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Wine and Spirits: Several good Washington wines can be found for under \$15

Randy Buckner;

Quality red wines for under \$15 can be difficult to locate, but surely there must be a bevy of laudable white wines to purchase in this price range, right?

Wrong.

There are plenty of economical white wines on the shelf, but do you really want to take one home for dinner? Far too often these wines are used as cash cows. They are cheaply made, with a quick turnaround time from production to market.

This may be today's winery economics, but I think I'll leave the bovine wine in place and grab another bottle.

Can inexpensive white wine be fashioned that really delivers proper varietal character, balance and purity of fruit? Of course it can. Take a look at Italian pinot grigio, sauvignon blanc from New Zealand and the Loire, German Riesling, Loire chenin blanc, pinot blanc from Alsace, and Spanish albariño. These wines are all imports, and yet you can find dandy examples in our price category.

While it may seem that I'm a Europhile when it comes to wine, I'm not. I am an advocate of American wines; however I cannot promote bad winemaking practices.

Far too often I encounter wines that show no resemblance to the grape they come from. They are flabby, and oak dominates the flavor profile.

As if this were not enough, residual sugar is frequently left in the wine at threshold levels, giving a false impression of sweet fruit flavors.

So, with all of this in mind, I set out to find those Washington wineries that are not afraid to sever the bonds of ho-hum winemaking and that are providing honest wine values to the consumer.

The results of that search follows, and I think that you will be pleased with a few. Here are my top 10 favorites:

Ninth-tenth (tie): 2001 Bookwalter, chenin blanc, Ciel du Cheval Vineyard, Columbia Valley, \$10. The nose is filled with peaches, apricots and citrus peel. While quite sweet, the wine is not at all cloying. Peaches and almonds linger on the finish; 85/85.

Ninth-tenth (tie): 2001 Gold Digger, chardonnay, Okanogan Valley, \$15. Yellow delicious apples, mango, vanilla and butterscotch intermingle on the nose. Creamy but maintaining nice acidity, flavors echo the nose, with a dash of almond for added complexity; 85/85.

Seventh-eighth (tie): 2001 Ea-ton Hill, semillon, Fairacre Farms Vineyard, Yakima Valley, \$10. Light to medium-bodied, this crisp new release gives off aromas and flavors of lemon zest and fresh figs. Match with your favorite shellfish; 85/86.

Seventh-eighth (tie): 2001 Fox Estate, riesling, Columbia Valley, \$10. Freshly sliced apples and apricots delight the nose, while apricots dominate the flavor profile. With 3.8 percent residual sugar, the wine could use a tad more acidity to balance out the sweetness; 85/86.

Sixth: 2000 Covey Run, chardonnay, Columbia Valley, \$9. A treeoad of pears takes the nose for a lovely ride. Creamy in texture, the green apple, pear and vanilla flavors combine to make a pretty tasty wine for the less than \$10 price class; 85/87.



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Fifth: 2002 Bookwalter, Johannisberg riesling, Columbia Valley, \$10. Apples, honeysuckle and apricots rule the nose. Sweet, with very juicy flavors of mango, citrus and honeysuckle that is enjoyable. This is a nice match for a fruit and cheese plate; 87/87.

Fourth: 2001 Silver Lake, fumé blanc, Columbia Valley, \$10. Nice acidity heralds in the lovely nectarine, grapefruit and orange peel aromas and flavors. Oak is noticeable, but is not a predominant player; tasty; 87/88.

Third: 2001 Hogue, viognier, Genesis, Columbia Valley, \$13. Too bad more of this wine was not produced. Run, don't walk to your local wine shop and request this wine. Straw gold in color, this viognier delivers classic aromas of peaches and honeysuckle, augmented by delicate vanilla notes. Delightfully crisp, the flavors resound on the lengthy aftertaste; 87/89.

Second: 2001 Waterbrook, chardonnay, Columbia Valley, \$10. Pleasantly crisp, without a heavy oak burden, this chardonnay exudes aromas and flavors of casaba melons, white peaches and citrus. Well-balanced with a creamy mouth feel, the wine finishes on a refreshing note; 88/90.

First: 2002 Thurston Wolfe, PGV, Columbia Valley, \$13.50. A delightful straw color with a peach tinge. The nose is an enchanting mix of mandarin oranges, peaches and floral notes. Light to medium-bodied, delicate, with delightful fruit from the pinot gris and viognier. I wish that more of these blends enhancing the individual grapes were made; 89/90.

Dr. Randy "Bucko" Buckner lives in Steilacoom and is a family practitioner in Olympia. A collector and consumer of wine and spirits for almost 20 years, he is a professional wine judge and covers new U.S. wine releases for The Wine Lovers' Page on the Internet. Wines are rated on a 100-point scale, with the first number indicating quality, and the second rating relative value. You can e-mail questions and suggestions to him at Randybuckner@att.net or go online to www.wineloverspage.com/bucko.

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