignons and Pinot Noirs that come without painful price tags, and they are featured in this month’s installment of Best Buys along with a lengthy list of outstanding Sauvignon Blanc values.
Riesling

Although each of the aromatic white varieties has its partisans, none is held in higher esteem than Riesling. There are more than a few serious wine lovers who believe that Riesling is, in fact, the greatest white wine grape of them all, and there is no question that, when well made, Riesling is capable of making deeply satisfying wines that run the gamut from bone dry to extravagantly sweet.

There was a time in California when Riesling received far more attention than it does today, and, as the roster of the state’s accomplished bottlings has grown a bit shorter with time, Washington State and, more lately, Oregon have stepped in to fill what might otherwise be an unfortunate void.

It may be that the problem facing would-be California Riesling makers is one of climate, terroir and the market. Much like the other aromatic whites that share the spotlight in this issue, Riesling wants to be grown in comparatively cool districts. It is not a grape that will shine in places where Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel excel, and, while there are important cooler climes in which it could thrive, they are the same areas that are now covered in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir vines. We understand. Winemaking may be an art, but it is also a business, and it is reasonable to ask why vintners on the cool Sonoma Coast or in the Sta. Rita Hills would opt to make hard-to-sell Riesling rather than Chardonnay and Pinot Noir that will easily fetch two and three times the price.

It is the same issue faced by Chenin Blanc, Gewurztraminer and arguably to a lesser extent fine Pinot Gris, and it is not one that bears heavily on these grapes’ iconic European sites where varietal options are limited by long-standing laws. We have often mused at the potential for world-class Chardonnay grown in the cool climate and chalky soils of the Vouvray, for example, if only Loire Valley vigneron had true freedom of choice.

Happily, serious American winemaking is no longer confined to California, and other regions such as the Pacific Northwest, Michigan and New York’s Finger Lakes have enthusiastically taken up the Riesling challenge. That is not to say that California has wholly left Riesling to others, but those grown in Washington consistently rank among the best domestic bottlings to be had, and we are increasingly impressed with those grown in cooler sites across the country.

If Riesling has had a hard time in attracting a large following, the up side for consumers is that very good efforts at very good prices abound. Our annual survey of Riesling is always marked by a high number of fine values, and this year’s is no exception. This month’s collection ranges from dry to moderately sweet, and the best wines again demonstrate the brightness, balance and racy fruit that makes them lovely drinks on their own as well as winning companions to a wide range of foods. We are unabashed fans of the grape and hope that those who have yet to make Riesling’s acquaintance will find that there are, in fact, immense pleasures to be had from this wonderfully inviting, too-often-overlooked variety.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTSTANDING WINES</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS &amp; TRADITIONAL USE WITH FOOD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>THREE STARS</strong> <code>(95-98 points)</code> An exceptional wine. Worth a special search of the market.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TWO STARS</strong> <code>(91-94 points)</code> A highly distinctive wine. Likely to be memorable.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ONE STAR</strong> <code>(87-90 points)</code> Fine example of a type or style of wine. Without notable flaws.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Wines not marked with stars are often delightful wines. Each has unique virtues and any of these wines may be the best wine to serve your needs based on value, availability or for your dining and taste preferences. *Prices – Approximately California full retail prices. |

Connoisseurs’ Guide tastings are conducted with RIEDEL Stemware.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AVAILABILITY</th>
<th>DRINKABILITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited production and/or limited geographic distribution.</td>
<td>Drinkable now. Unlikely to improve with further aging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very limited availability.</td>
<td>Drinkable now. Further bottle aging can improve this wine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GV</strong> Good Value</td>
<td>Cellar for future drinking. Wine will improve with bottle aging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not suitable for drinking</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**GOOD VALUE**

**CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Eroica 2013**
Columbia Valley. Year in and year out, this collaborative effort from Chateau St. Michelle and Ernst Loosen stands as one of the best West Coast Rieslings to be had, and the 2013 version lives up to every expectation. It is vibrant young stuff with stunning varietal precision and a sense of depth that belies its lighter step, and, if bristling with the kind of fruity acidity that only Riesling can achieve, it shows remarkable polish and keen crafting. Patient cellaring is certain to bring further rewards, but whether drunk up in haste or allowed to grow to its best, it is for us the model by which American Rieslings must be measured. **GOOD VALUE**

**CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Eroica Gold 2013**
Columbia Valley. Envisioned by its makers as a Pacific Coast take on the German Auslese style, the new 2013 Eroica Gold is a moderately sweet Riesling that balances fruity lushness against a firming streak of freshening acidity. It is, at present, a wine that is a bit at odds with itself and lacks a sense of keen integration, but it is a deep and vital wine with teasing suggestions of real complexity to come, and it is not one to be opened and drunk right away. Good Riesling can age famously, and this one is on the track to do exactly that. **GOOD VALUE**

**DASHE Dry McFadden Farms Potter Valley 2013**
Ripe and vaguely honeyed yet bothered by a touch of something a little too reminiscent of kerosene in the nose and similarly fairly muddled in taste, this slightly viscous offering is soft, mildly sweet and a touch sharp all at once in the mouth, and it never comes into comfortable Riesling focus. **GOOD VALUE**

**DUTTON GOLDFIELD Chileno Valley Vineyard 2014**
Marin County. Given the wine's bright, crisp, floral and green peach first aromas and a suggestion of honey for good measure, the wine turns out to be a touch soft at the margins and comes with a chalky, slightly bitter edge as it finishes. It will make good drinking with light finger foods and should hold up nicely when washing down the likes of sweet-edged dishes such as a lightly savory sesame chicken. **GOOD VALUE**

**FIRESTONE Central Coast 2013**
15% Gewurztraminer. Never quite as well-focused as it could be and implicitly Riesling by virtue of its slight sweetness and appealing balance rather than defined fruit, this bottling hints somewhat mildly at a touch of grapefruit at one moment and at flowers the next with suggestions of minerals scattered here and there along its way. Nonetheless, its certain vagueness is no great liability considering its price, and it has a good chance of finding a more definite varietal voice some six to twelve months hence. **GOOD VALUE**

**CLAIBORNE & CHURCHILL Dry Central Coast 2013**
Favoring the stony, minerally side of the Riesling spectrum with deft touches of wild flowers and honey in the background, this dry-leaning bottling is moderately full in body yet firm and chalky in feel. Its briskly stated flavors stay true to themselves at every stop and, if not an easy wine for aperitif drinking, it is one geared to trout, rockfish or sole dishes. **GOOD VALUE**

**CLAIBORNE & CHURCHILL Estate Dry 2013**
Claiborne Vineyard, Edna Valley. Gently hinting at minerals and dried flowers in the nose, but fairly dry smelling and low on fruity vigor, the winery’s Estate Riesling is fuller and riper than the bottling below, and, while having more palatal presence, it is also a bit ragged and coarse with a spot of last-minute heat working its way into view. It is clearly a wine that wants drinking with food, and, although its angles and edges might diminish with a year or two of age, richness rather than refinement will always be its strength. **GOOD VALUE**

**CORKSCREW Luma Blanc Sonoma Coast 2013**
By Azari. This patently unpleasant effort is bitter, burnt out and absolutely bereft of fruit with one foot over the line that marks spoilage and the other close behind. It says nothing of Riesling or of well-made wine for that matter, and it is a bottle that is easily avoided. **GOOD VALUE**

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**CHALET de LOISEN Vignoble de la Loise 2013**
Burgundy. The Pinot Noir that is often noted for its aromatic complexity and great aging potential is showcased here with a fruit-forward, refreshing character. **GOOD VALUE**

**KWV Stellenbosch 2013**
20% Sauvignon Blanc, 10% Chardonnay, 70% Darling Coastal. Very nice effort from a producer known for its consistent quality and value. **GOOD VALUE**

**A to Z Oregon 2014**
Light, mild in manner yet nicely fixed on straightforward fruit that runs to sweet limes, green grapes and blossoms in a way that hints distantly at Muscat, this clean, well-balanced effort is arguably not as varietally precise as it could be, but it is a wholly enjoyable, slightly sweet quaff all the same. Whether sipped on its own or served as a cooling accompaniment to spicier Asian recipes, it wants a good chill and should be tagged for drinking before too many summers have passed.

**BONNY DOON The Heart Has its Rieslings 2013**
52% San Benito County; 48% Monterey County. Always on the low-keyed side of things yet steadily focused on the mildly peachy, faintly floral traits of a wine that is unmistakably Riesling, Bonny Doon’s is a rounded, fairly genteel varietal expression that shades slightly to sweetness, and its bias to softness commends drinking without delay. **GOOD VALUE**

**CARMEL ROAD Unoaked Monterey 2013**
Curiously labeled as being “unooaked” as if oaky Riesling is the norm, this very easy-to-like offering plays to candied peaches and pears with suggestions of lemonade to the side. It is simple and frontal and comfortably balanced with zesty acidity in league with its slight sweetness, and it earns recommendation by dint of its continuous, affably juicy impressions of clean-as-can-be fruit. **GOOD VALUE**

**CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Dry Riesling 2014**
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Riesling

HAGAFEN Dry Rancho Wieruszowski Vineyard 2014
Coombsville. Although its distant suggestions of flowers and dried peach quietly bring this working into the varietal fold, the wine, like a good many of its similarly dry-finished cousins, speaks to Riesling in a fairly muted voice. It is narrow and quite firm with wiry acidity framing its strained impression of fruit, and it could benefit from another year in the bottle.

HANDLEY Anderson Valley 2014
Fresh, but not particularly fruity and framed with suggestions of matchstick and paper in the nose, this dry, rather rigid, relatively austere effort is ungainly stuff with a touch of back-end bitterness diminishing its otherwise minimal appeals. Even allowing for the fact that it is very young, it is a wine with too many angles and edges and too little varietal beauty.

HOGUE Columbia Valley 2013
We have often been impressed with the value that this winery's wines offer, and that is very much the case here. If moderately sweet, the wine is fairly lively, pleasantly balanced and it keeps fruit out in front of its sugars. It tastes of ripe peaches and honey before taking a slight turn to limey acidity at the finish, and, while it never once threatens to become cloying, it is sufficiently sweet to want a bit of thought before being poured at meals.

