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Wine & Spirits**MATTERS OF TASTE***When the second best is even better**A website finds bargains by comparing critics' scores with a wine's retail cost. The results can be surprising.***[HOME EDITION]**

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IN the course of his monthly wine tastings with friends in San Francisco, Neil Monnens spotted something he thought might call for further investigation.

Monnens, a 39-year-old advertising executive, always kept track of the wines tasted, averaged the scores and unveiled the wines at the end of the tastings. "I'm the stat guy," he says, "and I kept noticing how often a wine that did real well, maybe finished second overall out of a dozen or so wines, was a lot cheaper than the wines we didn't like as much."

Last year, Monnens began paying special attention to the ratio of quality to price at his tastings. One night he was stunned to discover that he and his friends liked a \$14 Allegrini Palazzo della Torre as well as a \$125 Ducru Beaucaillou.

Monnens thought of a way he could turn his discovery into a moneymaking enterprise: In September, he created QPR Wines (Quality/ Price Ratio Wines), an online buying guide that ranks wines by value -- by the relationship between critics' scores and retail prices.

Monnens plans to rate two sets of wines every issue, 18 issues a year. Annual subscriptions cost \$35. There is no charge, however, for the premiere issue, which is available through his website, QPRwines.com. It rates the relative value of more than 300 wines from the highly touted 2000 Bordeaux vintage and almost 200 wines from the 2001 Bordeaux vintage.

His system: He takes the average retail price of the wines in each vintage that received the same average score from top critics and, using online pricing sources, he divides that by the average retail price for all Bordeaux of that vintage that received the same score. Monnens then assigns a percentage rating for each wine.

A rating of 100% means the wine's price matches the average price for all Bordeaux from that vintage with that score. Any rating below 100% is a better value (the further below 100%, the better the value), and any rating above 100% is a poor value (the higher above 100%, the worse the value).

So, according to Monnens, the best value among the 2000 Bordeaux is Clos du Marquis, the second wine from Leoville-las-Cases. The average critics' score for the wine was 93; the average price of all 2000 Bordeaux with a 93-point rating is \$115. So Clos du Marquis, at an average retail price of \$43 -- 38% of that average -- is what Monnens calls a "great value."

On the other hand, the 2000 Cheval Blanc -- with an average critics' score of 94 -- is terribly overpriced, a bad value, at an average retail price of \$500, more than four times (438% to be precise) the average price of \$114 for all 94-point wines in that vintage.

Critics' rave notices for the 2000 Bordeaux-- Robert Parker called it "the greatest vintage Bordeaux has ever produced" -- drove prices into the stratosphere. But there are some very good 2000 Bordeaux available in much lower price ranges, and Monnens names several especially good values, ranging from \$9 to \$25 a bottle.

I know of no other wine rating system like Monnens', so given the growing number of wine-buying options and the dictates of human nature -- my dad used to say that the desire for a bargain was almost as universal as the desire for food, clothing and sex -- I'll bet QPR will find many adherents.

Curious as to which top critics Monnens was using in his computations, I called and asked him. If he's using Parker, Steven Tanzer and the Wine Spectator, I told him, the average score would be meaningful. If he's using scores by critics from, say, the Wine Enthusiast and the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, I don't think his calculations would necessarily be worth that much.

After a moment of silence, Monnens said, "It's more the former than the latter." Then he quickly added, "I can't actually name the critics I use because of copyright issues and intellectual property rights issues."

Translation: If he named the critics on his website (or in an interview), they might expect to be compensated. They might say -- quite reasonably, in my view -- "Why should this guy make money using my name and my ratings?" (Or as Parker said when I put the question to him, "If I'm doing all the tasting, all the work, I'd object to some guy profiting off my work.")

Figuring it out

Wine shops use the critics' ratings all the time, of course, advertising wines by giving their Parker or Wine Spectator scores in particular. Wine critics may grumble occasionally about stores exploiting their work and reducing their more nuanced tasting notes to mere numerical scores, but they also realize that the stores are giving them free advertising, as well as ego gratification -- explicit acknowledgment of their power and their importance.

Top critics are unlikely to see any such quid pro quo in a small website.

Monnens acknowledges that this is a fair interpretation of his concerns and he says that while he hasn't discussed this with Parker or any other critics yet, he hopes to do so in the near future. "Maybe we could do a financial arrangement," he says, "if I use their scores and name them."

In the meantime, he just hopes folks will take his word for it when he says he's using the scores of top critics, "at least two for every wine."

(Since he won't identify which critics he's using, I can't verify his claims with mathematical precision. But a spot check of his average ratings for a dozen or so wines does suggest they're at least roughly in line with the ratings of the major critics.)

