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LA Values
Shop like the pros

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Domaine de la Chanteleuserie, winner of the *W&S* LA Value Challenge



The author, the retailers and guests at the Taste-Off, held at *chi Spacca* in LA.

Mixed Case: LA

Shopping with the Pros

by Luke Sykora

photos by Jeff Newton on location at chi Spacca

At Silverlake Wine, named for LA's trendsetting neighborhood, the Velvet Underground plays on the sound system, and co-owner Randy Clement is on the phone planning a party, discussing DJs and haggling over the price of an event space: "That's a lot of dough for a Monday night...."

Meanwhile, Lou Amdur is quietly browsing the shelves. He ran LA's premier natural wine bar for several years before opening his own retail shop in a nondescript mini-mall next to a nail salon, not far from Silverlake.

I've asked both Lou and Randy, along with ten other local independent retailers, to join us in a search for great buys in LA: Each will visit one of their fellow retailers' stores and choose a single wine, $20 or under, that represents an exceptional value. The goal: to create a mixed case of distinctive, modestly priced wines selected by the taste-makers in one of the most dynamic wine markets in the country. We planned to follow up the shopping process with a taste-off, inviting a panel of judges to taste the wines and select one of them as LA's Ultimate Value Wine.

But what is value?

Lou Amdur, pensive and circumspect, spends a good 10 minutes browsing the shelves at Silverlake.

"To me, value is what is compelling," he tells me. "A wine that is for everyone is not exactly compelling to me." He points to a wine made from the nero buono grape by a cooperative winery in Lazio.

"If I brought that to a party not knowing the constituency of the people, or the food that was being served, everyone would like it," he says.

But he decides to go with something more "confusing, confounding and ultimately maybe successful." He's down to a pair of rieslings from small producers who are busy raising the image of Germany's often-overlooked Rheinhessen, one from Wagner-Stempel and the other from Alexander Gysler.

He chooses the Gysler, a biodynamically grown riesling with 15 grams per liter of sugar buffered, he says, by "brilliant acidity."

"I'm a little more narcissistic," he continues. "I want something that's pleasing to me. You never know when someone is going to say: What the fuck was *that?* I'm attracted, I guess, to that shamanistic side of wine—giving people new, transformative experiences."

Dressed in a t-shirt, board shorts and skater shoes, Randy Clement looks more like a producer of the X Games than a typical wine-store owner. No surprise, then, that his approach to selling wine—if not his tastes—runs toward the populist side.

"It's not about you," Clement says as I drive with him on his own buying trip to Domaine LA.

He recalls an anecdote from years ago: A now-established sommelier who used to work for him made an offhand comment to the effect that "everybody knows Tempier," the Bandol producer partly responsible for reviving the fortunes of the region's mourvèdre-based wines.

"I stopped him right there. I said: You think everybody knows Tempier? You only know that because you're in the wine business. Here's what we're going to do: We're going to go out to the street and I'm going to hold a gun to your head and you're going to flag down the next hundred cars that drive by, and ask them if they've heard of Tempier. And if they haven't, I'm going to pull the trigger. How many times do you think I'm going to pull the trigger? Ninety-nine times? Nope, 100 times."

He trains his staff to sell wine based on metaphor and analogy, and avoid overwhelming them with analysis or factoids—to hook customers with things they understand, for example comparing wines to music or movies.

No need for metaphor, though, when we get to Domaine LA.

"Ok, how are the wines organized?" he asks the young man behind the counter.

"Regionally," the salesperson replies.



Jim Knight of The Wine House (left) shopping at The Wine Country with owner Randy Kemner.

"Where's the south of France?"

Two minutes later, he's chosen his wine: a grenache-based red from the southern Rhône, made by the Brunier family of Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe, who farm one of the most exalted sites in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

It turns out that he's not alone in his predilection for France's sunny southern climes: Five of the twelve wines chosen by the retailers came from southern France, two from the broad Vaucluse appellation, two from Côtes Catalanes and one Côtes du Rhône. Clearly, there's a sense in the retail trade that these Mediterranean-influenced reds offer a compelling sense of place at a reasonable price. But there's diversity here as well: say, a frisky white from the tiny Moselle appellation, where fewer than 50 hectares of grapes grow along the river better known as the Mosel across the German border, and even a dry, savory, sparkling Lambrusco.

But enough beating around the bush. On the next pages, you'll find the wines that caught the eye of LA's top independent retailers.