J. LOHR Bay Mist Monterey County 2014
7% Gewurztraminer. Nowhere in its muddled mix of matchsticks and candied sweetness does this cheap-tasting wine find much in the way of defined Riesling character, and, if at first getting by on its frontal sweetness, it winds up a bit hard, chalky and slightly bitter at the end.

JOEL GOTT Columbia Valley 2012
Its uneasy mix of sweetness and acidity garners more attention than its hesitant, loosely defined fruit, and this stiff, decidedly graceless wine comes up chalky and curiously green in spite of its slightly sugary parts. It lacks keen Riesling focus and will not find it with keeping.

KENDALL-JACKSON Vintner’s Reserve 2013
Monterey County. Nominaly fruity with scattered suggestions of orange blossoms and a minerally note or two to its themes of peaches and sweet limes, this slightly sweet wine starts out well enough but takes on a chalky edge and runs into a bit of mildly grapefruityness hardiness in the latter going. Service with food and another twelve months of age may improve its lot, but its slight last-minute coarseness tempers our enthusiasm just now.

McFADDEN Potter Valley 2014
Wisp of flowers and ripe and slightly green peach are set in the aromas in slight opposition to a matchstick element that shows in the first nosing and never fully relents, and while a minor edge of sweetness does lift the flavors momentarily at entry, the wine fails to find continuing fruit and finishes somewhat abruptly with rising heat taking charge.

MORGAN Double L Vineyard 2013
Santa Lucia Highlands. Soft, slightly sweet, apple-like fruit is the main message of this rapidly maturing effort, yet, while it could do with a big boost in brightness, the wine does not fade or fall apart at the end. That said, it is not going to get better, and the time for drinking is now.

MORGAN Double L Vineyard 2014
Santa Lucia Highlands. Neither smelling nor tasting of Riesling and instead smacking of cooked corn, burnt sugar and spoiled apple cider, this patently unpleasant offering has gone terribly wrong, and it is a decided disappointment given its usually very reliable maker.

NUTHOUSE Eola-Amity Hills 2013
By Argyle. If light on the inviting perfume of Riesling and showing stony, lightly floral and quiet hay-like notes where a touch more juice would have been welcome, this wine finds itself expressing greater varietal character in its peaches, minerally, slightly candied flavors and in an aftertaste of surprising length. Not sweet but perhaps not wholly dry either, it can serve nicely now yet has the depth and balance to age a bit.

PACIFIC RIM Solstice Vineyard Yakima Valley 2013
Drawn along leaner lines and tempering a slight touch of residual sugar with so much zesty acidity that it comes across as being comparatively dry on the palate, this lively youngster takes a fairly minimalist approach to outgoing varietal fruit and is structured with mealtime service with delicate seafood in mind. It is, in fact, a somewhat tight-listed wine that impresses as being another year or two away from reaching its best, and its recommendation is conditional on waiting.

PACIFIC RIM Dry Columbia Valley 2013
Starting out with muddled aromas of canned peaches, cardboard and a bit of bath powder perfume, this stiff and ungainly wine is neither friendly nor fruity and its lack of buffering sweetness leaves it overly exposed to back-palate bitterness and unwelcome finishing heat.

PEY–MARIN “The Shell Mound” Marin County 2014
Still very much undeveloped at this stage and a bit of a challenge in that sense as the Pey-Marin Rieslings have often come around after time in the bottle, this medium-bodied, fairly dry offering turns slightly chalky and a touch bitter after its initial flirtations with roundness. Past fans of the wine might want to lay a few bottles away, but those short on optimism will likely pass this time around.

POET’S LEAP Columbia Valley 2014
By Long Shadows. Here is a good reminder that first impressions can sometimes be misleading and that fine Riesling can take its time in showing its true self for, while this one is fairly hesitant and relatively shy to begin, it gradually grows in both range and reach. It is fresh, firmly balanced and relatively mild-mannered...
Ryan's Riesling Columbia Valley 2013

With its very distant, half-hearted suggestions of fruit quashed by less-than-likeable smells of cardboard and matchsticks and similarly prone to bitterness and a slight chemical burn once in the mouth, this joyless wine is haphazard at best and will fare no better with time.

GOOD VALUE $21.00

REUSTLE "Engedi & Onyx Bloc" Umpqua Valley 2013

For a good many years now, Washington’s Columbia Valley has been home to a number of attractive and particularly priceworthy Rieslings, and the list of fine values has gotten a bit longer with the arrival of this hard-not-too-like offering. Long on juicy, well-defined varietal fruit with enticing top notes of honeysuckle and jasmine, the wine is very well-balanced with slight sweetness and acidity in ideal accord. It is far deeper than its modest price tag predicts, and it is one to buy by the case.

GOOD VALUE $10.00

SANTA BARBARA WINERY 2.3 Lafond Vineyard 2014

Sta. Rita Hills. This bottling’s “2.3” moniker refers to its residual sugar, and the wine does steer to noticeable sweetness, but it is nicely balanced with ample acidity mitigating any mawkishness and lending a touch of welcome, back-palate crispness. It is not boldly varietal yet consistently keeps a quiet bit of peachy fruit in its sights, and it will serve equally well as a congenial stand-alone sipper or a companion with spicier Asian fare.

GOOD VALUE $16.00

TREFETHEN Dry Oak Knoll District 2014

It may start out as a bit of a minimalist in its tight, lightly varietal aromas, but it delivers more to like in the palate despite a chalky edge to its firm texture. Along the way, it blends peach fruitiness with grapefruity tightness and narrowness, and were it not for its long finish, we would probably have held it something short of full commendation. But length and balance suggest potential for better, and the wine will be well-served by allowing it to mature for a couple of years.

GOOD VALUE $25.00

V. SATTUI Anderson Valley 2014

From its mildly floral, slightly honeysuckle-like nose to its slightly sweet, well-composed flavors, this energetic young wine shows a comparatively delicate hand and emphasizes freshness over fruity richness. Its evident sugar is met by plenty of enlivening acidity, and its finish is both crisp and cleansing. It is, in fact, firm enough to commend keeping, and it should develop nicely for several more years.

GOOD VALUE $26.00

V. SATTUI Off-Dry Riesling Napa Valley 2014

There seems to be little agreement about the nomenclature of sweetness when it comes to labeling Riesling, and this one comes across as being simple and slightly sugary with a loose sense of peachy fruit. It is a touch viscous to start and relatively rounded throughout with nominal acidity for balance, and, while never complex, it is affable stuff that will make pleasant drinking until the 2015 version is released.

GOOD VALUE $24.00

V. SATTUI Dry California 2014

Although it is labeled as being dry, this moderately fruity Riesling behaves like it is not and shows a scant trim of sweetness to its mildly blossom mix of white peaches and candied limes. It hints at candy but is balanced and brightened by neatly fit acid, and is nowhere close to being cloying. Its fruity vitality affords it lots of up-front appeal, but, like its mate from the Anderson Valley, it should keep and grow for a bit.

GOOD VALUE $23.00

V. SATTUI Dancing Egg Anderson Valley 2014

Deriving its name from the fact that it was partially aged in the concrete “eggs” that have been garnering winemaker attention of late, this wine shows a little more weight and a little less life than its same-vintage siblings. It, too, hints gently at sweetness with an inkling of ripe peach to its flavors, and, while a likeable Riesling, it finishes with just enough palpable coarseness to come up short of starred recommendation.

GOOD VALUE $25.00

WATCHDOG ROCK Columbia Valley 2013

This simple, slightly peachy, comparatively confected wine barely manages to say its varietal name, and, while it is clean and makes a pleasant enough first impression, its all-too-frontal charms are quick to give way to bitterness and then to an edge of chemical heat in the latter going. Its obvious sweetness can hide only so much, and its combination of lushness and coarseness leaves it uneasy and at odds with itself.

GOOD VALUE $12.00

WAXWING Tondre Grapefield 2014

Santa Luica Highlands. Tending to staleness and low in fruity life despite its elevated acidity, this stiff, somewhat hard-edged stab at Riesling is slightly sweet, decidedly sour and palpably bitter all at once, and it is woefully lacking in both varietal direction and basic charm.

GOOD VALUE $23.00

WILLAMETTE VALLEY VINEYARDS 2013

Willamette Valley. If smelling at first more of grapefruit and stones than of defined Riesling fruit, this wine quickly takes on a slightly peachy aromatic cast and follows with juicy, key lime and peach flavors. Its initial sense of palatal plumpness is countered by a rush of almost electric acidity. It is moderately sweet, slightly wiry and intensely fruity all at once, and a few years of age are sure to bring better integration of its parts.

GOOD VALUE $14.00
**Pinot Gris**

Pinot Gris is the one west-coast member of the aromatic white clan that has managed to become a significant player in the market. Vintners in Oregon began to explore its potential in the 1980s and 1990s, and it has subsequently become the state’s signature white wine grape, but there is no record of it having been planted in California twenty years back. Today, it is California’s third most-planted white variety.

There is a general notion that those labeled Pinot Grigio, after Pinot Gris’s Italianate title, are inherently lighter and less serious versions, but half-peachy aromas, this medium-bodied offering is firm on the Santa Cruz Mountains.

**GOOD VALUE**

genial stuff with its sights fixed on unhidden fruit.

showing a faint bit of finishing grip, it is first and foremost very white peaches comes with a trace of residual sweetness, and, if this one is correctly named. Its clean presentation of pears and is meant to be lighter, fresher and more forthrightly fruity, then Pinot Gris is at times impossible to understand, but if the former

* The distinction in a winemaker’s mind between Pinot Grigio and Pinot Gris is at times impossible to understand, but if the former is meant to be lighter, fresher and more forthrightly fruity, then this one is correctly named. Its clean presentation of pears and white peaches comes with a trace of residual sweetness, and, if showing a faint bit of finishing grip, it is first and foremost very genial stuff with its sights fixed on unhidden fruit.

**GOOD VALUE**

BACKHOUSE Pinot Grigio California 2014

As pale as water with little in the way of discernible fruit hiding behind its slightly chemical, matchstickey mask, this weak-willed effort shows a wispy suggestion of early sweetness in the mouth before drifting to chalky dryness and ending with a mildly bitter note punctuating its brief finish.

