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White Burgundy Bargains

These terrific values—all under \$25—from the heart of France will put Chardonnay back on your list of favorites.

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BY ROGER VOSS



Ask any high flyer about white Burgundy, and you will hear that it's love in a bottle and not worth drinking unless it's priced at \$100, \$200 or more. But those same folks don't mention what they drink when the spotlight is off and the market is down. In fact, if they don't drink (at least occasionally) the fabulous under-\$25 wines found here, they don't really understand economics and pride of place.

"One of my difficulties when I talk about Burgundy is to explain that most of it is not expensive," says Louis-Fabrice Latour, the seventh-generation president of négociant Maison Louis Latour, based in Beaune. "I say that we have kept the same price for a generation. It's always been good value."

We're talking about white Burgundy or, as the French labels read, Bourgogne. I have reviewed 450 (and counting) 2009 and 2010 white Burgundies for the *Wine Enthusiast* Buying Guide, and a good portion retails under \$25. The grape variety is invariably Chardonnay.

"People often say to me, 'I don't like Chardonnay, but I do like Burgundy,'" says Andy Chabot, sommelier and director of food and beverage at the exclusive Blackberry Farm in Walland, Tennessee.

Chabot's 211-page wine list contains 15 pages of white Burgundy, starting at \$45, a reasonable restaurant price. "When we tell customers that Chardonnay is white Burgundy, it's an eye opener" for many of them, says Chabot.

Chardonnay is ubiquitous around the world, because—at its worst—it's a grape variety that's easy to grow. At its best, Chardonnay is Burgundy. The French origin, climate, soil and the people who fashion the wines make all the difference.

"When I put 'Chardonnay' on the label, of course I am competing with the rest of the world," says Frédéric Drouhin, president of Maison Joseph Drouhin.

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"But when I put that word 'Bourgogne' on the bottle, then I am also selling our history and our region," says Drouhin, whose 13th-century wine cellars in Beaune once belonged to the kings of France.

So where do the best values come from? The producers, from large to small, consistently come up with the same answers.

"Mâcon and Chablis are the two places I tell customers to look," says Cécile Repolt, export director of the Nuits-St.-Georges négociant Louis Max. "And, of course, I suggest they try our Bourgogne Blanc."

When a consumer opens a bottle, Repolt says, "they appreciate the acidity, the freshness, the pure fruit, the lower alcohol."

Those are certainly some of the reasons to drink white Burgundy. For under \$25—often under \$20—you can find a wine that has a great sense of place, a feeling of being just right, confident without trying too hard.

But beware, once you acquire a taste for Burgundy, you may be a lover for life.

Bourgogne Blanc

The blender's art

Bourgogne Blanc is the hardest wine for a producer to make. It's the equivalent of nonvintage Champagne, where the skill of the master blender is at a premium.

"It's much more difficult to produce than a wine from a single vineyard or village," says Drouhin. "I want our Bourgogne Blanc to have freshness, minerality and fruit. In the quantities we make it, the only way we can get that is by blending together wines from many different places in Burgundy."

Bourgogne Blanc is the grand exception in Burgundy, the wine that does not reflect a specific patch of earth. Branded Burgundy reflects the philosophy of the producer more than the land.

"Our white Burgundy style is fruity, yes, but we made a mistake when we tried to compete with California's wood," says Philippe Bardet, president of Louis Max.

After this late 1990s blunder, Bardet pulled back on the oak. "What Americans are beginning to like about our wines is their fruitiness and freshness," he says.



You will likely see "Chardonnay" on the label. But don't think these are just more global Chardonnays. Although a good Bourgogne Blanc probably won't express the terroir of a particular vineyard, it will still reflect the unique characteristics of Burgundy: the region's minerality and the balance between fruit and natural acidity.

Sometimes, the wine will be touched by wood, other times it will be as fresh as tank fermentation can make it. It will always be crisp, dry and relatively low in alcohol.

This can be the most exciting category of white Burgundy for the price—and the most frustrating. Choosing the right producer is essential. But once you have found a Bourgogne Blanc that you enjoy, then the odds are that you will also have found a full range of enjoyable white Burgundy.