Lou Wine Shop; below: Domaine LA



"Terroir is very ephemeral with these wines. Typicity is a much more realistic expectation."
—Dan Perrelli, The Wine Hotel

Mixed Case: LA

Château de Vaux 2014 Moselle Les Gryphées ($17)

Selected by Dan Perrelli of The Wine Hotel at Bar & Garden (6142 Washington Blvd., Culver City) *Importer: Charles Neal Selections, Richmond, CA.* A blend of auxerrois, müller-thurgau, pinot gris and gewurztraminer from the terraced banks of the Moselle River, between Alsace and Luxembourg. Domaine certified organic in 2014. Floral and clean, with a white peach flavor that finishes on a knife edge of acidity.



Dan Perrelli: "I didn't know any of the wines [under $20 at Bar & Garden], but I knew the importer. Charles Neal is one of the great value importers in the United States. Plus, at lower price points, I find that mono-cépage wines rarely deliver as much flavor/punch/smiles as blends. Good winegrowers use the characteristics of each grape to build a fuller spectrum of aromatics, boost or diminish acids, etc. Terroir is very ephemeral with these wines. Typicity is a much more realistic expectation."

Domaine Courtault-Tardieux 2014 Touraine Les Sagères ($18)

Selected by Geoff Pattison of Wally's at Buzz (460 South Spring Street, LA) *Importer: T. Elenteny Imports, NY.* Grown from vines ranging from five to 30 years old on two hectares of white clay-slate soil. Organically farmed and hand-harvested. A savory single-site sauvignon blanc with chalky grip and a green, nettle-y scent.



Geoff Pattison: "In looking for value, I usually seek out wines that come from a naturally inexpensive category and over-deliver. This is a great Touraine Blanc from old vines that, while not really complex, is completely correct in its style: crisp, dry, racy and very well made. I usually steer people toward the Old World, France and Spain mostly. I think a lot of people tend to gravitate toward California, thinking imported wines are more expensive, but there are a ton of great, inexpensive, traditionally made wines from old vines coming from places like the Loire, Languedoc-Roussillon, the Rhône, Rioja and Campo de Borja."

Clos des Rocs 2014 Mâcon-Loché En Près Forêts ($19)

Selected by Elliott Wang of Everson Royce at The Wine Hotel (5800 W. 3rd St., LA) *Importer: Rosenthal Wine Merchant, NY.* From a southeast-facing vineyard near Pouilly-Fuissé with 25-year-old vines on clay-limestone soil. Aged in stainless steel and neutral oak. Broad yet fresh, with a firm and earthy flavor length.



Elliott Wang: "I first tasted the wines from Clos des Rocs at [Rosenthal sales rep] Ben Andersen's house next to dozens of other white Burgundies from Neal Rosenthal and, year after year, I've always felt that the En Près Forêts squeezed an unreasonable amount of flavor, complexity and specificity in terms of terroir into a fairly affordable package. There's commonly a perception that white Burgundy is super-fancy, and it very easily can be, but this one isn't, and hits well above its weight class."

Alexander Gysler 2014 Rheinhessen Feldgeflüster Riesling Kabinett ($19.50)

Selected by Lou Amdur of Lou Wine Shop at Silverlake Wine (2395 Glendale Blvd., LA) *Importer: Terry Theise Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, NY.* From red, sandstone-based soil in one of the coolest microclimates in the Rheinhessen. Demeter-certified biodynamic. Riesling blended with eight percent silvaner to lower the acidity. 8 percent alcohol, 15 g/l residual sugar. A flinty riesling with a tense finish that favors mouthwatering acidity over sugar.



Lou Amdur: "Typically, when we use the phrase 'value wine' in the trade, it's simply a synonym for 'cheap wine.' There's another side to value, which to me is a more meaningful metric. And that is: 'Does this wine light my brain up? Does this wine take me some place alive and new? Does it help me better accept my fate here on earth and also look forward to the next few minutes I will spend with it?' That's a lot to ask for a wine under $20, but the Gysler does that. It's light as a feather and delicately fruity, but laced up with acidity and minerality that makes me want to know more."

Fattoria Moretto 2014 Lambrusco Grasparossa de Castelvetro ($19)

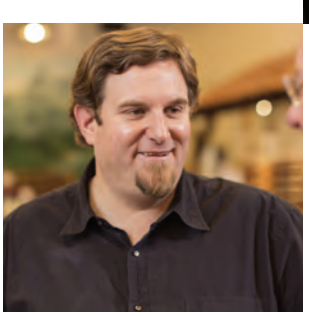
Selected by Dave Leboeuf of Buzz at Everson Royce (155 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena) *Importer: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, CA.* Black olive and thyme scents form a savory Lambrusco with a firm line of acidity.