**GOOD VALUE**

CK MONDAVI Pinot Grigio Willow Springs 2014

California. 11% Sauv. Blanc; 10% Chardonnay; 3% Moscato. Fresh and fruity with a touch of candy to its mildly peary fruit, this nicely made, sparkingly clean Pinot Grigio makes no attempt at being anything more than a wine meant for unceremonious gulping, but it handily succeeds at being just that at a price that puts much of its similarly-minded competition to shame.

**GOOD VALUE**

BLAIRE Meador Estate Vineyard Arroyo Seco 2013

Murky and muddled and edging to dirtiness in the nose with a faint note of sharpness beginning to take shape, this wine comes across as being far too old for its time, and, its slightly sherrified, stale-tasting flavors are overtaken by dissipative bitterness in no time at all.

**GOOD VALUE**

BLUE QUAIL Potter Valley 2014

By McFadden. Elements of white peach and citrus merge nicely in the nose of this fresh and fairly aromatic Pinot Gris, and, even though faintly suggesting a hint of juicy sweetness, the wine is youthfully vibrant and never ers to sugary softness. It is, withal, an easily liked wine that will be equally appealing when sipped on its own or poured alongside lighter first courses, and it earns endorsement by dint of its slight extra richness.

**GOOD VALUE**

DOMENICO Pinot Grigio California 2014

Once past a quick whiff of green peach, a vaguely cardboardy quality starts to take hold in the nose, and the same progression from green peach to paper follows on into this wine’s otherwise coarse, relatively innocuous flavors. If nothing else, Pinot Grigio needs to be fresh and friendly, and, despite being very young, this one is neither.

**GOOD VALUE**

ESTANCIA Pinot Grigio California 2014

Built along the lighter lines that its title predicts but pleasantly spry and mildly fruity with a very clean mix of limes and green peaches laced with subtle minerally bits, this refreshing effort is held back from full recommendation by a needless note of eleventh-hour palate and somewhat zesty with plenty of youthful energy as its primary calling card. Touches of acid-driven chalkiness do show up at the end, but they do little to peg the wine back and, rather, add to its usefulness with tangy foods.

**GOOD VALUE**

BEAUREGARD Orange Wine Regan Vineyards 2013

Santa Cruz Mountains. Twenty-one days of skin contact has rendered this wine mid-pink in color and given it plenty of vinosity, but what the wine does not have is the friendly fruit that marks the best of the variety. Some will like it for its different approach, but we are of mixed minds and cannot recommend it as a typical Pinot Gris in the popular mold.

**GOOD VALUE**

BACKHOUSE Pinot Grigio California 2014

As pale as water with little in the way of discernible fruit hiding behind its slightly chemical, matchstickey mask, this weak-willed effort shows a wispy suggestion of early sweetness in the mouth before drifting to chalky dryness and ending with a mildly bitter note punctuating its brief finish.

**GOOD VALUE**

BEAUREGARD Regan Vineyards 2013

Santa Cruz Mountains. With wisps of honey filling out its quiet, half-peachy aromas, this medium-bodied offering is firm on the

**GOOD VALUE**

ANCIENT Sangiacomo Vineyard Carneros 2014

Here is a moderately successful attempt at showing Pinot Gris in a somewhat more serious light, and, rather than being candied and soft like the majority of its inexpensive relations, it is very much structured with meals in mind. It is moderately full-bodied and slightly rounded in texture with quiet, vaguely peacy, mineral-tinted fruit running its length, and rather than aimlessly drifting away, it holds fairly well at the finish.

**GOOD VALUE**

A TO Z Oregon 2013

Although its underplayed aromas are slow to take form and at best only hint at peaches and wet stones, this wine surprises with deeper, far more vibrantly fruity flavors than predicted and shows a juicy immediacy that is hard not to like. It is not only quite nicely balanced but has a certain sense of winemaking polish as well, and its combination of interest and charm lifts into the sparsely populated ranks of enthusiastically recommended Pinot Gris.

**GOOD VALUE**

ACROBAT Oregon 2013

Very much a wine of mixed messages, some of which are nice and others that are not, the 2013 Acrobat Pinot Gris possesses a fair sense of richness, fairly good balance and a nice measure of essential, mildly peacy fruit, but it labors against a cardboardy background note that, in the end, is just enough to keep it out of the running for higher marks.
bitterness, but it is moderately appealing all the same and shows a very competent winemaking hand.  

85 FEL Anderson Valley 2014  
One of several Pinot Gris bottlings that seeks to go bigger with a noticeable complement of oaky spice to its make-up, this version from Fel is fairly dry at its heart and wants a little more fruit to be wholly complete. It presently suffers from coarseness and a surprising turn to chalky astringency at the finish, and, while it might soften over the next year or two, the odds are against it finding real beauty.  

84 FERRARI-CARANO Pinot Grigio Sonoma County 2013  
A bit flat and dried out beneath its slightly papery, vaguely leesy elements and with too little in the way of fruit on the positive side of its ledger, this soft and slightly viscous wine is overtaken by late-arriving bitterness without ever having made much of a varietal stand.  

85 FRANCIS COPPOLA Pinot Grigio California 2014 Diamond Collection.  20% Sauvignon Blanc. Gently hinting at white peaches and pears if never bright or forcefully fruity, this rounded, easy-going, medium-bodied working tips just a touch to candied softness, but it is cleanly made and otherwise free of fault, and it will meet the needs of those looking for an affordable white wine suited to picnic drinking.  

88 FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA Gia Pinot Grigio 2013 California. From its fresh and fragrant aromas to its spry, ever-so-slightly sweet flavors, this easy-to-like Pinot Grigio displays a constant compliment of flowery fruit. That fruit stays the course even as a touch of typical varietal bitterness arrives in the latter going, and service with food will go a long way in remedying its minor finishing indiscretions.  

87 GUENOC Lillie’s Pinot Grigio California 2014  
Nicely rounded and a touch fuller in feel with an attractive floral overlay to its themes of lightly spiced peaches, this juicy, lightly sweet-leaning working puts the emphasis on very accessible fruit while retaining a fine sense of brightness and balance. It is a little richer than most of those sharing its Italianate name, and it has enough character that it will not disappear when poured at the table as a foil to moderately flavorful foods.  

GOOD VALUE  

89 HAHN Monterey County 2014  
Clean, but a bit vague regarding fruit from first nosing all the way through to its slightly bitter-edged finish, this wine exhibits a little more ripeness and weight than a good many of its mates and counts a bit of palatal richness in its favor. Still, it never quite finds a convincing fruity voice, and last-minute bitterness makes an unwelcome appearance.  

87 HANDLEY Anderson Valley 2014  
From its mildly candied aroma to its lengthy, fairly lively flavors of slightly green peaches and stones, Handley’s Pinot Gris musters a bit more fruity volume than most and, while always dry, shows a juicier aspect that makes it stand out in a fundamentally faceless bunch. Its minor tag-end of bitterness is sure to be made moot by service with food, and it will match up equally well with meaty fish or lighter chicken recipes.  

GOOD VALUE  

88 HAWK’S VIEW Hawk’s View Vineyard 2014 Chehalem Mountains. This wine puts to rest any doubts that Pinot Gris can, in fact, make a fairly serious wine, and its careful marriage of fresh peaches and flowers and fine fruity acidity earns it a place at the very head of the class. It evokes genuine depth, and its subtle flirtations with sweetness are always in the service of well-defined fruit. It is an eminently food-worthy effort that will match up famously with lighter chicken or fish dishes, and its wonderful vibrancy and balance should carry it forward for a number of years.  

88 HORSE & PLOW McFadden Farm Mendocino 2013  
Faintly suggesting a note of dried peaches in the nose without ever quite being fruity, this slightly rounded, pleasantly textured offering gets good marks for its balance, but, once again in its flavors, its reach for defined fruit comes up a bit short and allows a touch of heat to show at the finish.  

87 KELLER La Cruz Vineyard Sonoma Coast 2013  
A hint of dried flowers lifts the light-medium volume aromas and shows up as a background note in lite, slightly round and vital flavors that follow, and even though this wine is somewhat less than fully expressed, it does hit varietal Pinot Gris marks at every stop. Lively enough to mate with grilled fish yet round and supple enough for baked chicken, this very versatile version of the variety is ready to be enjoyed today.  

GOOD VALUE  

88 LINE 39 Pinot Grigio California 2014  
Clean, but an otherwise essentially nameless and faceless white wine whose half-hearted grasp at green peaches is insufficient for it to be called fruity, this rounded and slightly slippery-feeling effort may not win many devoted new fans for Pinot Grigio, but it will, when well chilled, fill the bill as an affordable picnic quaff.  

GOOD VALUE  

88 McFADDEN Potter Valley 2014  
So close in character to McFadden’s Blue Quail version reviewed earlier in this section as to be almost indistinguishable from the same, this mildly peachy, very straightforward effort aims again at juicy, easy-to-taste fruit in a rounded, mildly candied style. It is, by small measure, the less lively of the two wines, and therein lies the scant difference.  

87 McMANIS Pinot Grigio California 2014  
This simple, very clean, fairly low-keyed look at the grape comes with a near-subliminal touch of residual sweetness and little in the way of defined fruit of any kind. It counts balancing acidity as an important asset, and it is the kind of easy-going white wine that will find useful service as a partner to all sorts of lighter foods as well as a heat-beating quaff for warm-afternoon sipping.  

GOOD VALUE
Pinot Gris

85 McMANIS Pinot Grigio California 2013
On the candied side of things right from the start but hinting
variously of flowers and peaches, this rounded, softly balanced
offering plays at all points to noticeable sweetness more than to
incisive fruit, but it is clean and free of fault other than that of
omission, and its price makes inattentive quaffing fairly easy.
GOOD VALUE

84 MIRASSOU Pinot Grigio California 2013
Soft, slightly sweet and whispering faintly of green grapes in the
nose, but low on drive and conviction, this confectioned wine may
be clean and reasonably well-balanced, but its anonymous nature
reminds too much of jug wine, and its lack of fruity vitality is a
liability it cannot overcome.

