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## Good buys now on Washington merlot, Oregon pinot noir, American bubbly

By Paul Gregutt

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THE DECLINE overall in wine prices has continued throughout 2010. A tough spot for wineries but a glorious opportunity for consumers. As I wrote a year ago, the supply chain jammed up as restaurants stopped buying and inventory-heavy wholesalers dumped wines at lowball prices to big buyers such as Costco, Garagiste and Wine Exchange. Wineries' sales also slowed unless they had waiting lists for their wine clubs, high tasting-room traffic, specialized in low-cost wines or got extraordinary reviews from big publications.

At the same time prices were falling, quality was rising. Here in Washington, the 2005 through 2009 vintages, though each unique, have all been quite good. In particular, 2007 is a vintage for cellaring, 2008 outstanding for white wines, and 2009 (at least so far) a perfect melding of the depth of 2006 and balance of 2007. As this is written, 2010 is just beginning, but for all the doom-and-gloom in the wine media, it's looking very good for Washington.

Oregon got bad reviews for its 2007 pinots, but I found producers who made outstanding wines in that rain-soaked vintage. And though 2008 is supposedly a great Oregon pinot year, it is spotty, too. In the Willamette Valley, the specific vineyard location and the picking decisions of the winemaker have far more impact than anything else.

For 2010, I'm putting the focus on a pair of iconic grapes — merlot for Washington and pinot noir for Oregon — along with some inexpensive bubbly to get the holiday season rolling. Cheers!

### SPLENDID WASHINGTON MERLOTS

Recent supermarket-wine-sales data confirm that merlot remains the second-best-selling domestic red wine (cabernet is No. 1). In my view, the best merlots made in America at any price point come from Washington. Here are 12 outstanding bottles in current release, six under \$15 and six over \$15. Some will be difficult to find, and you may wish to contact the smaller wineries directly to see where their wines are sold. A quick Google search will get you to their websites. Prices are suggested retail, but you may find many selling for less.

#### **Arbor Crest 2007 Four Vineyards Merlot; \$15**

The four vineyards referenced are exceptional: Dionysus, Conner Lee, Bacchus and Klipsun. This shows deliciously ripe, red-berry fruit and well-balanced tannins, barrel-aged for 20 months in 40 percent new oak.

#### **Kirkland Signature 2008 Merlot; \$10**

The Costco house brand. Vineyard sources are first-rate, and the wine has exceptional depth and structure for merlot this cheap. Cassis, dark plum, black cherry, licorice, espresso and smoke are woven together nicely. A great steak wine.

**Columbia Crest Grand Estates 2007 Merlot; \$12**

The Grand Estates merlot is one of the best-selling wines in America, and it's easy to see why. Seamless, smoky, supple and seductive, its exotic sandalwood and Asian spices weave into the palate, wrapped around broad black-cherry and blackberry fruit flavors.

**Columbia Crest Two Vines 2008 Merlot; \$8**

The blend includes 6 percent syrah, and the wine is tart and clean, offering a mix of berry fruits and a finish lined with vanilla and tobacco. Overall, the balance is excellent, the wine juicy and fresh, and the blend just about perfect.

**Pine & Post 2007 Merlot; \$8**

Fruit forward with sweet, clean scents of berry and black cherry. Some darker grapes in the blend (cab franc, syrah and lemberger) add color and a little bite to the finish.

**Eliseo Silva 2007 Merlot; \$10**

Soft and easy-drinking, this plum-and-cherry-flavored wine is already at its peak, the fruit generous and round, the finish tailing off gently into a Milky Way sort of confection.

**Woodward Canyon 2007 Merlot; \$39**

Deep and textural, this stunning wine packs together concentrated red fruits, preserves and cassis. At first it shows a little heat from the 15 percent alcohol, but as it breathes open over hours (and even days) the primary fruit gives way to subtle veins of olive, earth, coffee and toast.

**Fielding Hills 2008 RiverBend Vineyard Merlot; \$36**

Lush aromas of red berries, black cherries and chocolate invite you into a wine loaded with powerful ripe-fruit flavors. Threads of iron and coffee lead you into a lingering finish.

**Northstar 2007 Merlot; \$40**

Northstar's Columbia Valley bottling, at 11,500 cases, is much easier to find than the just-slightly superior Walla Walla bottling. Young and muscular, the mix of black fruits, sweet oak and toasty spice is focused and compelling.