2009

87 Olivier Leflaive 2009 Les Sétilles Chardonnay (Bourgogne). Frederick Wildman & Sons.

abv: 13% Price: \$19

85 Domaines Devillard 2009 Le Renard Chardonnay (Bourgogne). Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits.

abv: 13.5% Price: \$22

85 Simonnet-Febvre 2009 Chardonnay (Bourgogne). Louis Latour Inc.

abv: 12.5% Price: \$16

2010

88 Joseph Drouhin 2010 La Forêt Chardonnay (Bourgogne). Dreyfus Ashby & Co. Best Buy.

abv: 13% Price: \$13

87 Bouchard Père et Fils 2010 Réserve Chardonnay (Bourgogne). Henriot Inc.

abv: 12.5% Price: \$20

86 Joseph Faiveley 2010 Chardonnay (Bourgogne). Frederick Wildman & Sons.

abv: 13% Price: \$20

Chablis

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Crisp, clean, classic

My dad always drank Chablis. He said it was so easy to order and so reliable. Because he lived in London, Chablis for him came from France and was made, as it always has been, with the Chardonnay grape.



Chablis is still easy to say, and the reliability of this wine from the cool north of Burgundy is greater than ever. This is the epitome of Chardonnay. Whether wood aged or just deliciously fruity, it brings together ripe white- and yellow-fruit flavors, touches of citrus and zesty minerality, which comes from the chalk soil of the region. It's the perfect ambassador for Chardonnay.

Chablis is a passion shared by Samantha Dugan, general manager at The Wine Country wine merchant in the Long Beach, California, area. She specializes in buying Burgundy and Champagne for the Eurocentric palates of her customers.

"When I teach about wine, I put two glasses out, one with California Chardonnay and one with Chablis, and ask, 'What do they have in common?'" she says. "When people learn they are both Chardonnay, they can then start to appreciate that wonderful acidity in Chablis."

Chablis is a region apart in Burgundy—an hour's drive north of the Côte d'Or in its own isolated little world. Yet, in all my years of trekking to Chablis, I always run into American buyers and winemakers, looking, they admit, for the Holy Grail.

For grandeur, there are premier cru and grand cru vineyards that dominate the chalk hills around the tiny center of Chablis. For value, look for labels that read "Petit Chablis" and "Chablis," from vineyards spread over the hills and valleys a short distance away from the village itself.

"Chablis is all about balance," says Hervé Tucki of La Chablisienne, the region's excellent wine cooperative. "It's right in the middle between too light and too heavy Chardonnay. And we find the spirit of Chablis in our wines."

Tasting the 2009 and 2010 vintages from bottle, there are two different versions of balance. There is the ripe, full-bodied style of 2009, and the crisper, more mineral 2010.

What is exciting about both of these vintages is the overall quality of the wines and the range of great wines under \$25. These are good vintages to rediscover that French Chardonnay and Chablis can be synonymous.



2009

87 Simonnet-Febvre 2009 Chablis. Louis Latour Inc.

abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$22

86 Domaine Laroche 2009 Saint-Martin (Chablis). Wilson Daniels Ltd.

abv: 12% **Price:** \$24

86 Pascal Bouchard 2009 Le Classique (Chablis). Wine Symphony Inc.

abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$20

2010

90 Bernard Defaix 2010 Vieilles Vignes (Chablis). Winebow.

abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$22

88 J. Moreau et Fils 2010 Chablis. Boisset Family Estates.

abv: 12% **Price:** \$20

87 La Chablisienne 2010 La Pierrelée (Chablis). Ruby Wines Inc.

abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$22

Mâconnais

Full, fat and friendly

Burgundy's Mâconnais region is almost in the south of France. Here, the roofs are made of warm-weather red tile rather than Chablis's snowfriendly slate. From the cool chalk soils of the northern Mâconnais, it's 25 miles south to the warm, clay vineyards of Pouilly and Fuissé, which are a mere skip away from Beaujolais.

In the heart of the Mâcon is the village whose actual name is Chardonnay, according to local tradition the reputed birthplace of the grape variety. Chardonnay de Chardonnay is a good example of one of the two most common styles of Mâcon wine.

