

20 Reds Under \$20: Where the Values Live, for Now

The wine world is anxious as tariffs have been threatened against all wines from the European Union. These prices may not last for long.



By Eric Asimov

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The wine world looks a little different now than it did in September, when the last 20 Under \$20 column was published, and further radical changes may be on the way.

That's why this winter edition of 20 great values in red wine, all under \$20 a bottle, may be a mural in watercolors, fated to fade quickly should an ill rain blow in.

The source of the volatility is tariffs placed by the United States on certain European wines. As of Oct. 18, the Trump administration put a 25 percent tax on wines under 14 percent alcohol from France, Spain and Germany, excluding sparkling wine. The tariff is a result of a dispute with the European Union over subsidies it gives to Airbus, its largest airplane manufacturer.

The administration has further threatened a 100 percent tariff on all wines from the European Union, as well as certain cheeses, spirits and other consumer goods, if the Airbus dispute is not resolved. Because of a French tax on big technology companies, a similar tariff has been threatened solely on Champagne. Though that one has been set aside, the wider tariff threat still looms.

The effects of the 25 percent tariff are already apparent, particularly on French wines. The value of wine imported from France dropped steeply after the tariff took effect, to roughly \$57 million in November from about \$130 million in October, according to the American Association of Wine Economists.

Producers, importers, distributors and retailers absorbed much of the price difference at first, and consumers did not see prices rise noticeably in the last quarter of 2019, the busiest time of the year for the wine trade.

In January, however, prices began to increase. What's more, some importers have held off on new orders of wines, both in hopes that the first tariff would be resolved and out of fear that the next round might come midshipment.

I have long argued that the best values are found in the historic wine cultures of Europe. The astounding diversity of choices far exceeds what's available in the United States, where a handful of grapes dominate. But this list includes only two wines from France, ordinarily a prime source for distinctive wine values.

Italy is still in the game with six bottles; that will change if the new tariff comes to pass. It will also affect selections from Spain, Portugal, Austria and Greece, which account for another six wines on the list.

Luckily, I found good bottles from Chile, Argentina and South Africa, all of which consumers may soon be exploring in greater depth. And I found three terrific wines from the United States.

The potential reduction in choices is a serious concern for consumers, but it pales next to the grievous harm such a tariff would do to jobs and businesses, including importers, distributors, retailers and restaurants, along with affiliated support workers, not to mention the wine producers themselves. If these companies that do so much to provide choices were to disappear, I'm not sure we would ever again see the wines they once procured.

Right now, however, the market is still full of options. These 20 bottles represent just a snapshot of what's out there. If you don't see these precise bottles, ask your merchant for similar choices, or you can consult previous 20 Under \$20 columns.

You might see that prices for previous selections have risen. Nonetheless, they all remain pretty good values.

Matthiasson Tendu California Red Wine 2018 \$19.99

Matthiasson is one of the most interesting California producers. Steve and Jill Klein Matthiasson understand the value of offering great, moderately priced bottles that are not simply cheap imitations. Tendu is Matthiasson's value wine. It's bright and lively, with balancing acidity and a little tannic grip, and it's made without added sulfur dioxide, a stabilizer that is almost universally used throughout the wine world. The grapes — 47 percent aglianico, 42 percent montepulciano and 11 percent barbera — come from Dunnigan Hills in the northwest portion of the Central Valley.

Luyt Pipeño Carrizal Chile País Familia Ernesto Soto 2019 \$18.99/1 Liter

Louis-Antoine Luyt is a French émigré who makes wine in Chile. In addition to his own wines, he works with a set of growers, including Ernesto Soto in the Maule Valley, who make Pipeño, a traditional, refreshing Chilean wine that goes back almost as far as the country itself. This one is made entirely from a very old vineyard of país, better known as mission, the grape brought to the New World by Spanish missionaries. It's light, fresh and delicious, and goes down very easily.
(Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

