

# The Wine Cellar



**Protocolo 2004 Red**  
**5.99**  
 Case Price \$65  
 Reg. \$7.99  
 "Spicy, with lots of jammy raspberry"

**Bodegas Borsao 2005 Borsao**  
**6.99**  
 Case Price \$76  
 Reg. \$8.99  
 Wine Advocate: "For \$7 the word is BUY!"

**Bodega Lurton 2006 Pinot Gris**  
**7.99**  
 Case Price \$86  
 Reg. \$9.99  
 "Peachy, lemon and viscous"

**Finca Luzon 2005 Luzon**  
**7.99**  
 Case Price \$86  
 Reg. \$9.99  
 Advocate: "Loads of blackberry and cassis"

**Lurton 2004 Les Salices Viognier**  
**8.99**  
 Case Price \$97  
 Reg. \$12.99  
 "Viscous, peachy, tropical French bargain"

**Blue Lady 2004 Sauvignon Blanc**  
**9.99**  
 Case Price \$108  
 "Melons, grapefruit, touch of peach"

**Angeline 2005 Chardonnay**  
**10.99**  
 Case Price \$119  
 Reg. \$12.99  
 "Luscious and tropical SB County Chard"

**Artazuri 2004 Navarra**  
**10.99**  
 Case Price \$119  
 Reg. \$12.99  
 "Remarkably intense Spanish Grenache"

**Blue Lady 2003 Syrah**  
**10.99**  
 Case Price \$119  
 "Cherry, chocolate, oak spice and plum"



## The Latest From Costa Mesa

**Thompkins Cellars 2004 Syrah...\$38.99.** Jeff Dobkin and Julie Thompson-Dobkin make this formidable, micro-production Syrah at an industrial park in Orange County. That may not be the greatest introductory sentence I've ever written or the most enticing selling point I've ever presented, but it's the truth, just like the stated 16.5% alcohol level listed on the front label of this behemoth.

Chocolatey, slick and emotionally moving, this Santa Barbara County red is a blend of grapes from Thompson and Vogelzang Vineyards, and it encompasses the palate while scoffing at concepts like "delicacy" or "restraint."

We first discovered Thompkins Syrah at a massive trade tasting in Pasadena last spring, one that seemed to cover acres of convention floor space, featured hundreds of wineries and which attracted a thousand different wine geeks from throughout Southern California, at least half of whom stepped on my right foot that day. In the jostling and mayhem, I somehow wound up standing in front of Jeff and Julie's table, and I offered my glass out for a sample. I tasted their terrific Cabernet Franc and Grenache, but really freaked out when I sampled their '03 Syrah. I was able to order a mere three cases, which didn't last long (I just can't keep my yap shut about the really cool wines.)

This year, after previewing the '04, I had the same reaction, and I have a little more available to me so I can actually publicize it.

Only 100 cases were produced. We snagged five of them. This is very fun, intense stuff, but don't serve it with halibut or hummus: it requires food with an equal level of intensity, like beef ribs or my favorite, duck breast, which seems ideally suited to big reds with a sweeter profile to them.

## New Bargains

**Bodegas Borsao 2005 Borsao...\$6.99.** Borsao is always cheap and tasty, but it's a little showier in some years. The '05 is one of the "on" vintages, and I found it to be ripe, plump, peppery and slightly chocolatey, with a degree of red fruit and fatness that takes one by surprise. I'm not the only one who thinks so...

Here's Robert Parker's review from the *Wine Advocate*: "(The) 2005 Borsao (is) a blend of 80% Grenache and 20% Tempranillo. This stainless steel-fermented, deep ruby-hued effort displays plenty of sweet black cherry, strawberry, and raspberry fruit, a hint of black currants, medium body, silky tannin, and wonderful ripeness. For \$7, the word is "BUY!" Drink it over the next year."

And here's Steve Tanzer's review from *The International Wine Cellar*: "Ruby-red. Fresh red berries, pepper and a floral nuance on the nose. Racy and nicely focused, with tightly wound, brisk fruit complicated by a tangy mineral element. Firm, focused and juicy on the finish, with a complicating note of tobacco. Very impressive for the price."

**Paringa 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon...\$8.99.** I typically am not a big proponent of Australian Cabernet (at any price), so when we tasted this ripe, deep, cheap and friendly red, I was taken aback. The first word I wrote when tasting it was "shocker." I wasn't expecting this degree of sumptuousness and roundness on the palate, with an abundance of red fruits and faint dashes of earth and dried herb. Then I heard the price, which is actually lower than it was five years ago, and I

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ordered five cases on the spot.

The Paringa brand has invariably been a *Wine Spectator* and *Wine Advocate* favorite and best buy, and I've been a fan of the Shiraz in the past, but I always thought the Cabernet was an underachiever. By virtue of the vintage, or the winemaking (or maybe they threw some Shiraz in the mix, who knows), this Aussie '05 entraces the palate without a hard edge in sight. We like the new label design, too. The price makes the whole enterprise essentially impossible to resist.