Dave Leboeuf: "I wanted to get a wine that is a little obscure, but still fun and easy to drink. Lambrusco is relatively unknown in the USA, so I was pretty sure no one else was going choose it. As for the producer, I had heard of Fattoria Moretto, but never tried any of their wines. They produce only about 25,000 bottles [of this wine], and still it sits under $20!"

Domaine de la Chanteleuserie 2014 Bourgueil Cuvée Alouettes ($17)

Selected by Jim Knight of The Wine House at The Wine Country (2301 Redondo Ave., Signal Hills). *Importer: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, CA.* From cabernet franc vines planted between 1967 and 1980 on limestone and clay over tuffeau. Fermented and aged exclusively in stainless steel. Pretty violet color, fine and silky texture, with a bright yet earthy red-raspberry flavor.



Jim Knight: "After searching through the racks, I narrowed my focus on French wines, simply because that is a preference of mine. I then asked for assistance from Samantha Dugan—the general manager and French wine buyer for the Wine Country—whose palate and knowledge I trust immensely. And she was the one who actually turned me onto the 2014 Domaine de la Chanteleuserie Bourgueil. She was so excited and passionate about it that I had to go with this wine."



Poliziano 2013 Rosso di Montepulciano ($15)

Selected by Jeff Zimitti of Rosso Wine Shop at The Wine House (2311 Cotner Ave., LA). *Importer: Dalla Terra, Napa, CA.* 80 percent prugnolo gentile (sangiovese) and 20 percent merlot. Declassified Vino Nobile grapes. Aged in a mix of large vats and once-used barriques. Fresh fruit and a hint of oak cohere in a smoky red-cherry flavor held in a smooth, approachable structure.



Jeff Zimitti: "I tried to take the challenge literally, and pretended I was a consumer walking into a store, thinking about what I might want to eat that night. Maybe a pizza, something easy. And I always think of Italian wine in that value range for that kind of food. I stumbled across Poliziano. They make enough wine that I figured the 'average consumer' would be able to find it without searching high and low. They straddle the fence between traditional (classic) and modern, with more up-front fruit, so they can appeal to a wide audience. The region of Montepulciano is often overlooked; Poliziano makes a solid, inexpensive wine (Rosso, the one I chose) and an excellent top-shelf wine, along with their flagship wine in between."

Domaine Réveille 2013 Côtes Catalanes Franc Tireur ($19.50)

Selected by Randy Kemner of The Wine Country at Lou's Wine Shop (1911 Hillhurst Ave., LA). *Importer: Return to Terroir, San Francisco, CA.* From two parcels of organically farmed carignan, one planted in 1954 and one planted in 1900. Fermented without added yeast and aged for 14 months in concrete. Gripping and punchy, its beetroot and balsamic aromas begin and end on iron-fisted tannins.



Randy Kemner: "The bold graphics on the label attracted me in a Euro-hip 1960s sort of way. I don't drink too many Rhône wines anymore, or southern French, because the alcohols have gotten ridiculous, but I saw that it had under 14 percent, and I thought it might have a good crack at being a fairly generous, pleasant wine. When I go to a wine store, I'm always torn between the known and the unknown. I looked at a Beaujolais and thought, 'That may be what I buy for myself.' But then my wine merchant hat went on and I said: I want to find something that I don't know."

Domaine Ferrer Ribière 2013 Côtes Catalanes Empreinte du Temps ($20)

Selected by Marissa Mandel of Bar & Garden at K&L (1400 Vine St., Hollywood). *Importer: Garber & Co, Topanga, CA.* 135-year-old carignan vines. Farmed organically since 2007. 100 percent carbonic maceration; no added yeast. Ripe, luscious dark-berry flavors held in shape by stony tannins.



Marissa Mandel: "They are committed to responsible stewardship of the land they've inherited; some of the 135-year-old carignan vines that produced the grapes for this wine survived phylloxera, and new vineyard plantings are done with massale selections from the old vines. They are practicing biodynamics and not trying to interfere much in the cellar—not doing anything that takes away from the clear expression of the fruit or the terroir—and that comes through in the wine."