81 NINE HATS Benches Vineyard Horse Heaven Hills 2014
A muddled mix of grapefruit and wet cardboard in its aromas
makes for a less-than-positive beginning here, and this wine is
no more attractive on the palate where sweetness, harsh acidity
and a touch of chemical bitterness combine to chase a gasping
bit of citrusy fruit well off the stage.

GOOD VALUE

88 PANTHER CREEK Willamette Valley 2013
Distinctly peachy with subtle minerally notes in attendance and
fairly well-filled in both aroma and flavor, Panther Creek's is a
dry, well-balanced, moderately full-bodied Pinot Gris that exhibits
a fine sense of fruity depth. It shows the Oregon version in a very
good light, and it will find a welcome, very versatile place at the
table with seafoods running from the likes of broiled, white fish
filets to simply grilled salmon.

81 PEPI Pinot Grigio California 2014
Flirting here and there with a touch of candy in the nose, but
more suggestive of matchsticks and old straw than of anything
like youthful fruit, this soft, slightly rounded, directionless effort
lacks vinous seriousness of any kind, and watery cheapness is far
and away its dominant trait.

SOFT

81 PEPI Pinot Grigio California 2013
Looking for a positive bit of fruit here is a task that will not be
rewarded, and, once past of fleeting sensation of green peach in
the nose, this dull and dry, fundamentally eviscerated, light-

bodied white wine gradually flattens out and gives itself over to
dissuasive bitterness.


83 REDTREE Pinot Grigio California 2013
Little more than a drab and fairly lifeless white wine that is wholly
lacking in any apparent fruity distinction, this softly balanced,
medium-bodied effort is fundamentally washed-out in flavor,
bothered by late-arriving bitterness and counts cleanliness as its
singular achievement.

\$10.00

86 REUSTLE "Cana Bloc" Umpqua Valley 2013
On the underplayed side of fully expressed yet not wimpy and
washed out either, this medium-full-bodied wine stays light on
flavor but has a somewhat round and open palatal presence. It
drifts a bit into softness and does have the tell-tale bitter ending
of the variety, but, all in all, it is a serviceable version of the grape
gearied toward lighter meals.

\$23.00

86 SANTA BARBARA WINERY Thompson Vineyard 2013
Santa Barbara County. A bit at odds with itself, as so many of
the Pinot Gris are, this one is narrow and somewhat wispy in its
aromas, and while its flavors are only slightly more forceful, the
wine earns its near-recommendation on the balanced blending
of fullness of body and bright, brisk acidity. The overall result is a
wine that will work quite nicely with a variety of pan-grilled fish
or chicken dishes.

\$17.00

84 SIDURI Abre Vert Vineyard Willamette Valley 2014
We have great respect for this label and its maker but do not find
this wine to be one of Siduri's best efforts. While it may be clean,
it is slow-footed, dull and deficient in fruit, and, like too many
Pinot Gris bottlings, it runs afoul of bothersome bitterness at the
end.

\$24.00

87 SWANSON Pinot Grigio Sonoma Mountain 2013
11% Chardonnay. Even if only medium-full in body, this bottling
is favored with a certain depth and length that suggests a richer
version of the grape, and if you are looking for a balanced, firm
and solidly made version to go with a roasted chicken or a nice
piece of grilled fish, this wine, with its bow to peach and stones,
is sure to please.

\$21.00

84 TERRAPIN Willamette Valley 2013
Energetic but on the green side of ripeness with vague notes of
peaches and mangoes alongside chalky and slight matchstick bits,
this medium-bodied effort runs to angularity without reference to
richness, and grapefruit pith bitterness worms its bitter-edged
way into the picture to no good effect.

\$13.00

83 THREE PEARS Pinot Grigio California 2013
By Mason. There may be a few peachy pieces of a pleasant Pinot
Grigio hiding behind the more obvious matchstick qualities that
come to the fore of this one's aromas and flavors, but finding
them takes a bit too much work and forgiveness, and even if not
expensive, the wine offers little to like.

\$11.00

86 TOLOSA Estate Edna Valley 2014
8% Chardonnay. This comparatively weighty Pinot Gris aspires to
be more than most of its companions, and, given a chance to
shake off its initial matchstickly smells, it settles on white peaches
and cream as its message. It is moderately full-bodied and a touch
soft in balance with intimations of candy on entry, but it firms up
and finishes without signs of sugar and does not give itself over
to varietal bitterness.

\$24.00

85 WILLAMETTE VALLEY VYDS Willamette Valley 2013
Vague scents of green pineapple are uneasily merged with bare
whiffs of paper and dry straw in the less-than-inviting aromas of
this cramped and wiry wine, but it is biting palatal acidity, chalky
bitterness, and a trace of throat-catching heat that are ultimately
the engines of its undoing.

\$16.00
Chenin Blanc

Chenin Blanc was once a mainstay here planted than Chardonnay, but it has fallen attractive, wonderfully perfumed wines new glimmers of interest in Chenin Blanc on the part of a handful of wineries who are unwilling let it fade even further from view, and, while we enthusiastically applaud their efforts and are rooting for its resurgence, we are not holding our breaths.

**GOOD VALUE**

**BALLENTINE Napa Valley 2013**
What is fresh and lively in the nose becomes stiff and ungainly in the mouth here, and what was floral and pretty unfortunately turns into stony and slightly bitter. The wine is more mineral than fruity, but in a fairly stark way, and its grasp on inner fruit is tentative at best.

**CORNERSTONE Stepping Stone Napa Valley 2013**
Mildly melony, faintly candied and so wonderfully fresh on the nose that we could easily believe it to be a year younger than it is, Cornerstone's dry-finished Chenin Blanc raises high hopes to start, yet its flavors do not fully deliver on promise and it is slightly stiff and a touch sere on the palate. It will handily do the job now in culinary settings that demand something crisp and dry, but we would be surprised if it did not unfold and blossom at least a bit with age and would be willing to hide a few bottles away for another year or two.

**DRY CREEK VINEYARD Dry Clarksburg 2013**
Dry Chenin Blanc can be a tricky one to the grape's very high natural acidity, and successful versions that hint ever so slightly of sweetness such as this one are far and few between, but Dry Creek Vineyard always seems to get it right and continues its mastery in 2013. The wine is juicy and fresh with very fine fruity presence and suggests white melons, sweet limes, pears and a touch of honeysuckle, and, while never particular bold or intense, it is continuous and wonderfully long lasting with an upturn of crispness at the finish. We would gladly drink it with the likes of crab and milder chicken recipes, but are ready and more than willing to quaff a glass or two on its own.

**DRY CREEK VINEYARD Wilson Ranch Clarksburg 2014**
There is nothing in the way of nuance or hidden complexity here, but there is plenty of juicy, well-defined fruit, and the wine's very lively, lightly flowery, pear and white melon aromas are followed by similarly muddled, fermenter-fresh flavors that go straight to the varietal point. As tasty and friendly as can be asked of any white wine at its price, it speaks directly to Chenin Blanc's simple charms in a voice that is hard not to like.

**FOXEN Ernesto Wickenden Vineyard Old Vines 2013**
Santa Maria Valley. A grassy, slightly matchstick quality shows up first. The aromas followed by light suggestions of honey and melons. On the palate, the medium-full-body and firm but not overly hard balance adds a nice bit of richness, but from there, things tend to get a little drier and become slightly pinched and somewhat bitter by the finish. Service with pan-grilled trout or other white fishes might help.

**HABIT Jurassic Park Vineyard Santa Ynez Valley 2013**
Habit's Jurassic Park bottling is a Chenin Blanc that is at once both lively and fairly rich, and it serves up a mix of dried flowers, lemons, minerals and a wee touch of toast that prove that the grape is capable of complexity and interest. It is firm and quite dry without becoming in the least bit austere, and it is ideally balanced to be a winning companion to buttery sautéed sole, sand dabs or cracked crab.

**HUSCH Mendocino 2013**
A light bit of sweetness serves this inviting wine well and lends a juicy turn to its buoyant, very pear- and melon-like fruit, and it is always balanced by just the right degree of lively, freshening acidity. The wine is nicely polished, and its sweet and tangy parts are so seamlessly joined that it will be equally enjoyable when drunk on its own as when it is served alongside fruity entrees such as Sole Veronique or chicken breasts poached in cider.

**LANG & REED Mendocino 2013**
Cabernet Franc specialists, Lang & Reed, appear to have found success with yet another Loire Valley native and has pulled off the difficult task of making a very good, definitively dry Chenin Blanc. It is lean and racy with an almost steely sense of cleansing acidity and crisp, mineral-laced aromas and flavors of fresh pears and limes, and, if its lack of evident sweetness leaves it a touch too austere for aperitif sipping, it will shine as a mealtime mate to crab, shrimp and trout.

**LEO STEEN Santa Ynez Valley 2011**
From first to last, this wine comes with a sense of substance not often seen in Chenin Blanc, but it misses out on fruit and vitality at the price. Its fullness of body wants for deeper flavors, but in their absence, this wine is more palatal presence than it is a taste provider and turns out to be more of a study in why the grape is not usually made in this style than it is something that we would want to bring home for dinner.

**MUNICIPAL Blanche Old Vine 2013**
Santa Barbara County. Heading off in a lighter, fresher direction with lively honeysuckle and lightly citrusy scents leading the way, this wine is medium-bodied and bright with bracing acidity in its palatal impacts. It is firm, almost tight yet has the fruit to build on its style and should make a wholly refreshing accompaniment to light hors d’oeuvres.

**PACIFIC RIM Hahn Hill Vineyard Yakima Valley 2013**
This decidedly different wine breaks away from the Chenin Blanc pack and has more tactile weight than most, but its admittedly interesting mix of honey, beeswax and ripe melons is undercut by a bit of unwelcome staleness, and it winds up a touch brittle and tastes far older than it is.
Chenin Blanc

**PEPI Chenin Blanc-Viognier California 2013**
70% Chenin Blanc; 30% Viognier. Neither of its two claimed varieties can be recognized here, and this bottling is essentially watery and mawkish with a sense of sugary, jug-wine cheapness. Its single, very small virtue is cleanliness, but that cannot save it from vinous oblivion, and, even though it is cheap, it comes up short of offering fair value.

