

Aveleda Vinho Verde

\$6

EDITORS' PICK

Rank #2 of 21 light Old World whites under \$15 tasted
Country Portugal Vintage tasted Non-vintage
Grapes Alvarinho, Loureiro, Trajadura
Drink with sushi, cold salads, gazpacho
Website www.aveleda.pt



At six bucks, this wine is one of the great steals of the book. Sometimes you'll even see it for \$5 (though probably not for long, given the weakness of the dollar). It's lightly sparkling, in the classic Vinho Verde style. The word "verde" refers to the youthful greenness of the wine, which is what makes it great for cheap outdoor refreshment. Our skeleton in the closet: on a hot summer day, we drink it over ice.

Nose Citrus flavors—melon, lemon, apple, pear—dominate with a hint of spiciness beneath.

Mouth A remarkable number of our blind tasters noticed black pepper or burnt chilies. Some bottles have been sweeter than others, but the acidity's always reliably high, and that's really the point.

Design It's busy but harmonious, with an appropriately green bottle and a nostalgic and colorful label. Other versions of this bottle circulate, including a more attractive sepia-toned version.

Domaine Ste. Michelle Brut

Columbia Valley Sparkling Wine

Rank #1 of 22 sparkling wines under \$15 tasted
Country United States (Northwest) **Vintage** tasted NV
Grapes Chardonnay, Pinot Noir
Drink with smoked salmon, artichokes, chocolate cake
Website www.domaine-ste-michelle.com



\$12

WINNER

The darling of our blind sparkling wine tastings, Domaine Ste. Michelle routinely beat out French champagnes—two-thirds of tasters preferred it to the \$150 bottle of Dom Pérignon. Why? Well, it's made in the traditional method of Champagne, and the grapes are from Washington's Columbia Valley, whose climate is similar to that of the Champagne region in France. However, the style is fresher and lighter than Champagne, and you're not paying for millions of dollars in PR stunts and glossy magazine ads featuring scantily-clad supermodels.

Nose Our blind tasters almost unanimously agreed that the nose was dominated by apples, with a bit of minerality and chalkiness.

Mouth The apliness continues, turning the mouth almost cidery for some. The finish is fresh and dry.

Design With its outdated Optima font and out-of-place swirls, the bottle looks a little cheap—but then again, it is. Thankfully.



La Vieille Ferme Rouge

Perrin & Fils

\$8

Rank #3 of 18 heavy Old World reds under \$15 tasted

Country France **Vintage** tasted 2005

Grapes Grenache, Syrah, Carignan, Cinsault

Drink with cassoulet, pot roast

Website www.lavieilleferme.com

This screwcap wine, which comes from a humble pocket of the Rhône Valley called Côtes du Ventoux, has that lovely, soft, fruity-but-not-sweet style characteristic of Grenache from southern France. This is the kind of simple but enjoyable Old World wine that, even with the skyrocketing Euro, still feels like a better value than anything similar coming out of the United States. Why can't we do better?

Nose Although it's faint, there's some jamminess and candied fruit. Breathe too deeply and you might get a slight chemical whiff.

Mouth The flavors include sweet spices and a slight herbal aspect. On the finish, some blind tasters found dark chocolate.

Design Don't be fooled by the fake French handwriting or the homeliness of the chicken couple flirting on the bottle: the maverick marketing punch of Perrin, the Rhône giant, is behind this big brand.



Oyster Bay Sauvignon Blanc

\$13

Rank #2 of 50 light New World whites under \$15 tasted

Country New Zealand Region Marlborough

Grapes Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay

Vintage tasted 2006

Drink with fish and chips, grilled shrimp

Website www.oysterbaywines.com



This wine is like a caricature of a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, whose flavors are often described in wine jargon as “gooseberry and elderflower.” We’ll refrain from using those words, as we know few people who have actually eaten or smelled either of the above. Instead, our blind tasters described it as being crisp, pure, vigorous, and citrusy, with a hyper-strong New Zealandy aroma and taste. In other words, it’s got all the qualities one looks for in a wine of this style, but they’ve been exaggerated.

Nose It’s bright, with almost glaring versions of the grapefruit, lime, and grassy aromas you’d expect.

Mouth An ever-so-slight prickle accompanies the sharp acidity that screams New Zealand.

Design The label seems to be influenced by Hallmark sympathy cards. A black-and-white bay—more of a cove, really—sits quietly behind tacky calligraphy. The only thing missing is Für Elise.