"If people start with a Chardonnay that's labeled with the grape, they will inevitably come to Burgundy," says Grégoire Pissot, winemaker at the cooperative Cave de Lugny, which produces Chardonnay de Chardonnay.



It is crisp and unoaked, “what we call natural Chardonnay,” says Pissot. “Ten years ago, we were adding wood flavors, but now we understand that we have the fruit quality to cut out the wood.”

Also in this category, look for the regional Mâcon-Villages wines—one quality step up from simple Mâcon. They are often excellent values.

The other major Mâcon style is more serious, age worthy, expensive and wildly popular in the United States. That’s Pouilly-Fuissé.

Its neighboring appellations, Pouilly-Vinzelles, Mâcon-Fuissé and Viré-Clessé, are in a similar style, but still preserve the minerality of good white Burgundy. They all have the feeling of being kissed by the warm, southern sun.

While most wines from Pouilly-Fuissé cost more than \$25—the price cutoff chosen for this story—the other appellations offer less expensive, delicious, pure Chardonnay drinking. Look for flavors of tropical fruit, apricot, peach and, sometimes, just a touch of wood.



2010

90 Château Vitallis 2010 Pouilly-Fuissé. David Milligan Selections.

abv: 13.5% Price: \$23

89 Louis Max 2010 Vieilles Vignes (Pouilly-Fuissé). Slocum & Sons.

abv: 13% Price: \$21

88 Chanson Père et Fils 2010 Viré-Clessé. Terlato International.

abv: 13% Price: \$19

87 Louis Latour 2010 Pouilly-Vinzelles. Louis Latour Inc.

abv: 13% Price: \$22

86 Cave de Chardonnay 2010 Chardonnay de Chardonnay (Mâcon-Chardonnay).

David Milligan Selections.

abv: 13% Price: \$15

86 Louis Jadot 2010 Mâcon-Villages. Kobrand.

abv: 13% Price: \$14

Premature Oxidation

An unacceptable number of bottles of white Burgundy produced in the 1990s and through 2003 suffered from premature oxidation. Many of the wines lost their fruit and aged too fast. The affected wines turned brown and developed stale, buttered-almond aromas.

This was particularly true of high-end wines from some top domaines in the Côte d’Or, but also grand cru Chablis, which should normally age well.

Multiple causes are now accepted: poor cork quality, too much batonnage (stirring of the lees in barrel), drastic reduction in the use of sulfur in order to make “more natural” wines and allowing oxygen into the wine at bottling.

Burgundians claim that these issues have all now been addressed. The Burgundy Wine Council now controls the amount of oxygen that enters during bottling and has issued directives about how oxygen-free bottling can best be done. Producers who want to reduce sulfur must protect the wine in other ways.

So far, I haven’t encountered any prematurely oxidized bottles from 2006 or more recent vintages. But it’s early—the problems occur as the wines age. If you buy and drink the wines young, as one might with under-\$25 wines, there’s no problem. If you encounter a bottle that is oxidized, return it to your retailer.

Taking the Next Step

Already hooked on white Burgundy? Here is the next step to take before scaling the heights of the great villages of Meursault, Puligny-Montrachet and Chassagne-Montrachet.

Just over the hill from those three Côte d’Or villages is Saint-Aubin. Further south is Rully. Sébastien Roux, whose family’s Roux Père et Fils is based in Saint-Aubin, believes both offer great value.

“You can get a premier cru Saint-Aubin for the price of a village Meursault,” he says. “And a village wine for around \$25. And Rully is fantastic, with wines retailing for under \$20.”

The style of the two wines is different. Saint-Aubin's wines lean toward a full, fat style of Chardonnay, similar to Meursault. Rully is steely and mineraly, more like Puligny-Montrachet.

89 Domaine Vincent Girardin 2010 Murger des Dents de Chien Premier Cru (Saint-Aubin). Vineyard Brands.

abv: 13% **Price:** \$51

89 Roux Père et Fils 2010 Clos de Mollepierres (Rully). Opici.

abv: 13% **Price:** \$30

87 Pierre André 2009 (Rully). William Harrison.

abv: 13% **Price:** \$26

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