**TERRA D’ORO Clarksburg 2014**
87% Chenin Blanc; 13% Viognier. A nicely crafted quaffer, this wine smells of fresh peaches and honeysuckle with suggestions of juicy flavors to follow, and it delivers fully on that promise. It comes across as slightly sweet and has the lightness and a good dose of vitality on its side. And, whether it is used as a hot-day refresher or paired with cracked crab or something as savory as cashew chicken, it will be very easy to drink and enjoy.

**WILLIAMS SELYEM Limestone Ridge 2013**
Vista Verde Vineyard. San Benito County. About as close as anyone in California has come to the dry, briskly fruity style found in the Loire Valley’s Savennieres bottlings, this one may not fully match up with the potency of those wines, but its energy and focus are admirable nonetheless. Hints of honey and honeysuckle backed by brimming acidity and a touch of spritz hold long into a bright, lemony, mineral finish.

Gewurztraminer

Gewurztraminer, one of the most distinctive and readily identifiable white wines owing to its unique spice and floral character, has never been much more than a peripheral player at best here in California. That said, it seems that there are fewer examples to be found with each passing year, and, if Gewurztraminer is unlikely to disappear entirely, there is sadly little to suggest that its slow slide into obscurity will be halted anytime soon.

**CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Columbia Valley 2014**
Mildly citrusy with accents of orange rind to its blossomy, slightly honeysuckle-like nose, this slightly sweet effort walks a fine line between Gewurztraminer and Riesling and finds a comfortable niche all its own. It is insistently fruity rather than candied and is impeccably balanced with carefully measured acidity providing plenty of brightness and life, and, while a delicious quaff on its own, it is not singularly defined by its sugars and will famously match up with a wide range of Asian dishes.

**CLAIBORNE & CHURCHILL Dry Central Coast 2014**
Unmistakably varietal with a well-meshed mix of flowers, gentle spice and mildly peachy fruit evident at every point, the younger of the two Claiborne & Churchill bottlings is a trim and tailored wine that, even though pleasantly rounded in feel, does not stray into softness and shows good balance throughout. It is dry but not at all bitter, and the energy of youth serves it well. And, while it is thoroughly enjoyable now, it is in danger of fading away over the next couple of years.

**CLAIBORNE & CHURCHILL Dry Central Coast 2013**
Nicely defined as Gewurztraminer in the nose with wispy notes of spice and dried roses set against a background of lightly juicy fruit, this wine hints distantly at a touch of sweetness in its ripe, mildly citrusy but fairly closed and clove spicy wine that, even though pleasingly rounded in feel, does not stray into softness and shows good balance throughout. It is dry but not at all bitter, and the energy of youth serves it well. And, while it is thoroughly enjoyable now, it is in danger of fading away over the next couple of years.

**CLIF Mendocino 2013**
This dry, softly balanced, bare-bones Gewurztraminer is pretty much stripped down to the basics, and it fights with background suggestions of matchstick in both its aromas and finish. It musters a bit of varietal spice but is decidedly stinting in evident fruit, and its low-energy flavors are marked by just enough bitterness to be a bother.

**DUTTON GOLDFIELD 2014**
Green Valley of Russian River Valley. A little low-keyed and yet showing fairly good fruity volume with subtle notes of clovey spice and fresh flowers neatly tied to its suggestions of not-too-volume with subtle notes of clovey spice and fresh flowers neatly tied to its suggestions of not-too-transparent, this lithe, faintly sweet, mid-sized version sports a nice bit of acidity for balance. It is never forceful, but it is always lively and quite well-defined and it hits the varietal mark without the too typical drawbacks of bitterness.
Zinfandel is rarely in the crosshairs of but the days when behemoth, late-har- gone. Be it by winemaker intent, market couple of harvests have yielded a good styles. That is not to say that the wines have big-bodied versions of unbridled excess have vanished, but, as is manifest in the following notes, fans of this uniquely Californian grape have more styles to choose from than ever before. Zinfandel has found a home up and down the state and thrives in all but the coldest wine-growing regions, but whatever its provenance, it is a grape that likes to be ripe.

**AUGUST BRIGGS Old Vines Calistoga 2012**
Very solid, blackberry fruit is met by a good dose of vanilla-bean oak in the nicely defined, moderately intense aromas of this one, and, if fairly tight with acid and tannin working to stiffen things up at the moment, the wine follows through with sweetly spiced, well-ripened flavors that echo the nose. It is never dramatic, but it holds and shows fine stamina, and it should round into its best shape in three or four years.

**BEAUREGARD Beauregard Ranch 2012 Ben Lomond Mountain.** Zins from the Santa Cruz Mountains make up a tiny company at best, but this one from Beauregard makes a good case that just maybe there should be more. It is solid, full-bodied and shows fine concentration with a clear fix on varietal, blackberry fruit. Its ample and obvious tannins leave it a bit gritty and gruff at the end, but a few years in the cellar will tame its tougher side, and a few more should see it through to its best.

**BLUE QUAHI Old Vine Potter Valley 2013**
By McFadden. A confusing and confected mix of strawberry jam, half-candied sweetness and sour grasses sets this one on a track that is hard to call Zinfandel, and, from beginning to end, it is a limp and decidedly directionless wine that reeks of cheapness and demands hasty drinking.

**BOGLE Essential Red California 2013**
Loosely berry-like and pointed in the general varietal direction with hints of woody spice adding small notes of richness, this inexpensive, Zinfandel-based blend is not long on fruity depth, but it is balanced to firmness and does not succumb to dulling softness. If sufficiently tannic to make unaccompanied sipping a limp and decidedly directionless wine that reeks of cheapness and demands hasty drinking.

**CHRONIC Dead Nuts Paso Robles 2013**
64% Zinfandel; 21% Tempranillo; 15% Petite Sirah. If not at all lacking in ripeness, this ample wine keys first and last on solid, blackberry fruit, and its juicier traits combine with a careful bit of sweet oak to make for an open and moderately rich effort. Its mix of varieties notwithstanding, it is convincingly keyed on Zinfandel to the end, with a trim touch of tannin lending grip and staying power.

**CHRONIC Purple Paradise Paso Robles 2013**
70% Zinfandel; 14% Syrah; 11% Petite Sirah; 5% Grenache. Another grab bag of grapes but far less successful than its sibling above, Chronic's Purple Paradise is a somewhat off-kilter mix of pushy acidity and chalky astringency that never manages to find clear fruity bearings. It is at once ripe and tangy and a touch thin as it crosses the palate, and it comes nowhere close to being a complete wine.

**CLINE Bridgehead Vineyard Contra Costa County 2013**
As close as any of the winery’s Zinfandels come to being refined, the Bridgehead bottling is a big, fully ripe, but ever so slightly more mannerly member of the big-shouldered Cline clan. It is generously fruited and sports lots of ripe berry fruit with a touch of black pepper here and a bit of briary spice there. While it does show some last-minute heat, it is fairly well-structured for the weighty wine that it is, and it surprises with a spot of slight acidity amid its riper parts.

**CLINE Meadowbrook Ranch Vineyard Contra Costa County 2013**
Tehama County This potent and powerful wine hails from one of California’s most northerly Zinfandel sites, and it will impress many as being too much of a good thing, but despite its blustery ripeness and hard-to-ignore heat, it is solidly varietal at its heart. It tilts precariously to chocolate without wholly abandoning its variety’s blackberry fruit, and, if not one for pouring with pasta, it will be at home with savory cheeses.

**CLINE Big Break Vineyard Contra Costa County 2013**
Smells of dark berries and briar are met by a nice touch of sweet oak in the nose here, and the flavors that follow are similarly ripe and sweet-leaning with zesty acidity lending firmness and life. It, like it mates, is another big-bodied Zin that makes no apologies for full ripeness, and it, too, does a good job at holding the line against runaway excess with very clear and constant fruit in play from beginning to end.

**CLINE Live Oak Vineyard Contra Costa County 2013**
Smelling all too much of chocolate, molasses and coffee yet a bit dry and lacking in richness all the same, this thick, very ripe opus is a top-heavy wine that largely forgoes fruit and staggers under its own weight. It will appeal only to fans of late-harvest Zinfandels, and, even then, its fruity deficiencies will leave most of them unsatisfied.
**Zinfandel**

**DARIE KENT Livermore Valley 2013**
Fairly heavy and lacking in life at every stop, this stolid, rather ripe-leaning wine is little concerned with Zinfandel's fruitier side. It runs to dried grapes and dark chocolate with no more than a passing suggestion of berries, and it is dogged by elements of old bark throughout with bitter tannins bringing a quick end to its coarse, fruitless finish.

**DASHE Cellars**

**DASHE Todd Brothers Ranch Old Vines 2012**
*Alexander Valley.* Medium-intensity aromas of dark berries are paralleled on the palate of this well-balanced, fairly full-bodied effort and while there is a momentary drift into supleness as the wine enters the mouth, things tighten up and show decent continuity all the way into a mid-density finish. Time in bottle is likely to see it smooth out a bit, but there is plenty to like now given the wine's obvious energy.

**DASHE The Comet Alexander Valley 2012**
25% Petite Sirah; 8% Carignane. Mixing a bit of early flesh with a tannin-heavy finish, this rustic bottling wins plaudits for its first aromas of ripe blackberries and its underlying palatal solidity—as befits a wine with a high Petite Sirah content. It will find good use alongside a savoy-seasoned and butterflied leg of lamb hot off the Weber.

**DASHE Florence Vineyard Dry Creek Valley 2012**
More than ripe enough but surprisingly limited in full fruitiness for its provenance and vintage, this bottling has plenty of structure and comes close to commendation. It takes a tough turn to full tannin and dries out at the finish in the face of its astringency. It is hard to see how time will lift it into higher charm, but a bit of softening cannot but be helpful.

**DASHE Dry Creek Valley 2013**
Although not without at least a vague sense of Zinfandel berries, this muddled version is anything but fruity, and its comparatively dry, woody aromas are followed up by blunt, slightly chalky, tannin-framed flavors that are drier yet. It is too tough by half and nowhere suggests that it has the fruity heart to be worth waiting on while its astringency eases.

**DECOY Sonoma County 2013**
By Duckhorn. Curiously reedy on initial nosing and never quite able to shake off the nagging, out-of-place elements of dried brush and stalks that get in the way of its otherwise very modest attempt at varietal expression, this soft and shallow wine is simply too weak in fruit to stand without waverling, and it summarily runs off the road to recommendation.