Although Monnens' ratings for the 2000/2001 Bordeaux are available without charge, subsequent ratings are available only to subscribers, beginning with issue No. 2, which contains his value ratings of 2001 and 2002 Pinot Noirs from the West Coast. Among the more than 350 Pinots he ranked, he found 15 "great values," his description of wines that sell for less than 50% of the average price for wines with the same scores.

In fact, of the four groups of wines he's examined so far -- 2000/ 2001 Bordeaux, 2001/2002 Pinots, 2001/2002 California and Washington Chardonnay and vintage/nonvintage Champagne -- he found the most "great values" among the Pinots. When I looked through all his findings so far to come up with his 12 best values overall, seven were Pinots. The single best value of all the wines he's rated, the only one listed as an "outstanding value," is the '02 Sebastiani Sonoma Coast Pinot, a 90-point wine selling for \$11.

But he also lists 13 Pinots selling for more than double the average price for wines with the same scores. Four of those wines -- and 13 others selling for more than 150% of the average -- are from one of my favorite California Pinot makers, Williams Selyem.

Does that mean I'll stop buying Williams Selyem? No. Because of their increasingly high prices, I've already reduced my annual purchases, but I still like the wines and I still buy a few bottles every year. Monnens' information is both interesting and useful, but numbers -- his, Parker's, the Spectator's, anyone's -- take you only so far. The real bottom line -- the only wine-buying advice that's truly useful -- remains: Buy what you personally like and can afford.

Having said that, I have to admit that I was pleased to see that one of Monnens' three best-value Champagnes was the bubbly I use as a house Champagne -- the nonvintage Bollinger Special Cuvee Brut.

Monnens' Champagne ratings -- issue No. 3 of QPR Wines -- were released just in time for the holidays. That issue departs from the two-vintages-per-issue format to look at 224 Champagnes, nonvintage and vintage -- more than a dozen different vintages. His best value? A 93-point 1996 J Lassalle Special Club Champagne at an average retail price of \$50 -- 34% of the average for all 93-point Champagnes. Biggest rip-off: The 89-point 1985 Cristal from Louis Roederer; at \$250, it's more than five times as expensive (556% to be exact) as the average 89-point Champagne.

Issue No. 4 rates more than 200 California and Washington Chardonnays from 2001 and 2002. Best value: the '02 Chateau St. Jean from Sonoma County, an 88-point wine selling for \$9. Worst value: Testarossa's '02 California Signature Reserve, an 87-point wine selling for \$44.

Among the wines scheduled for future issues of QPR Wines are California Cabernet from 2000 and 2001 and Zinfandel, Rhone wines, red and white Burgundy and German Rieslings, all from 2001 and 2002.

Monnens has been in advertising for 15 years, first in Los Angeles and -- since 1991 -- in San Francisco. It was the move to San Francisco, he says, that introduced him to wine -- first white Zinfandel, then Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Merlot. Now his favorites are Rhone wines.

"You can find a lot of them, really good ones, from \$35 to \$60," he says, "and they're ready to drink a lot younger than Cabs and Bordeaux."

Their quality/price ratio is also generally better -- often a lot better -- than most Cabs and Bordeaux.

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The top scores

Here are the three best values from each of the first four issues of Neil Monnens' QPR Wines. The prices shown are averages calculated by QPR; lower percentages represent better price-quality ratios.

2000/2001 Bordeaux:

2001 Chateau la Tour Carnet (\$22, 91 points, 37%)

2000 Clos du Marquis (\$43, 93 points, 38%)

2000 Chateau Leoville Barton (\$125, 96 points, 39%)

2001/2002 West Coast Pinot Noir:

2002 Sebastiani Vineyards, Sonoma Coast (\$11, 90 points, 28%)

2001 Rex Hill Vineyard, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$10, 87 points, 31%)

2001 Echelon, Central Coast (\$12, 88 points, 36%)

2001/2002 California, Washington Chardonnay:

2002 Chateau St. Jean, Sonoma County (\$9, 88 points, 40%)

2002 Souverain, Sonoma County (\$11, 89 points, 43%)

2001 Chateau Ste. Michelle, Columbia Valley, Washington (\$9, 87 points, 43%)

Vintage/nonvintage Champagne:

1996 J Lassalle Special Club (\$50, 93 points, 34%)

1995 Bruno Paillard, Brut (\$53, 90 points, 37%)

N.V. Bollinger, Special Cuvee, Brut (\$32, 91 points, 37%)

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[[Illustration]]

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