

Shopping for Grape Place

I work at a community college and my wife works part time so she can spend more time with our two young sons, which means my family is on a tight budget. If, like me, you purchase wines with your rapidly overspent budget in mind, you may have wondered at one point why two wines sitting next to each other on the shelf have markedly different price tags. Is it because the grapes were higher quality, or only a few bottles were produced, or the wine was made by a famous winemaker, or because the wine is in a beautifully etched heavyweight bottle with a nice natural cork? Are more expensive wines always better? Are all wines about the same and it's just a matter of brand marketing and cult status which sells wine? Does it matter if some reviewer gave the wine 87 points (is a B+ wine tasty)? How is it possible to determine a relative quality/price ratio with all this information? Today let's talk about where the grapes come from, which is known as the appellation of origin.

First we'll start with some background information regarding the geographic origin of the grapes which is printed on wine labels. All wine grapes were grown somewhere. The way we describe this on a wine label is by declaring the appellation. In the US we call this designation the American Viticultural Area, or AVA. In France it is known as the AOC, in Spain it is the DO, and in Italy it is the DOC. The general idea of all these systems is similar in that there are legally-defined geographic areas where wines made predominantly from grapes which came from a given area may use that place name on the label.

Using the appellation, let's explore how we can become bargain hunters for wines with high quality to price ratio. The general rule for AVA's with regard to quality/price is that the smaller the geographical area on the label, the more likely the wine is going to be high quality and distinctive, but perhaps also expensive. For instance, Yamhill-Carlton AVA is a sub-appellation of the Willamette Valley region which has a great reputation for growing wine grapes. Because of this reputation the grapes of Yamhill-Carlton are more expensive than generic Willamette Valley grapes. A winemaker purchasing Yamhill-Carlton fruit is going to want to put that on her label because she will be able to sell the wine for more money, thus recouping the cost of the more expensive fruit. In the bargain wine realm, this means that a wine labeled as "Willamette Valley," although not as nice as a Yamhill-Carlton wine, should be more interesting and thus more expensive than a wine labeled "Oregon." The lowest levels of appellation designation are national wines "America," "France," "Chile," and wines which are blended across countries and thus don't even have a country designation.

So, how do you know if a region makes high quality/price wine? That is a more difficult problem, and usually requires picking up a "wines of the world" type reference book to learn about some of the famous wine regions in each major wine-producing country. Or, come take our "Wines of the World" class at Umpqua Community College! Armed with this knowledge you may find that an older "Rioja" red wine from Spain which has been marked down is a good bargain, whereas an older Spanish white wine with no appellation is probably not worth exploring. Because smaller usually equates to better quality and more expensive, it also means that the bargain hunters may need to focus on "Goldilocks" regions, which are neither too small and thus too expensive, nor too large and thus of lower quality. Some American regions known for making quality wines at affordable prices are: Lodi, Clarksdale, El Dorado /

Sierra Foothills, Monterey, and Lake County in California, Southern Oregon in Oregon obviously, and the Columbia Valley in Washington.