**DRY CREEK VINEYARD Old Vine 2013**
Dry Creek Valley. 23% Petite Sirah; 2% Carignane. Optimally ripened, solidly fruited and hitting the varietal mark smartly, Dry Creek Vineyard's Old Vine bottling does a fine job of being both rich and lively at one and the same time. It is deep and well-filled without a whit of heaviness, and, while sufficiently open to afford

**Dry Creek**

lots of forthright appeal now, it has a very promising sense of reserve and the structure to get better with age. It is an honest, carefully crafted Zinfandel that is very sure of just what it is, and it deftly reminds that richness and range do not depend on a heavy hand.

**GRACIANNA Bacigalupi Vineyard 2013**
*Russian River Valley.* This uneven wine combines contrasting elements of both green and ripe berries in a most uneasy mix. It is hot, dry and desiccated with acidity cutting sharply through its flavors, and it is a real disappointment given its price and its well-regarded vineyard source.

**GRAZIANO Kazmet Vineyard Old Vine 2012**
*Redwood Valley.* Mendocino's Redwood Valley has a history of producing very good Zinfandel, but not since the noteworthy Lolonis bottlings of more than a decade back have we found one that makes the point quite as well as this one from Graziano. It is a solid, deeply berry-like wine that shows very fine form and focus, and it never once falters and tilts too far to ripeness. There is no chocolate here, just persistent, neatly defined fruit, and the wine's slightly tight structure bodes well for another half-dozen years of keeping.

**HERENCIA Napa Valley 2013**
A bit haphazard and heading in too many directions at once, none of which are informed by a clear sense of fruit, this wine is at once ripe and curiously green, and it fails to get on the right track before palpable heat and acidy tartness conspire to bring it to a quick end.

**HOWELL MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS Old Vine 2012**
*Howell Mountain.* Ripe without excess and nicely concentrated in its focus on blackberries with a light patina of leathery and cedary notes, this wine is moderately full in body and reasonably generous in its delivery of surprisingly open and inviting flavors. It has some youthful edges to lose yet, but it does not demand more than a few years in the cellar.

**KENWOOD Reserve Sonoma County 2012**
Although it is a little more certain of its varietal footing than its lesser-priced partner below, this straightforward offering is still a bit plain and fairly temperate in fruit. It takes no chances, and it commits no offense, but it is clean and comfortably balanced. It is not a wine that needs waiting and will provide easy drinking with platters of tomatoey pastas and meatballs now and over the next couple of years.

**KENWOOD Sonoma County 2012**
If it admittedly flirts with a bit of berry-like fruit here and there, this fairly full-bodied Zin is surprisingly timid given its tactile size. It is ripe but wants for articulate varietal definition and depth, and it quietly drifts to tannic dryness and fades away without putting up much of a fight.

**LA CHERTOSA Reserve Fra Paolo 2013**
*Amador County.* Richness rather than refinement is this one's forte, at least for right now, but, for all its chocolaty ripeness and considerable concentration, the wine is always solidly fruity with a firm fix on Zinfandel's singular blackberry character. It is a wine
of fairly big muscles, but it is never a brute, and, if it tends slightly to heat at the finish, its ripper traits are under control and tempered by a nice note of youthful pertness.

**MONTE VOLPE Primitivo Mendicino County 2012**
By Graziano. A bit biased to ripeness and sporting very nearly as much woody spice as it does evident fruit on the nose, this wine steps up and delivers a good deal more berry-like fruit in taste and shows a twist of enlivening acidity that very much reminds of Barbera. It is full but firm, and its tart fruitiness hangs on and on at the finish, and, while surely capable of growing for several years, it will make tasty drinking with pastas tossed in tomatoey meat sauces right now.

**NOCETO OGP Amador County 2011**
The Original Grandpère Vineyard. If not overtly angular in its first impressions, the nose of this fairly full-bodied effort possesses a trace of sharpness that is at least partially offset by the wine’s evident ripeness and a brown-sugar trace of richness. Soft at the margins and firm underneath with both tannins and a slight edge of bitterness creeping in, this one delivers mixed messages and is not one that we would rely on.

**PEACHY CANYON Westside Adelaide District 2013**
13% Petite Sirah; 6% Alicante Bouchet; 3% Syrah; 1% Tannat. It may be the least expensive member of the Peachy Canyon Zin clan, but, dollar-for-dollar, this one excels and earns the nod for both quality and value. It leads with deep, slightly juicy aromas of blackberries and sweet oak, and it follows with lengthy, like-minded flavors. It is both supple and sturdy and has more than enough fruity extract to handily buffer its latter-palate heat, and, if eminently tasty right now, it is structured to keep with three to five years of guaranteed growth in the offspring.

**PEACHY CANYON Bailey Adelaide District 2013**
A dollop of creamy oak sits comfortably atop precise blackberry fruit in the nose here and remains a helpful partner to the same in this one’s accessible, somewhat juicy flavors, and, if sharing a clear bias to ripeness with its many cellarmates, it is a balanced wine whose appeal is not undone by excessive heat. It is, to be sure, not a delicate Zin, but neither is it outsized or heavy, and its ready richness will hold it in good stead with smoky, pulled pork or slow-roasted brisket.

**PEACHY CANYON Especial Adelaide District 2013**
25% Petite Sirah. Arguably the biggest and weightiest of the many 2013 Peachy Canyon Zinfandels and one that may be a little too much depending on one’s taste and with what it is poured, the Especial makes a very good start with its sweet, broadly fruited, close-to-juicy aromas, but ripeness, rather than fruit, takes charge in its flavors. It succeeds in a genre that has its fans and detractors, and the former will find plenty to like in its no-holds-barred style.

**PEACHY CANYON Snow Adelaide District 2013**
If not identical peas in a pod, the Zins of Peachy Canyon share a good many family traits starting with the ripeness and generous fruit that is once again in full evidence here. This particular effort shows a little more early polish and a slight tilt to firmness all its own, and, if not quite as juicy as several of its siblings, it is nicely balanced with the stamina to keep and will reward three or four years of aging.

**PEACHY CANYON Mustang Springs 2013**
Adelaide District. A bit of an outlier in that it tends to dryness and shows a touch of the desiccation that its equally ripe mates manage to deftly avoid, the Mustang Springs Zinfandel holds back in fruit and sports a distinctive woody twist all its own. Its slight coarseness suggests that a wait of a few years is in order, but, in the end, it lacks the fruity amplitude to guarantee that aging will pay sufficient dividends.

**PECH MERLE Cuccio Dry Creek Valley 2012**
When compared to its sweeter, more outwardly ripe cousins, Pech Merle’s Cuccio Zinfandel might at first seem a little austere, but it is not without the requisite, blackberry fruit that success demands and its firmer, structured style makes it far easier to fit in at the table. And, those who find it a bit rough and rigid will be pleasantly surprised at the difference even two or three years in the cellar can make.

**PECH MERLE Rocky Ridge Rockpile 2013**
Although Rockpile Zinfandels can be very ripe, the best of them possess remarkably fruity depth, but this wine stops with ripeness and seems to forget about fruit. It is full-bodied and yet oddly underfellt at its heart, and its unrelenting ripeness brings only heat without bringing richness.

**PECH MERLE Treboree Dry Creek Valley 2012**
6% Petite Sirah. A bit fuzzy in focus and showing woody, wet bark and old-leather traits to its less-than-forthright fruit, this weighty wine is ripe without great richness or a clearly defined varietal voice, and it plods along sluggishly to a dry, bluntly tannic, palpably hot finish.

**PEDRONCELLI Mother Clone Dry Creek Valley 2012**
Without question favoring full-blown ripeness yet avoiding the pruney, dried-grape liabilities of a wine that has gone over the top, this big-bodied Zin joins those that willingly embrace ripeness and eschew any sense of finesse. It is gusty stuff, but it speaks with a clear varietal voice that is sustained even as heat arrives at the finish. And, even if unlikely to appreciably change its stripes with age, it will benefit from a few years of smoothing.
Zinfandel

**RAIL 2 RAIL Old Vine Lodi 2013**
Lighter and livelier than the Lodi model predicts but sparing in the berry-like fruit that defines good Zinfandel, this firmly built bottling is a clean, somewhat pert, mid-sized red wine that is only vaguely varietal at best. Its youthful energy makes it useful with simple, barbecued fare, yet those looking for Zinfandel will find little here. **$18.00**

**RUSACK Estate Ballard Canyon 2013**
Clean, quietly fruity and inclined more to strawberries than to the darker, blackberry traits that typically define Zinfandel, this clean, slightly fleshy, full-bodied effort flattens out on the palate and is hampered by a shortfall of brightness and fruity drive that leaves it less than complete. **$30.00**

**SARAH’S VINEYARD Old Vine Santa Clara Valley 2011**
Whether by dint of vintage, vineyard or vintner, this way, vaguely souring wine offers little to like. While its fruit may have been ripe, it is not in the least fruity, and it winds up so tart that even those who cannot find wines with enough acid will think twice before pouring a second glass. **$23.00**

**SHANNON RIDGE Lake County 2012**
More ripe and rustic than it is keenly fruity yet a Zinfandel with undeniable substance and heft, this solid, relatively unruly wine does not go so far as to be hot or jammy or sweet, but elegance lies well out of its reach. Hints of hardwood and spice lend it a note of complexity to its hushed themes of berries, and, if a bit stolid now, it may find better focus with time and cannot but be helped by a few years of age. **$20.00**

**SIMPLE SOLACE Red Wine Paso Robles 2013**
41% Zinfandel; 37% Cabernet Sauvignon; 22% Sangiovese. Included here because its larger piece is Zinfandel but a wine that does not fit neatly into any specific varietal lines, this one conveys a good sense of well-ripened, blackberry fruit in the nose yet shows the sturdier build and tannic spine of Cabernet once in the mouth. While it is still a bit ragged and raw at the edges, it stands a good chance of gaining a bit of complexity as it ages and looks to benefit from a few years of smoothing. **GOOD VALUE $20.00**