**Olsen Estates 2008 Merlot; \$19**

A fine effort from this Yakima Valley grower/producer, this pure merlot is generous and forward, with rich cherry and raspberry fruit. Spicy in the nose and in the mouth, it has the concentration and depth to develop nicely over the next decade.

**Seven Hills 2008 Merlot; \$22**

Often underrated, wines from Seven Hills are sleekly European in style. This spicy merlot has well-defined berry fruit, baking chocolate and a streak of herb. Give it plenty of breathing time, or better yet, decant it.

**L'Ecole No 41 2007 Merlot; \$25**

The Columbia Valley bottling from L'Ecole is widely available, complex and aromatic, with tobacco scents and undertones of tar, licorice and clove wrapped around tart, pie-cherry fruit.

**TASTY OREGON PINOT NOIR UNDER \$22**

You would have to turn back the clock at least 15 years, and perhaps 20, to find Oregon pinot noirs this good at these prices. A number of factors have converged to create a most exceptional buying opportunity. Besides the poor 2007 vintage reviews that slowed sales, an explosion of new wineries — most mom 'n' pop startups — began crowding each other out on retail shelves. Vineyard capacity is outpacing sales. There are too many single-vineyard, single-clone, single you-name-it wines, priced in double (sometimes triple) digits. So a number of savvy winery operations, including some biggies from California, have swooped in to buy bulk wine or cheap grapes, and they're bottling plain old pinot noir blends and selling them at prices competitive with the cheapest pinots from New Zealand, Chile and France.

In order of preference (by rank and price):

**Brandborg 2007 Bench Lands Pinot Noir; \$22**

Light and aromatic, this wine seduces with lush aromas of cherries and baking spices. It has the elegance that only fine pinot noir can express, surprising in a vintage that was often lambasted by critics. Rich details of spice and incense and chocolate truffles add to the lingering finish.

**Spindrift Cellars 2008 Pinot Noir; \$20**

Scents of dark chocolate weave around delicate, feminine pinot noir fruit flavors. The overall impression is light and elegant, a mix of berries and wafer-thin chocolate.

**Redhawk 2008 Pinot Noir; \$18**

Half the fruit is estate-grown, and this light, clean, well-balanced wine drinks like a village Burgundy, with just the right hint of herb around the tart red fruit.

**Illaha 2008 Pinot Noir; \$20**

This affordably priced pinot spent 15 months in French oak, 20 percent new. Sappy fruit flavors of cherry and raspberry, with a lick of caramel, make this a great choice for near-term drinking.

**Libra 2008 Pinot Noir; \$20**

Libra is a side project from Panther Creek's winemaker. This Willamette Valley pinot noir is dark, aromatic and surprisingly concentrated, oozing blackberries and black-cherry fruit, with a splash of cola. It's front-loaded, full-bodied and drinking well right now.

**Plowbuster 2008 Pinot Noir; \$20**

Warmly sensuous in the mouth, this gentle and attractive pinot noir offers soft fruit, a mix of berries and

plums, that slides gracefully across the palate. It's dappled with hints of cracker and chocolate.

**Acrobat 2009 Pinot Noir; \$18**

From King Estate, this dusty, young, tart wine is scented with earth and pine needles. Give it extra breathing time and it will broaden out with good grip and medium finish.

**Willamette Valley Vineyards 2009 Whole Cluster Fermented Pinot Noir; \$20**

WV makes a zillion different bottlings, but this is the youngest, freshest and best value. At just 12.5 percent alcohol, it has a sweet core of pretty cherry fruit. A fine sipping wine.

**Amity 2008 Pinot Noir; \$22**

Soft, pretty and pleasant to drink, the widely available Willamette Valley bottling might pass for a simple Bourgogne rouge. Cranberry and watermelon fruits meld with light, balanced tannins.

**Coeur de Terre 2008 Pinot Noir; \$20**

Aromatic and floral, this forward and fruity pinot mixes spicy raspberry and strawberry fruit, leading into a cherry-cola core. That's where it remains through a quick fade. Good near-term drinking.

**Castle Rock 2009 Pinot Noir; \$14**

This California behemoth makes a decent Oregon pinot, though still so young the tannins have not lost their stiff earthiness. But the mouth-coating vanilla cream and strawberry fruit compensate nicely.

