

# 10 most memorable wines of the year

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Wine occupies a strange place in memory. The greatest wines - or at least the most dramatic - can come and go, while more modest bottles can leave a lifelong impression.

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## Images

With that, here are my 10 most memorable wines of the year. This doesn't necessarily represent the top wines I tasted (which is why there's little overlap with the Top 100 Wines); this is a road map to wines that lingered in my mind. Each serves as a reminder that, at its best, wine isn't simply about flavor and impact. It's about context and culture.

The usual disclaimer: This isn't a buying guide. Some wines may still be available but many aren't, so retail prices aren't listed for every wine. However, current vintages or similar bottlings from these producers should be on store shelves.

**10. 2007 Spottswoode Estate St. Helena Cabernet Sauvignon** (price n/a) There's an intangible sensation when you taste a wine that seems destined for greatness. It's not merely perfect balance or complexity; there's a gestalt that takes over, like a Bat-Signal for deliciousness.

That's what happened on my first encounter with Spottswoode's remarkable 2007. Its opulent profile had just the right accents: soft paprika scents; cedar shavings; a coffee hint at the end. But it was more the sense of grace; every flavor, every aroma fell precisely into place.

The down side? It won't be released until next fall.

**9. 2004 Biondi Outis Nessuno Etna Rosso** (\$40; Importer: Oliver McCrum Wines)

Ciro Biondi harnesses the Nerello Mascalese grape on the southeast slopes of Sicily's Mount Etna to make this pure, almost crystalline wine. Full of roasted orange peel, wild strawberry and deep mineral weight, it shows the complexity that Etna's volcanic soils can produce. After making its impact at a Passover dinner, the Outis kept resurfacing all year - along with the 2005 - as a bottle that could contend with the most subtle Burgundies.

**8. 2005 Lazy Creek Vineyards Anderson Valley Gewurztraminer** (price n/a)

Time can make Gewurztraminer either blossom or fail. Only a few years have passed, of course, since this was bottled when Josh and Mary Beth Chandler owned Lazy Creek. (They sold last year to Don and Rhonda Carano of Ferrari-Carano.)

Aged Gewurz gains a mellow, waxy depth, edged by heady scents of talc and rose. And this was just what Anderson Valley Gewurztraminer should be, starting to mellow without losing a drop of focus. Paired with a simple pasta sauce of butter, sauteed onions and Madeira, it was a quiet tribute to the passage of time.

**7. 1997 Diebolt-Vallois Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne** (\$100; Importer: Martine's Wines)

Like "Fight Club," the first rule of Diebolt-Vallois is: Don't talk about Diebolt-Vallois. My bad. But this tiny Cramant estate deserves its loyal following.

This holds its own with another late release, the 1997 Salon. Both hail from the Cote des Blancs - Chardonnay territory. Both wines share that rich, giving quality of the 1997 vintage.

The Diebolt has a bit more obvious backbone, but at a fraction of Salon's cost it's the Champagne I'd tuck away. (Alternately, look for the nonvintage.) Along with the 2002 Cristal and Cedric Bouchard's Inflorescence series, here was the Champagne I couldn't get out of my head.

**6. 2006 Olivier et Alice DeMoor Bourgogne Aligoté** (\$19.50; Importer: Vintage '59 Imports)

It would have been tempting to list a Chablis from this enterprising couple. But the wine I kept buying all year was their Aligoté (the 2007 is now available). This should be a simple wine from the simplest of white grapes, the afterthought of Burgundy. And yet the De Moors' Aligotés - they use vines dating back to 1902 - have enough density and complex mineral presence to make clear you are in the presence of true white-wine maestros. That they take the time to make their Aligoté matter signals that even the humble gets respect in a great cellar.

**5. 2008 A.J. Adam Dhroner Hofberg Riesling Spatlese** (around \$40; Importer: Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines)

Andreas Adam, from the tiny Mosel town of Dhron, makes fewer than 1,000 cases a year, and his Rieslings burst with absolute purity. They are made with indigenous yeasts (a rarity in German Riesling) and no additions beyond a bit of sulfur dioxide.

In a lean vintage that left some bottles too nervous and fragile, Adam's wines feature electrifying fruit and dense minerality.

I had plenty of great Rieslings to choose from this year, including a 1937 Steinberger Trockenbeerenauslese from the Rheingau's Staatsweinguter Eltville. But now I understand why Riesling lovers become giddy at seeing Adam's ornate label.

**4. 1999 Henri Gouges Nuits-Saint-Georges Les Saint-Georges** (price n/a; Importer: Vineyard Brands)

So many Burgundies were memorable this year. Yet this wine kept resurfacing in my mind - doubly impressive because I tried it at a tasting arranged by collector Wilf Jaeger that included *grand cru* giants. Gouges, while outstanding, has a reputation for austerity - not much new oak here. Plus: 1999, a bold and tannic vintage.

Here's street fighter Burgundy. Its massive structure simply provides the right frame for transparent fruit and appealingly seamy undertones.

A decade old, it's an unrepentant wine not yet in its prime, ready for a prodigiously long life.

**3. 2007 Failla Estate Sonoma Coast Syrah** (\$56)

I've already praised the immediate pleasures of this extraordinary Syrah, made entirely from whole grape clusters off Ehren Jordan's parcel near Fort Ross. But its memorable quotient came from almost death-defying longevity. Not only was it terrific on first taste and better the next day. It was still delicious 19 days later, with just a cork to keep it stored on the counter. An object lesson on the preservative power of tannins. (More on the saga at [sfgate.com/ZIXY](http://sfgate.com/ZIXY))

**2. NV Equipo Navazos Bota Punta No. 17 La Bota de Palo Cortado Sherry** (price n/a; Importer: Eric Solomon Selections)

Last month, California finally got its first taste of some of the world's most exquisite (and rare) sherries. Equipo Navazos is a labor of love - a small project by sherry lovers to discover exceptional casks (*botas*) from Jerez bodegas. Each sequentially numbered release is a one-time-only affair, selected from a specific stash, with sometimes just a few hundred bottles released. Hence each captures a moment in sherry history.

No. 17, drawn in January 2009, hails from the old stocks of Rey Fernando de Castilla. As a Palo Cortado, it retains the energy of an amontillado and the weight of an oloroso. But this one, chosen from a unique row-end cask, magnifies the concept. Filled with brine, layers of dried fruit and a nutty richness, it envelops you in the quintessence of sherry.

Any Equipo bottle is a special experience. No. 17 is a reminder of the centuries of Jerez's unique traditions.

**1. 2006 Charles Joguet Cuvee Terroir Chinon** (\$20; Importer: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant)

How much does context matter?

Here's a solid bottle from a reliable Loire name in a decent year, and a wine I'd recommend to anyone looking for a respectable glass. It's also the wine I convinced my father to drink this spring after months of chemotherapy had withered away his taste buds.

His taste for wine had returned, he discovered, and he swore nothing had ever tasted as good. It was the last wine we drank together.

If I had to choose for him all over again, I don't know that I'd come up with anything better. And that's how wine enters the realm of memory.

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