**SOL ROUGE Red Hills 2012**
Not wholly on point as Zinfandel, yet attractive in its own right, this wine runs more to strawberry preserves and ripeness than to the brighter, blackberry fruitiness of the variety. To its credit, it is on the round and near supple side at entry and stays that way across the palate before firming up decently in the finish. It needs little age and is ready now. **$28.00**

**SPICY VINES Scarlet’s Flirtation Mendocino County 2011**
10% Syrah. Ripeness trumps defined Zinfandel fruit right from the first and puts a real damper on varietal expression here, and the wine comes across as being a bit fat and sloppy. Its viscous beginnings give way to dryness and unbuffered heat, and it has little chance of improving with age. **$18.00**

**SPICY VINES Zin Master Sonoma County 2012**
20% Syrah. Here, again, amorphous ripeness rather than fruit occupies center stage, and overt astrigency and hidden heat make for a ragged, very unfriendly wine. This one has volume but it is as crude as they come, and waiting for polish is a gamble we are not willing to take. **$32.00**

**STEELE Old Vine Pacini Vineyard 2012**
**Mendocino County.** Single-minded in its ripeness and hard-pressed to find saving fruit, this wine has made a bad bargain in trading berries for chocolate and unforgiving heat. Its flirtations with sharpness only make matters worse, and it has the feel of wine whose better days are behind it. **$18.00**

**STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN Antaeus Napa Valley 2012**
53% Zinfandel; 34% Cabernet Sauvignon; 10% Petit Verdot; 3% Merlot. Immediately impressing with its sense of crafting and polish and as rich and refined in flavor as it is in aroma, the latest Antaeus marries the deep, dark berry fruit of Zinfandel with a bit of Cabernet cassis and is structured along distinctly claret-like lines. It is layered and long and thoroughly involving right now, but its balance and youthful vitality are the markers of a wine that will grow effortlessly. Allow for at least five years in the cellar, and we are certain those who wait for ten will be very glad that they did. **$45.00**

**STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN Estate Reserve 2012**
**Napa Valley.** Although fairly ripe and very solidly fruity with the unmistakable blackberry bias of Zinfandel, this slow-to-unfold wine is a little tight and withdrawn and takes its time to come to full voice. Its first feint to softness is followed by structured firmness and nominal tannins, and, if never quite juicy, its ample fruit quietly holds and holds. As is usually the case with wines from its maker, it is a Zin meant to be aged, and, if it follows in the footsteps of its Estate Reserve forerunners, it will have a very long life ahead. **$68.00**

**TIN BARN Gilsson Vineyard 2013**
**Russian River Valley.** Here is a wine very likely to be the source of some controversy in so far as it winds up a little too hot at the end for its own good, but, right up until then, it hits every varietal mark from its depth to its exceptionally well-focused fruit and commendable balance. It is big and it is ripe, but it is not close to being chocolaty or jammy, and it does so many things right that its slight, last-minute harshness and noticeable heat are very easy to forgive. **$29.00**

**VILLICANA Paso Robles 2013**
20% Syrah; 5% Grenache Blanc. Rich, fairly full and very up front...
in fruit with a light touch of jammy sweetness to its governing themes of blackberries, this wine avoids the late-harvest, dried-grape desiccation that is the bane of many extremely ripe Zins, but high ripeness defines it in a good many ways. It is temperate in tannin and gets better-than-passing marks for its richness, yet its 16% alcohol proves to be a little more than its fruiter parts can comfortably support.

** WELLMONT OTD Reserve Russian River Valley 2012
7% Carignane. Rich and juicy in a somewhat obvious way, and made more so by its time in bottle that has allowed it to soften and fill out, this tasty bottling does manage some latter-palate tannin for grip. It is in no further need of aging but is not going to quit any time soon, and age has given it a trace or two of real refinement rarely found in young Zins. $30.00

Unlike several of this month’s featured becoming anonymous hereabouts and its place as California’s premier white about Chardonnay’s appropriate style and interest its way after a time when its virtues were questioned by a few nay-saying critics, and, as its many successful incarnations attest, it is a grape that defies one-size-fits-all thinking. In this issue, three particularly noteworthy offerings drive home the point. On one end of the varietal spectrum, Pellegrini’s energetic Olivet Lane bottling shows off the variety at its vibrant best and, on the other, the weighty Black Cordon Reserve exhibits extraordinary richness and range while the ripe and lively Frostwatch settles comfortably in between. All are remarkable, thoroughly satisfying wines and they remind that good Chardonnay comes in many guises.

** AUGUST BRIGGS Leveroni Vineyard Carneros 2013
Offering up a nicely managed mix of citrus, green apples and lightly toasty oak in both scent and taste, this friendly and fairly accessible, medium-full-bodied Chardonnay is rounded in feel and enlivened by well-placed acidity from front to back. It will keep for a few years but hides nothing now, and it is balanced for versatile drinking with dishes ranging from chicken to meaty white fishes. $32.00

** BLACK CORDON Reserve Russian River Valley 2012
This invitingly rich and generous wine boasts layers of character from its first-fruit-driven aromas to its scents of toasty oak and roasted grains and is both juicy and complex at one and the same time. Its flavors benefit from a slight rounding of its texture, and its balance manages to be wholly supportive without relying on bristling acidity. The overall effect makes the wine into a happy mate to richer dishes like grilled salmon fillets or roasted chicken with pan gravy. $55.00

** CANNONBALL Sonoma County 2013
Fairly fresh and slightly citrusy in tone with a bare touch of oak to the side of its straightforward, green apple traits, the Cannonball Chardonnay is as plain as it is clean, and its modest, underplayed fruit escapes early as acidity and an unwelcome spot of heat crop up in the latter going. $15.00

** CARTLIDGE & BROWNE North Coast 2013
A little sweet-leaning in character if not out-and-out sugary and sporting a fairly creamy element of oak, this frontal, easy-to-gulp effort just manages to keep Chardonnay in its sights. It tilts to softness in balance but does not stall out as it goes, and its clean, but very simple, fruit stays the course. $14.00

** WELLMONT O T D Estate Vyd Sonoma Mountain 2009
7% Carignane. Rich and juicy in a somewhat obvious way, and made more so by its time in bottle that has allowed it to soften and fill out, this tasty bottling does manage some latter-palate tannin for grip. It is in no further need of aging but is not going to quit any time soon, and age has given it a trace or two of real refinement rarely found in young Zins. $34.00

** ZIN-PHOMANIAC Lodi 2013
Led in the nose by enough direct, blackberry fruit to clearly say its varietal name without hesitation, this viscous, fairly full-bodied wine tends to syrupy ripeness in taste and is a little less certain about fruit. It is moderately rich stuff, but it is a bit heavy-footed as well, and its slight, but steady drift to dryness signals a need for drinking sooner than later. $18.00

** CINNABAR Santa Cruz Mountains 2013
Although it can be accused of a certain slightly candied simplicity in the nose at this point, this wine’s minor sins are merely those of youth, and it, in fact, shows quite well on the palate with fine fruity depth and clarity. It also counts very good balance among its many assets, and its hard-to-ignore energy signals that aging will bring real rewards. It is more than the simple wine that it at first seems to be, and, while it is pleasant now, it will be much better a year or two hence. $34.00

** CINNABAR Estate Grown Carneros Napa Valley 2013
The juxtapositioning of ripe and lean in this wine may make it uncomfortable for some, but that is the price of finding flavor on the one hand and balance on the other. In truth, there have been other Cuaison Chardonnays that seemed better integrated, but this one has the right pieces for pleasant drinking and can, in time, add a bit of polish. $25.00

** CUVAIISON Estate Grown Carneros Napa Valley 2013
It is a grape that defies one-size-fits-all thinking. In this issue, three particularly noteworthy ** offerings drive home the point. On one end of the varietal spectrum, Pellegrini’s energetic Olivet Lane bottling shows off the variety at its vibrant best and, on the other, the weighty Black Cordon Reserve exhibits extraordinary richness and range while the ripe and lively Frostwatch settles comfortably in between. All are remarkable, thoroughly satisfying wines and they remind that good Chardonnay comes in many guises.

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ESSER Monterey County 2013
On the one hand vaguely juicy and a touch sweet and, on the other, edgy and angular and given to tart, citric acidity, this harsh, haphazardly structured wine recalls candied lemons far more than it does recognizable Chardonnay fruit, and bitterness rushes up at the finish to seal its fate.

FROSTWATCH Bennett Valley 2013
Ripe but very lively with elements of crisp apples, sweet lemons and creamy oak seamlessly joined in a wonderfully harmonious mix, this neatly composed bottling is as well-structured as it is deep and tasty, and there is plenty of potential for development even if it is fairly open and very easy to enjoy now. It is full and firm with plenty of youthful energy on its side, and its teasing glimpses of complexity to come make a very compelling case for at least a few years of keeping.

GOOD VALUE
FROSTWATCH Ophira Bennett Valley 2013
Although a little mild-mannered and tightly drawn in aroma to start but gradually gaining in volume as it airs and showing a well-married mix of ripe apples, creamy oak and lees as it does, this one is the less immediate and outgoing of the winery's two Chardonnays, yet it evokes a very real sense of crafting as well as the potential and promise for age. It is deep, it is balanced and it has good places to go, but patience is a must, and two or three years of waiting are advised.

MORGAN Highland Santa Lucia Highlands 2013
Lightly brushy with a trace of sweet oak adding a scant bit of richness, this bottling is at once ripe and yet lacking in real fruity presence. It is clean and pleasantly rounded in feel, and it finds a quiet varietal voice, but it is always a wine defined by its limits more than anything else.

LANGTRY Genevieve Vineyard Guenoc Valley 2012
Mid-depth apple fruit featuring somewhat frontal, candied notes that lead the way are followed on the palate by a rounded entry and flavors that parallel the nose in both intensity and type. If a bit soft at the finish, the wine is clean, tasty and entirely useful, albeit of limited production.

MAGNOLIA COURT Central Coast 2013
Loosely suggestive of sweet apples yet never clear on just what it is, this candied, low-energy effort shows virtually nothing in the way of varietal depth or range. Cleanliness counts among its few achievements, but there are better, far-more-convincing Chardonnays to be had at the price.