Frédéric & Daniel Brunier 2014 Vin de Pays de Vaucluse Le Pigeoulet ($18)

Selected by Randy Clement of Silverlake Wine at Domaine LA (6801 Melrose Ave., LA). *Importer: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, CA.* 80 percent grenache, 10 percent syrah, 5 percent cinsault, 5 percent carignan. Average vine age: 25 years. Hand-harvested from two vineyards, one on the banks of the Rhône, the other beneath Mount Ventoux in the Côtes du Ventoux. Made by the Brunier family of Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe fame. Light garnet in color, with bright strawberry and resinous herb aromas; vibrant and mouthwatering.



Randy Clement: "If I were selling this wine, I'd say: They're using grapes that used to be thought of as not important. The people that make this wine also make wines that are super-special and super-important. But this, you can drink on a daily basis. It's all about information that people can understand and retain; we go into to super-wine-details only if someone wants us to. To watch and love a movie, you don't need to know what kind of camera or microphones they used—you just watch the movie."

Mixed Case: LA

Domaine la Millière 2013 Vin de Pays de Vaucluse ($15)
Selected by Keith Mabry of K&L at Rosso Wine Shop (3459-1/2 N. Verdugo Rd., Glendale). *Importer: North Berkeley Imports, Berkeley, CA.* Syrah and merlot from 15-year-old vines planted in sandy clay. A wild, rustic, chewy, dense country wine with savory flavors that suggest blood sausage and green peppercorn.



Keith Mabry: "I was pushing for the [sales] associate's favorite wine: What would you take home; what are you excited about? And I like the south of France, so it came together on that category. We talked about a few wines, and I settled on this. Enthusiasm is key for me when taking a recommendation."

J.L. Chave 2013 Côtes-du-Rhône Mon Coeur ($16)
Selected by Jill Bernheimer of Domaine LA at Wally's (2107 Westwood Blvd., LA). *Importer: Erin Cannon Imports, Manhasset, NY.* 60 percent syrah and 40 percent grenache. The Chave family has farmed vineyards on the hill of Hermitage since 1481. Jean-Louis Chave makes this négociant wine from purchased fruit. Firm and brooding, with a dark, beefy black-olive flavor that turns floral at the edges.

Jill Bernheimer: "It's a producer who I don't carry, but respect very much. I've had past vintages. It's a solid wine, year in and year out. We can't all afford Chave Hermitage on a weeknight (and some of us, ever). But for $20, we can try a bottle that, while including some négociant fruit, really represents the style of Chave's more prized wines, including their balance, restraint and minimal-intervention approach."



The Taste-Off

With the wines assembled, we brought together the retailers along with some winemakers, sommeliers and other wine geeks to taste the wines blind and choose the most enticing wine of the bunch in a taste-off at *chi Spacca* on Melrose Ave.



In some ways, of course, it's an exercise in comparing apples to oranges—how do you evaluate the deliciousness of an off-dry German riesling versus a rustic, ripe wine from southwest France? Still, it gave us an opportunity to think through what really gives wine value—especially in the context of wines that aren't from exalted, world-renowned vineyards.

"I was trying to think a lot about parties," said Anthony Wilson, a wine-savvy guitarist who joined us at *chi Spacca.* He imagined a heterogeneous group of people, maybe eating food, maybe not. "I looked for something I would come back to, and I found a lot of them, actually."

For similar reasons, others consider the wine's basic approachability, or sense of completeness.

And what about terroir, or sense of place?

While all but one of the wines garnered at least one first-place vote, the winning wine turned out to be a wine that was particularly about place: Domaine de la Chanteleuserie's 2014 Bourgueil Cuvée Alouettes, chosen by Jim Knight of the Wine House.

As delicious as it was, it would be hard to fully appreciate the wine without understanding that it's genius was in capturing the flavor of cabernet franc from one of the best places for it on earth, all at $17.

The two runners-up, the Gysler riesling and the Brunier Le Pigeoulet, were also noteworthy for capturing a distinctive flavor of a place, translated through sensitive winemaking. It's worth noting that few if any of the wines that the retailers selected were raised in any new oak barrels—new barrels are an added cost and, in humble terroirs, new oak often masks the gentle delight of grapes from workhorse vineyards. While some of the wines had plenty of impact, the impact didn't seem put on or artificial.

"It reminded me a great deal of Yannick Amirault's wines, with just a bit less body and oomph," said Dan Perrelli of the Wine Hotel about the winning Bourgueil. "Beautiful balance of acid, fruit and structure. My note reads: Just the right amount of leaf. And good length to boot!"

So, what genius strategy gave Jim Knight the win? How did he find such a charming, elegant wine for $17? He simply went with a staff recommendation.