**Mas Carlot 2004 Grenache-Syrah Cuvée Tradition...\$10.99.** *Wine Advocate* review: "The 2004 VDP d'Oc Cuvée Tradition is a dark ruby-colored blend of 60% Syrah and 40% Grenache with loads of fruit. Juicy, medium-bodied, and exhibiting plenty of cassis, blackberries, licorice, and earth, it should drink well for 3-4 years."

**Château de Montpezat 2004 Palombières (Grenache-Mourvèdre)...\$15.99.** *Wine Advocate* rating: "(90-92)...The 2004 Palombières has a dark purple color and a big, sweet nose of earth, chocolate, licorice, and spice box as well as a heady concoction of herbs and black fruits. Deep, medium to full-bodied, ripe, and nicely textured, it should drink well for 3-4 years."

**Hocus Pocus 2005 Syrah...\$16.99.** We touted Hocus Pocus back in October, and it's become our best-selling California Syrah.

Crafted by Peter Hunken (of Stolpman Vineyards) and his partner Amy Christine, it's a cleverly-packaged, sensibly priced red with an unheard-of level of spicy complexity and juicy black fruits.

It finally received a review from somebody other than us, and we couldn't agree more with the write-up from the January '07 issue of *Beverage Dynamics*: "Rating 92 (five out of five stars)...Everything you could want in a domestic Syrah; ripe boysenberry anise fruit combines gracefully with a peppery bacon smoke spice; add a touch of coating texture and a long unraveling finish and you have something special; a wonderful value."

**Amancaya 2005 Malbec/Cabernet Sauvignon...\$17.99.** Made by Nicolas Catena (based in Mendoza) and the Rothschilds of Château Lafite, this Argentine red has definite French tendencies. If I'd tasted it blind, I would have pegged it as a new-wave Bordeaux.

It's got a fairly heavy (and expensive-tasting) degree of French oak which wows you immediately in the aromas: lots of high toast barrel and roasted coffee character leads to a deep, rounded, refined and supple medium-bodied red with a dash of charred herb and tobacco traipsing around in the background.

Amancaya is the lower-priced sister label of Catena/Rothschild's Caro project, and this "secondary" juice is a steal. It tastes pretty expensive: fool your friends, startle the neighbors and please your forlorn palate. *Wine and Spirits* just gave it a 92 point rating, and if someone hadn't stolen my copy of that issue, I would print the review here. Trust me, they loved it as much as I did.

## A New Local

**Michael Grace 2004 Syrah...\$18.99.** I scream and yell about Syrah all the time, and how it generally offers more bang for the buck than any other red wine. Of course, sometimes my loud, vocal exhortations occur when I'm standing in line for the bus, or perusing the model railroad magazines at Borders, and I startle people who are standing nearby. If I'm in my natural habitat here in the vino hut at Lazy Acres, my outbursts are acceptable and part of the job. But if I'm walking the streets and decide to extemporaneously preach

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about Syrah's marvelous attributes, the authorities are often called.

This new Syrah from Michael Grace certainly inspires a bit of shouting. It's got an intimidatingly dark color, and the aromas don't just loll around the glass like accountants at a water cooler, they erupt effusively like sprightly, purple-clad cheerleaders at a championship playoff game.

Besides the blackberryish fruit, there are truly enticing oak barrel notes of toffee, caramel and roasted coffee, and on the palate, this Syrah is medium-full and plush, with unexpected concentration. My final note says "just-right ripeness," and I also wrote something indecipherable and profane about what a bargain this is.

If you see me on the streets hollering about Syrah, this is the wine that drove me to it...

## I'd Like An Oaky, Buttery Chardonnay, Please

**Sapphire Hill 2003 Chardonnay Russian River Valley...\$21.99.** Toasty oak and mineral notes in the nose lead to a thick, rich, creamy Chardonnay with plenty of pear and barrel influence, and enough acidity to keep the extravagance from derailing into parody. It's the kind of Chardonnay we've been looking for: opulent and sensibly priced.

**Neyer's 2005 Chardonnay Carneros...\$30.99.** *Wine Advocate* rating: "91...The complex aromatics of the 2005 Chardonnay Carneros includes scents of smoky bacon fat, tropical fruit, honeysuckle, and ripe orange rind. Good underlying acidity adds zest to this fleshy, full-bodied effort. It should drink nicely for 3-4 years."

## The Great Adventurer

The first day of 2007 broke sunny and clear, and I was starting off the new year with four straight days off and no hangover. I'd joined a friend the night before to tune in to the east coast celebrations on TV, and we savored smoked salmon and Champagne, and at 9 pm watched as a multitude of revelers in Times Square exhibited traditionally overwrought exuberance as their time zone hit midnight.

I'd been good and gone home early, knowing I had to pack and prepare to leave for a quick trip to Napa the next morning. Watching east coasters celebrate was enough for me.

Moderation and sobriety were the watchwords for me on the final day of the year. I knew I'd have the rest of 2007 to make up for it...