MARIMAR Don Miguel Vineyard 2013
Russian River Valley. 60% Chardonnay; 40% Albariño. This different-minded wine is, not surprisingly given its varietal mix, a little wide of the mark as Chardonnay, yet it possesses a good sense of depth even while going in two directions at once with elements of fresh pears played against something a little more taut, chalky and dry. Its evident firmness commends drinking with seafoods running from oysters to simply broiled snapper, but its wiry aspects suggest that it might evolve a bit, and it may make slight gains in richness with age.

MORGAN Double L Vineyard 2013
Santa Lucia Highlands. If starting out with the slightest hints of austerity to its lightly toasty, green apple aromas, this rich and decidedly polished wine comes up long on deep, well-formed Chardonnay fruit once in the mouth and is anything but sparing or restrained. It is, however, just a touch hard and stiffens up a bit at the finish, but it is guaranteed to relax and fill out with an extra two or three years of age.

MORGAN Highland Santa Lucia Highlands 2013
Here, once again, Morgan shows a very polished and professional
hand, and, if the wine is not quite as deep as its companion from the Double L Vineyard, it is keenly focused on the appley aspects of honest Chardonnay with a trim touch of oak lending a slight boost in richness. It is fresh and very well-balanced with cleansing acidity joining in at the finish, and, if its prospects for increased complexity over time are modest, it has the brightness and drive to keep nicely for several years.

**PELLEGRINI**

**81 PELLEGRINI Olivet Lane Vineyard 2013**

Russian River Valley. Olivet Lane Vineyard consistently turns out structured Chardonnays that tend to brightness and buoyancy regardless of maker, and this one fundamentally follows form yet shows an extra bit of richness. It is keyed on slightly juicy, very fresh apples and shows a tidy measure of sweet oak and lees, and, while fairly full-bodied, it is nonetheless briskly balanced and very light on its feet with plenty of bounce and an especially long finish. It is a wine without swagger, but it wants for nothing in the way of substance or fruity depth, and it promises to unfold famously with age.

**88 PENNYWISE California 2012**

Clean, slightly wiry and decently fruited, this citrus-tinged effort comes with medium weight and enough energy to be in balance from front to back. One might argue that it is on the direct side, but, given its modest price, there is more here than one should ask of the wine and it is well-worth remembering.

GOOD VALUE

**SANTA BARBARA WINERY**

**87 SANTA BARBARA WINERY Reserve Sta. Rita Hills 2013**

Bright and bristling with the bracing acidity that marks good, cool-climate Chardonnays, this is not a “reserve” that plays to lavish oak and unctuous ripeness but, is instead, a comparatively lean and compact look at the grape. It is biased to green apples and fresh citrus with a slight stony bite at the finish, and its firm balance predicts years of useful life.

**TALLEY**

**89 TALLEY Rincon Vineyard Arroyo Grande Valley 2013**

The deepest and best-filled of the new Talley Chardonnays, this one from the Rincon Vineyard steps out well ahead of its mates by virtue of both its keen, fruity focus and extra range. It is at once vital and concentrated with plenty of volume and weight, but it never once threatens to be in any way over the top, and its layered expression of sweet apples and oak comes with a deft bit of mineraly nuance. It is firmed up by acidity in all the places that need firming, and its combination of substance and structure is the recipe for successful aging.

**TALLEY Rosemary’s Vineyard 2013**

Arroyo Grande Valley. There are parts of a serious Chardonnay at work here even though the wine seems bit slow to start and is always slightly throttled back when compared to the very best Rosemary's Vineyard bottlings of the past. It is fruity, well-ripened and reasonable oaky, yet it is relatively muted in richness. While not especially nervy or tight, it may find a fuller voice with age, and it is one on which it is worth keeping a careful eye over the next two or three years.

**TALLEY Oliver’s Vineyard Edna Valley 2013**

Even though it offers scattered glimpses of sweet lemons and candied apples in its quiet aromas, this firmly balanced wine is sparing in defined fruit in the mouth and fights with a fair bit of youthful coarseness just now. It should settle and smooth with some time in the bottle, but it never quite finds the fruity focus or volume to wholly convince.

**THREE STICKS One Sky Sonoma Mountain 2013**

Very much influenced by lots of caramelly oak in the nose but never neglecting plenty of ripe apple fruit, the Three Sticks One Sky Chardonnay is a big, fairly viscous version that emphasizes richness over restraint. It will be seen by some as being a bit over the top, and we would be loathe to argue the point, but, while it may lack finesse, it is deep, full-throated stuff that will find a place alongside the richest fare.

**THREE STICKS Origin Durell Vineyard 2013**

Sonoma Valley. Again favoring ripeness and richness and caring little for restraint, the Durell Vineyard bottling follows the lead of its One Sky cellarmate. It is quite full in body with ripe apples and oak to spare, but it veers to both hardness and heat as it goes. It could do with some smoothing, and additional time in the cellar may provide it, but it is just coarse enough to make us want to hedge our bets.

**THREE STICKS One Sky Sonoma Mountain 2013**

There is no doubting the intent here. This is a rich, toasty, near to mature bottling whose mid-gold color and layered aromas speak loads about the direction of its making. Its fruit center, however, regardless of its soft apple and pear character, lies down on the job just a bit and never delivers the charm and depth to balance both the wine's richness and its firming acidity. Try it with a cream-sauced roast chicken.

**THREE STICKS Sierra Madre Vyd Santa Maria Valley 2012**

Seemingly even more overdone than its cellarmate above yet at the same time underfruited, this one manages to take on lots of oak barrel character as well as a touch of a sharp cocktail onion note in the nose. While it begins with a fair bit of viscosity and glyceriny roundness, its palatal impacts quickly tighten en route to a sparse and narrow finish.

**WINERY SF North Coast 2013**

So sparse in fruit and so stiff and austere that it would drop to the back of the pack even if not hindered as it is by an odd and off-putting, vaguely chemical quality, this difficult wine is little more than a hollow shell whose bitterness and earthy intrusions get far too much play.
Best Buys in the Market

Cabernet Sauvignon

It is no secret that good Cabernet Sauvignon very rarely is cheap and that prices for the top labels only seem to go up with each vintage, but that does not mean that there are no noteworthy values to be had, and the current spate of fine vintages has, in fact, provided more than a few. A trio of 90-point performers heads up this month’s list of recommended wines and puts a lie to the notion that outstanding Cabernet must necessarily come with triple-digit prices. The mannerly, carefully composed ROCCA Vespera Napa Valley 2012 ($40.00), the deep and defined TRUCHARD Carneros Napa Valley 2012 ($38.00) and the accessibly, generously fruited WHITEHALL LANE Napa Valley 2012 ($40.00) best much of the competition costing two and three times as much. Keep an eye out as well for the nicely extracted, ageworthy ROTH Alexander Valley 2012 ($28.00) and the solid, similarly sturdy MURPHY-GOODE Alexander Valley 2012 ($26.00), and the direct, nicely focused FIRESTONE Santa Ynez Valley 2012 ($22.00) fills the bill as an affordable and tasty offering that is ready to go now. Among Cabernets that check in at $20.00 and less, the lively BISHOP’S PEAK Paso Robles 2013 ($20.00), the friendly, cherry-like ANCIENT PEAKS Paso Robles 2012 ($18.00) and the graceful EOS Central Coast 2013 ($20.00) are satisfying, 86-point efforts well worth seeking out, and, while lighter and far from complex, the BOGLE California 2013 ($11.00) is clean, fruity and balanced with a quiet varietal voice that belies its rock-bottom price.

Sauvignon Blanc

Sauvignon Blanc has always been the source of plentiful fine values, and the 2014 vintage has provided a bounty of very good, sensibly priced versions, and some, like the deep, incisively varietal PECH MERLE Dry Creek Valley 2014 ($19.00) and the rich, carefully composed SONOMA-CUTRER Winemaker’s Release Russian River Valley 2014 ($25.00) are serious wines of great definition and depth that absolutely excel at the price. Those who favor fruit over the grape’s grassier traits should take notice of the substantial CANNONBALL Sonoma County 2014 ($15.00), while fans of mildly herbal Sauvignons are sure to enjoy the RODNEY STRONG Charlotte’s Home Northern Sonoma 2014 ($17.00) and the briskly balanced SANTA BARBARA WINERY Santa Ynez Valley 2014 ($16.00), and the WHITE OAK Russian River Valley 2014 ($17.00) is an energetic working that ups the ante when it comes to varietal grassiness. The expressive, very well-balanced DRY CREEK VINEYARD Dry Creek Valley 2014 ($18.00) and its bright and buoyant cellarmate, the DRY CREEK VINEYARD Fumé Blanc Sonoma County 2014 ($14.00) continue the winery’s winning ways with the grape, and, if admittedly shy on varietal character and a few steps short of winning full one-star recommendation, the lightly sweet CK MONDAVI Willow Springs California 2014 ($7.00) is clean as can be and priced right for unceremonious, warm-weather gulping.

Pinot Noir

New Pinot Noirs wait in the wings and will be featured in next month’s issue, but a half-dozen recent favorites warrant consideration while their diminishing supplies remain. The sleek and neatly polished RIVERBENCH Estate Grown Santa Maria Valley 2013 ($28.00) and the rich, fairly full-bodied COSA OBRA Sonoma County 2013 ($28.00) are 90-point standouts that show off the grape in two different but equally flattering styles, and both the HANDLEY Mendocino County 2013 ($25.00) and the CARMEL ROAD Monterey 2013 ($22.00) earn an enthusiastic nod for their very generous, well-defined, ripe cherry fruit. Finally, price-conscious fans of good Pinot Noir should find room on the shopping list for the vibrant BISHOP’S PEAK San Luis Obispo County 2013 ($20.00) and the juicy, eminently fruity TESTAROSSA Cuvée 107 Santa Lucia Highlands 2013 ($20.00).

Connoisseurs’ Series

Created by the California Wine Club exclusively for Connoisseurs’ Guide readers, and featuring only our two-star and three-star selections, the CONNOISSEURS’ SERIES wine-of-the-month club makes hard to get wines available for you. Featured this month are: TESTAROSSA Pinot Noir Garys’ Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands 2012, DONUM ESTATE Pinot Noir Carneros 2012 and TESTAROSSA Chardonnay Fogstone Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands 2013.

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