**A to Z Wineworks 2008 Pinot Noir; \$20**

At 62,000-plus cases, this is Oregon's most widely available pinot. Oregon does not have vast contiguous vineyards, so these grapes have been sourced from widely scattered locations, but the result is perfectly quaffable: gentle, lightly fruity, crisp and clean.

**AFFORDABLE AMERICAN BUBBLY**

Sparkling wines, notably Champagnes, are as much a part of the holiday season as gifting and feasting. In fact, a bottle of bubbly makes a nice gift and enhances any feast. But real Champagne, though delightful, is a little spendier than some budgets allow. So here are some American-made sparklers, done in the Champagne method (that is, refermented in the bottle), at prices that Champagne can't match. All are finished with a wire cage and a Champagne-style cork, and require caution (and a covering dish towel) when being opened. Prices quoted are suggested retail, but during the upcoming holiday season, you should be able to beat these prices by shopping around.

**Woodbridge NV Brut; \$10.** A sparkling addition to the Woodbridge line is this just slightly off-dry brut made from 100 percent chardonnay grapes. Though not mÃ©thode champenoise, it is well-made, with smallish bubbles and no carbonated roughness.

**Korbel 2008 Brut; \$16.** I don't agree with Korbel's use of the word Champagne on its label (it reads California Champagne, but in truth it's California sparkling wine, not real Champagne). The blend is a little odd (chardonnay, sangiovese and French colombard), but the flavor is good, the method of manufacture is traditional, the grapes are grown organically, and for the first time, the wine is vintage-dated.

**Domaine Ste. Michelle NV Blanc de Blancs;** \$12. Nice package, yeasty, with a toasted-coconut flavor that spices up the fruit. Primarily chardonnay, with no perceptible residual sugar.

**Domaine Ste. Michelle NV Blanc de Noirs;** \$12. Though excessively foamy, once it settles down this wine has a pretty, pale-copper shade and a hint of strawberry and cherry in the fruit flavor. It's dry and delicate, with a clean, persistent finish.

**Domaine Ste. Michelle NV Brut;** \$12. Pungent, spicy, with a scent that suggests it has a fair amount of riesling in the blend. Medium-bodied, with a neutral palate of green apples and a whiff of orange liqueur.

**Domaine Ste. Michelle 2004 Luxe;** \$24. Luxe is the high-end offering from Domaine Ste. Michelle, using free-run chardonnay from a 25-year-old Columbia Valley vineyard. It has more refinement, grip and depth than the regular Blanc de Blancs, and the sort of toastiness associated with top Champagnes. Worthy of a place of honor on your holiday table.

**Gruet NV Brut;** \$15. There's a reason for the long-running popularity of this New Mexico bubbly: It tastes good. Dry, fresh, clean and elegant, it outshines some of the cheaper Champagnes from France.

**Gruet NV Blanc de Noirs;** \$15. A bit foamy, but full-bodied and rich, with bold fruit dotted with hazelnut/caramel highlights.

**Gruet NV Brut Ros ;** \$15. The least successful of the three Gruet offerings that I tasted, this pinkish/salmon-colored wine seems more rough-hewed and sour than the Brut or the Blanc de Noirs. But it's a pretty wine and would be a fine match for a smoked-salmon mousse or appetizer.

**Mountain Dome NV Brut;** \$17. This Spokane producer of sparkling wines makes a full line of big, bold, potent bubbly. The basic brut has ripe fruit flavors that reach into banana/tropical, with large, yeasty bubbles and a persistent spicy finish.

**Mountain Dome 2004 Brut;** \$22. This vintage brut has six years of bottle age, which has smoothed out some of the rough edges. Still bold and fruity in the Mountain Dome style, it can stand up to some rich cream and butter sauces.

**Mountain Dome NV Brut Ros ;** \$22. Crafted from Washington-grown pinot noir and chardonnay grapes, this bright, coppery wine is my favorite of the Mountain Dome lineup. Suggestions of apple and strawberry, a whiff of toast (from fermentation in oak barrels), and a lingering, crisp finish make this especially appealing.

*The revised second edition of Paul Gregutt's "Washington Wines & Wineries" is now in print. His blog is [www.paulgregutt.com](http://www.paulgregutt.com). Gabriel Campanario is a Seattle Times staff artist.*

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