A giddy feeling of freedom enveloped me as I pointed my car up '01 and stepped on the gas...here it was, the initial morning of a new year, and I'd survived yet another holiday season and had no plans for the next four days. Except for a hotel reservation, I had nothing arranged. This is about as daring as I get with travel. People who backpack around Europe and stay at hostels are just asking to end up in the clutches of an underground slavery ring from which there is no escape. I'll always take amenities over adventure.

The ride up is a five and a half hour autopilot

experience and each town passed in familiar sequence...suddenly I was crossing the bridge over the bay at Martinez and was just minutes from Napa's busy main artery, Highway 29.

I checked in at the Rancho Caymus Inn, a favorite and familiar hotel in Rutherford that features fireplaces in each suite. They're not gas-fired and have no remote control, so I had to build my own fire each evening...this is my idea of "roughing it."

That first night I headed for dinner at Go Fish, a new seafood restaurant in St. Helena that had been lauded by a Napa winery owner I'd just met a few days before at a dinner in Santa Barbara. His recommendation was spot on: the menu and wine list were Tolstoy-esque in length and took me 20 minutes to wade through. I ended up having a half dozen incredibly fresh and tasty oysters, and the best steamed clams I've ever been served. I got even more adventurous and ordered some delicate yellow tail sashimi. Wow, first, no itinerary, now raw fish...I'd become a pedal-to-the metal combination of Evel Knievel and Indiana Jones.

I wasn't sure how many other boundaries I might cross on this trip, but I was hell bent on being unruly and living fast.

The next morning I got in touch with Mike Smith, who works for Schrader Winery (a top-tier Napa Cabernet label); he was kind enough to invite me over at the last minute, and we met and tried barrel samples and chatted for about two and a half hours at his headquarters in Carneros. Mike introduced me to his own brand, Myriad, which will be out in the fall. There are only two barrels (about 50 cases) of this opulent '05 Spring Mountain Cab, but we hope to get at least 12 bottles of the mere 600 that were made. This was vacation, but not work. Discovery and good company are endless motivators.

Mike also asked me if I would like to join him and his wife for dinner that night at Bistro Jeanty in Yountville, where we had a warming tomato soup, steak and fries, and a great bottle of Red Car Syrah that I'd brought with me from Santa Barbara. It was brooding, peppery and laden with black fruit, and most definitely a beef wine.

I'm usually shy when meeting new people, but the Smiths were so open and convivial that I felt liked I'd known them for years. Tuesday was made memorable by their kindness for this lone traveler.

The following morning I went up to Calistoga for a massage at my favorite spa, Lavender Hill, and then drove through the rainy, gray afternoon up to Healdsburg to wander through some wine shops and bookstores. Dinner back in St. Helena at Press that night was marred by a bracingly tart Margarita, but the food was a treat...crab cakes and ravioli at the bar. I was as relaxed as any human being can be, despite all the "derring-do" from the previous two days.

On Thursday I ventured into San Francisco (something I hadn't done in recent years) to have lunch with my friend Jen, and as soon as I crossed the Golden Gate, I got lost. This freaked me out, but after a quick phone call to her for directions, I got back on course and we met at our rendezvous, A-16, an Italian restaurant with great charcuterie, cheeses and meatballs. I was in low-carb heaven, her company was delightful and I felt like staying to goof off for another day rather than continuing my drive back to Santa Barbara. I liked the vibe of a big city, if only for a day or two. After lunch, though, I wimped out, said goodbye to Jen and got in the car for the drive south.

For something so unstructured, it had been a great if fleeting trip. And I'm going to work on being a bit more more adventurous. Next: skydiving in the Himalayas...

Bob Wesley



**Buttonwood '05 Sauvignon Blanc** **10.99**  
Case Price \$119 Reg. \$12.99

"Rich and melony local"

**Masi 2005 Masianco** **10.99**  
Case Price \$119 Reg. \$12.99

"Citrusy, minerally Italian Pinot Grigio"

**Tangent 2005 Sauvignon Blanc** **12.99**  
Case Price \$140 Reg. \$14.99

"Effusively fruity with grassy melon notes"

**Bishop's Peak 2005 Chardonnay** **12.99**  
Case Price \$140 Reg. \$13.99

"Bright, precise, balanced and refined"

**Desert Eagle 2005 Shiraz** **14.99**  
Case Price \$162 Reg. \$18.99

"Sumptuous black fruits...seamless texture"

**Zaca Mesa 2005 Viognier** **15.99**  
Case Price \$173 Reg. \$18.99

"Peachy, tropical, rich and balanced"

**Hocuc Pocus 2005 Syrah** **16.99**  
Case Price \$184

"Magical!...jammy raspberry, blueberry and spicy oak"

**Consilience 2004 Syrah** **16.99**  
Case Price \$184 Reg. \$20.99

"Smoky, ripe and amazingly luxurious"

**Edge 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon** **19.99**  
Case Price \$216

"Full-bodied...loaded with red fruit"