

Wines For The Weekend

Wines That Surprise

Tyler Colman, 29 October 2009, 04:00 PM EDT

These great-tasting bottles will be favorites when used as "ringers" in blind tastings of pricier, more prestigious picks.

"Have you ever mistaken Bordeaux for Burgundy?"

Harry Waugh, a venerable member of the British wine trade of the late 20th century, was once asked.

"Not since lunch," he replied. Tasting wine can be confusing even for seasoned pros. Research has shown that when evaluating a wine's flavors, the drinker is sensitive to a variety of inputs, such as the price, the label, the producer and even the stemware the wine is served in.

So tasting wines "blind," or just poured in the glass without knowing what they are, has become the choice of many professionals, ranging from competition judges to critics. The theory is that holding various elements constant--such as tasting a group of Napa cabernets all from the same vintage, but eliminating all the other information--can lead to a more unvarnished and objective opinion.

Arguably the hardest thing a taster can do is to start with a glass of wine and have to divine insights as to what it might be, in terms of grape variety, vintage or region of origin. But this sort of thing can be fun to do at home: Arrange a dinner party and ask each guest to bring a bottle fitting a certain theme--say, Oregon pinot noirs. When the guests arrive, bag the wines, number them, pour them blind and have everyone choose their favorites at the end.

To keep things lively, as host, you should always add a "ringer" to the lineup: One wine that doesn't fit the theme. Some wines transcend their regional profiles and taste as if they were from someplace else. (Often these are New World wines that taste like Old World wines, since appellation rules in Europe can limit the tastes from being too far out of the long-ago determined style.)

Being a ringer isn't always a compliment. A criticism of wines today is that there are too many lookalike wines that do not reflect any regional distinction at all. On the other hand, if a wine is from an unheralded region, standing out as the top pic in a blind tasting can help change people's long-held opinions of that particular grape or place.

Here are five ringers that should perform well in a blind lineup, not to mention stir some conversation once the bottles are revealed. If you see the labels during the tasting, you might think the wines aren't in the same ballpark. But in a blind tasting, they'll be harder to tell apart than a Bordeaux and a Burgundy, *pace* Harry Waugh.

Tyler Colman is the author of the practical guide [A Year of Wine: Perfect Pairings, Great Buys and What to Sip with Each Season](#). He also writes the agenda-setting wine blog [DrVino.com](#).

Tyler Colman's "Ringer" wine picks

Ocone Falanghina 2008 (\$12)

Falanghina is a white-wine grape indigenous to the volcanic soils of southern Italy. This Ocone has a rich, full aroma of ripe peaches and wet rocks that could be a solid ringer in a lineup of white Rhone wines. The key distinguishing characteristic, though, is lower alcohol, clocking in at 12.5%, which might make it feel a bit more drinkable than the other wines in the lineup.

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