TerraQuilia Falconero Zero I.G.P. Emilia-Romagna Sparkling Red Wine 2017 \$18.99

Although it doesn't carry the official appellation, this is a Lambrusco from the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy. It's dry, savory and earthy, made from the grasparossa grape, one of the classic Lambrusco varieties. Most Lambrusco is made using industrial methods, but this one is made like a pétillant naturel, the oldest method of sparkling wine production: Midway through fermentation, the juice is bottled, and as the fermentation finishes in the sealed container, the resulting carbon dioxide carbonates the wine. Drink with salumi or pizza. (T. Elenteny Imports, New York)

Poderi Colla Dolcetto d'Alba Pian Balbo 2017 \$18.99

Beppe Colla of Prunotto was one of the pillars of the Barolo region. He eventually sold the estate and, with his family in 1994, set up Poderi Colla, which produces superb Barolos and Barbarescos, as well as this excellent Dolcetto d'Alba. It's understated and elegant, with fragrant floral aromas and flavors of spicy dark fruit. Enjoy this with a good mushroom risotto. (Grand Cru Selections, New York)

Domaine Alary Cairanne La Brunote 2016 \$19.99

Domaine Alary is a leading producer in the Southern Rhône commune of Cairanne, an area in the larger Côtes-du-Rhône that was deemed distinctive enough to use its own name rather than the regional appellation. This spicy red — a blend of grenache, mourvèdre and carignan — has plenty of body and character. It's stylish, balanced and intriguing. (Weygandt-Metzler, Unionville, Pa.)

Marietta Cellars North Coast Román Zinfandel 2016 \$19.96

This zinfandel, with a little petite sirah and barbera in the mix, is brawny and rich. But like an old-school California zin, it turns spicy on the palate rather than sweet. With plenty of acidity, it's balanced and refreshing despite its 14.9 percent alcohol scale. The wine is named after Román Cisneros, a longtime employee at Marietta.

Fattoria Rodáno Chianti Classico 2016 \$17.96

This is a weighty, intense Chianti, rich and complicated, with a lot going on. It's not the sort of focused wine that delivers sangiovese flavors with laserlike clarity, but instead is a fascinating collection of fruit, herbal and earthy sensations that nonetheless make for a delicious wine. (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)

Meinklang Österreich Blaufränkisch 2018 \$19.96

Meinklang, in eastern Austria near the Hungarian border, is a consistently excellent producer, and wine is just a part of what it does. The estate is a mixed environment, with animals, grains, fruits and vegetables, farmed biodynamically with an eye toward protecting the soil. The vines benefit from this sort of enlightened approach, as do the wines. This blaufränkisch feels alive in the glass and tastes of violets and plums. (Zev Rovine Selections/Fruit of the Vines, Long Island City, N.Y.)

Domaine de la Grosse Pierre Chiroubles "La Grosse Pierre" 2018 \$19.96

Pauline Passot was working as a sommelier in Lyon when she decided that her real calling was to make wine. She returned to her family home in Chiroubles, one of the 10 crus of Beaujolais, and rented vineyard land from her parents. Her first vintage was 2016. The 2018 is so pretty I just wanted to

inhale the floral aromas. It's a gentle, delightful wine. (Weygandt-Metzler)

Viña Zorzal Navarra Garnacha 2017 \$10.99

This fragrant, floral red, made from old-vine garnacha, is one of the best deals I have seen in a while. It's lively and spicy, and while not especially complex, it's fresh, juicy and offers unexpected nuances. Serve lightly chilled. (Bowler Wine, New York)

Ver Sacrum Uco Valley Garnacha Los Chacayes 2017 \$19.99

Ver Sacrum specializes in wines made from Rhône varieties in the Mendoza region of Argentina. Argentine garnacha? This wine, from a high-altitude vineyard in the Uco Valley, will not remind anybody of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. It's not weighty, but light, bright, fresh and juicy. (Brazos Wine Imports, Brooklyn, N.Y.)

