

By DOUG HAMPTON

ON WINE



Cheap wine not the same as bad wine

Cheap wine and bad wine are different things. Bad wine exists at all prices, and cheap wine is better than bad wine at any price.

Bad bottles are available in Helena: a decrepit fruitless Burgundy, a Barolo with the brown sugar tang of oxidation, a Bordeaux reeking of vomit — all probably the result of indifferent storage at some point. Lapses of judgment broaden at lower prices to include corruptions of taste like M.D. 20/20 and Annie Green Springs, which do not have the flavor of wine.

The first duty of wine is to be wholesome. The cheapest wines, which come in jugs or boxes and approach the equivalent of \$1 a bottle on sale, succeed when they are inoffensive, or when their flaws are small enough to be masked by the chill of a refrigerator. Wholesome cheap wines have wine's inherent goodness, its particular fruit taste and smell that naturally complement meat and cheese, its ability to relax, comfort, stimulate the appetite and aid digestion.

A particular advantage of cheap wine is you can pile on the horseradish or eat corn chips and not feel like you're doing anything wrong.

The cheapest reds are great with nachos. They provide a needed digestive assist for the masses of toasted cheese and sour cream. Their mild sweetness soothes and adds richness to hot sauce and jalapenos. They are best drunk out of tumblers that resist the kicks and pumping fists of television sports fans.

Prejudice against particular very cheap wines, or against the entire class, is nearly impossible to overcome, and not really worth the effort: the cheapest wines do not reward discernment. That is why I can't recommend the cheapest white wines, which I find oversweet and too acidic. That's also why the plastic jug of Vintner's Choice Valley Burgundy was removed to the basement solvent shelf after a visitor detected a "nasty note" in the flavor. It might have been better chilled.

One of the cheapest reds ever in Helena is the four-liter box of Summit Burgundy, which was bought on sale recently for under \$5. It was red-purple and had a simple, winey smell and a slightly sweet, earthy, peppery taste. I liked it even when it sold for \$6-plus.

By comparison, the box of Cribari Burgundy, which was recently on sale for somewhat more, was redder and clearer, smelled of cloves (for the first few days) and was fruitier, but still simple and very sweet. The sweetness put me off.

Both wines were fairly heavy, and tasted better after being diluted with a little water.

Even wine hobbyists should not disdain the cheapest wines. Their simplicity gives perspective and more appreciation to better wines, and their low price can assist the purchase of expensive, excellent bottles for those special occasions when wine writers are invited to dinner.