

By Chris Rubin

15 UNDER \$20

When you're looking for a good bottle of wine that won't break the bank.

I REMEMBER VISITING A FRIEND IN PARIS in the early 1990s, and going out to shop for a bottle of wine for dinner at her home that evening. She conversed with the store owner and made a selection, and it was only after we returned to her flat that I realized how little I had spent on the purchase—it was about eight francs which, at that time, came to just about \$1. And it was a very drinkable wine.

Bargains like that may be long gone, but it's still possible to find perfectly decent wines without spending a fortune—and perfectly delicious ones by spending a little more.

Following are 15 wines all priced under \$20—including some way under. While California bottles rarely offer great bargains nowadays, you'll find a few Golden State wineries represented on this list, alongside offerings from Oregon, Chile, and Argentina. Each will impress you for its quality regardless of price.

1. Argentina may be best known these days for high-quality, low-price malbec, but here's proof they know how to work with other Bordeaux varietals: the **2003 Bodegas Salentein Finca El Portillo Cabernet** can be found for less than \$10, and it's a delicious wine of impressive complexity with velvety tannins. (Look for the winery's similarly priced malbec—it's also quite a bargain, if not as complex and satisfying.)

2. Here's a local wine, and I don't mean one from Santa Barbara County: **Rosenthal—The Malibu Estate Chardonnay 2004** (\$19.75). This is chardonnay that's smooth, soft and buttery—not an austere French bottle, but very much a

California example. Food? You don't need food with this wine—but it's big enough to hold up to hearty dishes with complex sauces if you do sip it at the dinner table.

3. Monterey fruit goes into the **San Simeon 2003 Syrah** (\$20). Once the grapes are harvested, the wine is vinified in Paso Robles, then brought down to the Los Angeles facility for aging and bottling. The end result is a rich, full-bodied wine from San Antonio winery, a venerable Los Angeles-based wine producer that also makes custom wines for the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown Los Angeles.

4. Looking for a lively pinot noir bursting with flavors including ripe cherry? Open a bottle of **Argyle 2004 Pinot Noir** (\$20) from Oregon's Willamette Valley. If you can afford to splurge, grab a bottle of the winery's more expensive Nuthouse Pinot, too. You'll find both releases very pleasing.

5. A big wine of great intensity, the **Dry Creek Vineyard 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$19) delivers impressive power for the price. All the grapes in this bottle come from the Dry Creek Valley, an area gaining notoriety for the potency of its wines.

