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## exploring wine with tim fish

### 10 California Merlots for \$20 or Less

The 2009 vintage offers both quality and value

Posted: Oct 24, 2012 3:50pm ET



California Merlot falls into three basic categories: the easygoing values, the expensive Cabernet-wannabes and that big void in the middle that's a stylistic roll of the dice. For my annual Merlot report, I tasted nearly 200 wines, and I give the lowdown in the Nov. 30, 2012, issue of Wine Spectator.

Since the high-tech proletariat seems to throw around the most weight on the Internet, I thought I'd focus today on Merlots that cost between \$10 and \$20. In years past, that has not always been easy, but the 2009 vintage is so good that even the value Merlots are tasty. (A few early-release 2010s show promise as well.)

These aren't wines that will blow your mind with complexity. The best rated 89 points on our 100-point scale, just shy of outstanding. No, these are generally soft, juicy Merlots that offer just enough depth to keep them interesting. In other words, the sort of Merlots that soar off retail shelves.

My favorite of the 10 is the [Buena Vista Merlot Carneros 2009](#) (89, \$20), which is supple and elegant, with layered cherry flavors. [Alexander Valley Vineyards Merlot Alexander Valley Wetzel Family Estate 2009](#) (88, \$20) is a fine old-school Merlot that shows good structure and lively dried cherry and herb notes.

Bogle, as usual, delivers the best bargain this year with its [Merlot California 2009](#) (88, \$10) that's a zesty quaff. The folks at Gallo created a Merlot for Zinfandel lovers with the [Frei Brothers Dry Creek Valley Reserve 2010](#) (88, \$20). And the [Napa Cellars Merlot Napa Valley 2010](#) (88, \$18) and [Tangle Oaks Merlot Napa Valley Lot # 10 2009](#) (88, \$15) demonstrate that—yes—bargains can be found in Napa.

Four other well-priced Merlots you can look for:

- [Goldschmidt Merlot Dry Creek Valley Chelsea Goldschmidt 2010](#) (88, \$18)
- [Rancho Sisquoc Merlot Santa Barbara County Flood Family Vineyards 2009](#) (88, \$20)
- [Sebastiani Merlot Sonoma County 2008](#) (87, \$17)
- [Steele Merlot Clear Lake 2009](#) (87, \$17)

WineSpectator.com members can read the full reviews by clicking on the review links, but this free chart offers a taste of all my reviews in the annual Merlot report.

Do you have a favorite value Merlot? What do you expect from a



Tim Fish

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