

Laurie Daniel: Best reds for \$15 and under

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Red wine drinkers on a budget have a lot to choose from these days. What follows are my picks for reds priced at \$15 and under, based on recent tastings.

BLENDS: Last week I told you about how blending can help create a white wine that's greater than the sum of its parts. The same is true of red wine, and some of the best values I've found in reds have been easy-to-drink blends of disparate grape varieties.

One example is the 2007 Hey Mambo Sultry Red (\$13), a medium-weight blend of six grapes that offers plenty of bright berry accented by vanilla and spice. The 2007 Vina Robles Red4 (\$14) is a Paso Robles wine so named because it's a blend of four grapes (mostly petite sirah and syrah); it's dark and dense, with blackberry and blueberry fruit and notes of spice, roasted coffee and white pepper. The 2006 X Winery "Red X" (\$15) is a cabernet-dominant blend that's bright and a little peppery, with ripe berry and a soft finish. The 2005 St. Francis Red (\$10), a blend of four grapes, is bright and fruity, with cherry and a note of anise. And the non-vintage Pro-mis-Q-ous Red (\$12) combines four varieties into a wine with spicy berry and black cherry, medium tannins (and rather tortured spelling).

As for imports, Cotes du Rhone blends from France's southern Rhone are often good values. One example is the 2007 Perrin & Fils Cotes du Rhone Villages (\$15), which is ripe and peppery,

with bright berry fruit. A good value from Spain is the 2007 Red Guitar Old Vine (\$14), a blend of tempranillo and grenache (called garnacha in Spain) that's bright and peppery, with roasted strawberry flavors and firm tannins.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON/MERLOT: One of the best cab bargains I've tasted recently is the 2005 Clos du Bois North Coast Cabernet Sauvignon (\$15), which offers ripe black cherry, a note of black olive and medium tannins. The 2006 Ravenswood "Vintners Blend" Cabernet Sauvignon (\$10) is also very good, with bright black cherry and cassis flavors, decent weight and polished tannins, and the 2007 Robert Mondavi Private Selection Cabernet Sauvignon (\$11) is dark and dense, with ripe black cherry and a savory note of olive.

From Australia, the 2007 Penfolds "Thomas Hyland" Cabernet Sauvignon (\$15) is dense and juicy, with black cherry, a slight roasted note and nice balance.

The 2007 Blackstone Merlot (\$12) is easy to find and to drink, with black cherry fruit, a note of olive, decent weight and firm tannins. (Note that this is the California bottling, not the more expensive Sonoma Reserve.) The 2006 Festival 34 Merlot (\$13) offers ripe black cherry with a note of mocha.

There's a lot of good merlot coming out of Washington state these days; one affordable choice is the 2006 Millbrandt "Traditions" Merlot (\$15), which displays ripe black cherry flavors and drying tannins.

SYRAH/SHIRAZ: Although syrah (sometimes called shiraz) often provides some of the best values in red wines, my recent tastings haven't yielded many good choices. That said, the 2006 Concannon Syrah (\$10) is a tremendous value: It's quite peppery, with ample berry fruit. Another good one is the 2006 Ravenswood "Vintners Blend" Shiraz (\$10), with its slightly candied berry flavors, some nice spice and medium tannins.

The Aussies like to blend some cabernet sauvignon with their shiraz, and one such wine is the 2006 Penfolds "Koonunga Hill" Cabernet Shiraz (\$12), a hearty wine with ripe berry, spice and a slightly roasted flavor.

MISCELLANEOUS: As I've said before, it's hard to find a good, inexpensive pinot noir. Many of the cheap ones are made from grapes grown in all the wrong places. But the fragrant, fruity 2006 Cycles Gladiator Pinot Noir (\$11) is worth a taste, with its bright raspberry and strawberry flavors and smooth finish. **So is the surprisingly refined 2008 Cono Sur "Vision" Pinot Noir (\$15) from Chile, a wine with bright cherry and spice flavors and firm structure.**

If you like something a little heartier, there's the 2007 Ravenswood "Vintners Blend" Zinfandel (\$10), a restrained zin with juicy blackberry flavors and a tobacco note. Or you can look to malbec from Argentina, like the 2007 High Note Malbec (\$13), which is ripe yet lively, with blackberry and spice notes and medium tannins, or the more structured 2006 Graffigna Centenario Malbec (\$13), with its blackberry and cherry flavors, note of anise and firm tannins.