Ampeleia I.G.P. Toscana Rosso Unlitro 2018 \$19.99/1 liter

Ampeleia, on the coast of Tuscany, is a collaboration of three friends, including Elisabetta Foradori, the wonderful grower-producer from the Trentino region in northern Italy. The Unlitro is a liter of beautifully fragrant, graceful and light wine that is intense and full of flavor. It's made from a blend of grapes: grenache, carignan, mourvèdre, alicante bouschet and sangiovese. Yes, it almost sounds like a blend from the south of France, yet this wine offers a distinctly Italian interpretation. (Bowler Wine)

Kokkinos Naoussa Xinomavro 2015 \$19.99

Newcomers to the xinomavro grape, seeking reference points to describe its characteristics, will often point to the nebbiolo wines of northwestern Italy. This xinomavro from Naoussa in northern Greece suggests the comparison is apt. The dark tarlike fruit, acidity and firm tannins are reminiscent of nebbiolo, yet there's also a brightness that is xinomavro's own. Serve it with — what else? — lamb chops. (Verity Wine Partners, New York)

Mateus Nicolau de Almeida Trans Douro Express Douro Baixo Corgo 2018 \$19.99

Mateus Nicolau de Almeida's family once owned the Ramos Pinto port house, which was sold eventually to Louis Roederer. Mr. de Almeida turned to making dry, unfortified wines that would express the various terroirs of the Douro. This bottle comes from the western Douro, and is made from a blend of familiar port grapes like touriga nacional and touriga franca, among others. It's fragrant and lively, with fresh, almost exotic fruit flavors grounded by a pleasing earthiness. (Bowler Wine)

Onabay Vineyards North Fork of Long Island Cabernet Franc Côt-Fermented 2016 \$19.96

The name of this juicy, herbal, balanced wine, Côt-Fermented, is a pun that requires maybe more explanation than it's worth, but here goes. It's a blended wine, 90 percent cabernet franc and 10 percent malbec. The grapes are fermented together, or co-fermented. Côt, pronounced coe, is the local Loire Valley name for malbec, and this wine is made in a Loire style, lighter on its feet than many Bordeaux-style cab francs, not to mention North Fork renditions. Côt-fermented indeed.

Storm Point Swartland Red Blend 2018 \$16.99

This wine from the Swartland region, northeast of Cape Town, South Africa, is a homage to the red blends of the south of France. It's 56 percent cinsault, a workhorse grape that is getting more attention and care these days, with the remainder syrah and carignan. It's fruity yet lithe, underlined with light tannins. (Vine Street Imports, Mount Laurel, N.J.)

Tiberio Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2017 \$19.99

Tiberio has become one of my favorite producers in the Abruzzo region of southeastern Italy. The whites are superb, and so is this bright, vibrant entry-level red, with earthy minerality, a touch of welcome bitterness and a light tannic grip. (The Sorting Table, Napa, Calif.)

Ioppa Colline Novaresi Nebbiolo 2018 \$17.99

Good nebbiolo doesn't just come from the Langhe. All over the northern Piedmont, higher altitude nebbiolo wines, often easier to consume when young than those from the Langhe, come from areas like Ghemme, Gattinara and Colline Novaresi, just to name a few. This one — from Ioppa, a small, family operation based in Ghemme — is just plain delicious, emphasizing the easy-drinking, dark-fruited side of nebbiolo. (Grand Cru Selections)

Hermanos de Peciña Señorío de P. Peciña Rioja Cosecha 2018 \$15.99

This is an entry-level bottle from one of my favorite Rioja producers. It's made from the estate's youngest vines, which are still around 25 years old, and unlike more ambitious Riojas, it is not aged in oak, which leaves it fresh, fruity and immediately accessible. It's a balanced, refreshing expression of tempranillo from a good Rioja terroir. (Polaner Selections)

Monje Tenerife Tinto Tradicional 2016 \$19.99

The scattering of volcanic islands just off the southwest coast of Morocco known as the Canary Islands produces wonderful wines that are often great values. This one comes from Monje, a good family estate on Tenerife, in the center of the chain. It's made largely of the listán negro grape, blended with a little negramoll and some listán blanco, a white grape better known as palomino. It's lovely and slightly exotic with the barest tannic grip. (Bowler Wine)

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