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August Value Picks

2003 Columbia Crest Chardonnay. Offering a richness and complexity most often reserved for Chardonnays in the \$30 plus price range, this wine offers good green apple, peach, citrus and cantaloupe flavors. Best of all, it is not over-oaked. This wine would be a great pairing with Chicken and Fish dishes. Widely available at around \$10 a bottle!

2003 Montes Alpha Syrah. From the Colchaqua Valley, which is quickly gaining a reputation as Chile's "Cote du Rhone", this Syrah is generously layered with toasty blackberry, plum and coffee flavors and aromas. It has an enjoyable full firm finish. Try it with Lamb, Beef or Pork entrées. One of the best wines Chile has to offer, you can find this little known gem at Costco for \$14.

Featured Winery

Columbia Crest

Wine drinkers often confuse quality with price. Great wines do not have to break your wine-buying budget. An excellent case in point is Washington State's Columbia Crest Winery. Located 200 miles east of Portland along the Columbia River on the Oregon border, Columbia Crest planted its first 500 acres of grapes in 1978 and now has more than 20,000 acres of vineyards. When you consider that an acre of premium grapes yields 60 cases of wine on average, this is no small operation. However, year after year, they produce both handcrafted, superior quality small-lot wines as well as their everyday affordable wines. Quality wines are most often a result of great geography and great winemaking and Columbia Crest has both. Protected from the typical Pacific Northwest rains by the Cascade Mountain range, the south-facing slopes of the vineyards receive only 6-8 inches of rain a year. Winemaker Ray Einberger, who oversees the winery's operations, came from Napa Valley's Opus One as well as Bordeaux's famed, Chateau Mouton Rothschild. So, it is no small wonder that Columbia Crest wines offers one of the best values in American today. The wines range in price from about \$10, for their "Two Vines" selections, to more than \$30 for their "Reserve" and "Grand Estate" bottlings. Bestowed with accolades from the likes of renowned wine writer, Robert Parker, both the "everyday" as well as their premium wines offer extraordinary quality and value. Since 1997, more than a dozen Columbia Crest wines have been named in Wine Spectator's prestigious "Top 100 Wines of the Year." Columbia Crest wines are widely available throughout Collier and Lee Counties at Costco, Publix, and In Good Spirits on Tamiami Trail in Naples.

Did You Know...

At more than 16 gallons per person, Luxembourg is the top wine-consuming country in the world.

Cellar Talk

The great debate rages on. In one corner, the “cork purists” cry foul over the ever-growing popularity of the screwcap, a non-traditional stopper and in the other, open minded wine drinkers say “tradition be damned!” Give us a screwcap quality beverage free from the musty, dank smells often associated with corked wines. “Corked” being the term associated with wines infected with TCA, a randomly occurring chemical compound that develops after the wine has been bottled and exposed to the cork. Me, well...the jury is still out. There’s something inherently romantic about the cork removal process. On the other hand, if I never open another tainted bottle, I’ll be all the happier. Truth be told though, corked bottles are not all that common; maybe 3-5% of all wines bottled are actually contaminated. Even that number is very much in question as to whether it is truly the cork that is bad. Imbibers of this ancient nectar can rarely discern between the flawed wine and one we simply don’t like, and increasingly the cork producers are developing greater control in their production techniques. One major benefit of the screwtop bottle is that opened wines have an extended shelf life beyond their cork-closed counterpart. And, of course you would never again have to chase those spongy little particles of tree bark floating in your \$40 Merlot, as a result of a cork breaking during opening. Those in the cork corner however, make a very strong case for the fact that true “age-worthy” wines, those that are meant to mature beyond the first few years of release, can only do so with a cork closure.

First introduced in the UK in the late 19th century, serious consideration of the screwcap for wines did not take place until around 1970, when even France’s, “*premier cru*” first growth producer, Chateau Haut Brion, experimented with it. By the 1990’s, a number of wine producing countries pushed the number of *corkless* bottles to the one million mark. By 2003, the popularity of the screwtop exceeded demand and bottlings of premium wines in New Zealand and Australia surpassed their cork bottled cousins! Since then, a number of premium producers both here and abroad, including California’s Sonoma Cutrer, Bonny Doon, Beringer and Plumpjack, and vineyards in Alsace and Germany’s Rheinhassen region, have embraced the screwcap closure. While the UK has fully accepted, even demanded the screwcap, the slowest out of the cellar door to forego the cork is... France, where tradition still trumps change.

And the winner of this debate is... sorry, the controversy continues. 95 % of all wines produced are meant to be enjoyed within a year or two after release, Recent studies suggest that while screwcaps may retain the freshness and quality of these wines, don’t look for the iconic Screaming Eagle or Latour to abandon the cork just yet. I think there just may continue to be ample room for both types of bottle closures. In the meantime, I’ll enjoy another glass of the terrific Mount Riley Sauvignon Blanc (New Zealand) and yes, it is a screwcap. I’ll also ponder whether that 1974 Heitz’s Martha’s Vineyard, I have been saving for that special occasion might just end up smelling like my black lab after his romp through the neighbor’s pond!