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Why Second-Label Wines Are a Smart Choice and an Excellent Value

Often these approachable bottles provide a taste of the talents of first-rate winemakers at a fraction of the cost of their flagship wines



BEST SUPPORTING Approachable, affordable bottles from producers whose output is otherwise quite dear or rare, second-label wines can offer top-notch value.

ILLUSTRATION: DAVID DORAN

By Lettie Teague

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“SECOND” IS an inherently disappointing word. Second place. Second class. Second rate. And yet, as the second-born of two, I believe “second” can also signal something of worth, especially when it comes to the second wines of winemakers who are first-rate.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Has a second-label wine allowed you to try a wine from a vineyard that otherwise might be out of reach or unavailable? Join the conversation below.

What's known as a second or second-label wine might be produced from grapes that didn't make the cut for a winery's flagship bottling. Or it might be made by the same winemaking team as the flagship, but in a different location, with different types of grapes. Often it's a wine made in larger quantities than a producer's "first" wine and priced much lower.

The second-label concept probably originated in Bordeaux, where a winery's first-label bottling is known as its *grand vin*. I've tasted some seconds from that region that were quite good and some that were worse than mediocre. (One recent standout: the 2016 Confidences de Prieuré-Lichine, second label of Château Prieuré-Lichine.) In the excellent book "The Complete Bordeaux," wine writer Stephen Brook notes that "...there is no clear line in the sand between the quality required for the grand and the second wines. It's a subjective decision." And he cautions: "The principle to remember is that a second wine is always the second-best wine."

Perhaps that's why some people I contacted seemed to bristle at the term. That's how Priscilla Incisa della Rocchetta, co-owner of Tenuta San Guido Guidalberto in Tuscany, reacted when I asked her about Guidalberto, the Cabernet-based second-label wine to her estate's acclaimed Super Tuscan, Sassicaia. She disputed the second-label characterization outright. "Many people understandably perceive Guidalberto as a second wine," she wrote in an email. "In reality, Guidalberto is another wine, a new project."

Created in 2000, the Guidalberto is a Bordeaux-style blend of Cabernet and Merlot (formerly Sangiovese too) that's much more affordable than the formidable Super Tuscan: The 2017 Tenuta San Guido Guidalberto I purchased cost \$45 a bottle, about a fifth of the price of the 2017 Sassicaia. It's also softer and much easier to drink in its youth than the famously long-lived Sassicaia, displaying another hallmark of second-label wines: approachability.

Whereas the flagship might need time to reach its peak, a second wine is styled to be ready to drink. This is true of Champagne Delamotte, which collectors often refer to as the second label of the very expensive, rare and slow-maturing Champagne Salon. Although the Delamotte and Salon houses share the same director, Didier Depond, they are distinct entities according to Catherine Cutier, vice president of marketing and brand strategy at the wine importing company Vineyard Brands. "We prefer to call them sister houses," she wrote in an email.

Winemaker François Chidaine made his name in the regions of Vouvray and Montlouis before turning to another part of the Loire Valley, the Touraine. According to his wife, Manuëla Chidaine, he fell in love with this underrated region in 2006 and wanted to show drinkers it had good terroir. In the Touraine, he makes the second-label Clos de la Grange Sauvignon, a

wonderfully crisp, snappy wine I've been drinking for a couple years. It's just \$13 a bottle, and the minerally, lithe 2019 may be the best vintage I've tasted yet.

Approachability is a hallmark of wineries' 'second-label' wines.

I'm also a fan of the Dr. L Riesling, the second label of the Dr. Loosen estate in Germany's Mosel region. So is my friend Eberhard Müller, a German-born chef turned farmer who owns Satur Farms on Long Island with his wife, Paulette Satur. He buys Dr. L by the case. "It's a refreshing drink after a long hot day at the farm," he said. He especially likes how well it pairs with the vegetables he grows on his farm.

According to Ernst Loosen, proprietor of the Dr. Loosen estate, he launched the Dr. L brand as an "ambassador for Mosel Riesling." The first vintage was 1996. "The idea behind Dr. L is to create a typical Riesling from the Mosel at an affordable price," he wrote in an email. Low in alcohol, produced from steep slate-soil vineyards, the approachable wine is a mere \$10 a bottle—far cheaper than the single-vineyard wines from the Dr. Loosen estate.

In much the same way, the Cloudline Willamette Valley Pinot Noir provides an affordable introduction to Oregon Pinot Noir, noted winemaker Véronique Boss-Drouhin, of Domaine Drouhin in Oregon and Maison Joseph Drouhin in Burgundy. Back in 2002, when the wine was created, 5,000 cases were produced. The wine became so popular that today that number is closer to 50,000, though the price (\$20) has remained almost unchanged. The 2018 Cloudline Pinot is particularly delicious, with a bright cherry note.

Decoy, the onetime second-label wine of Duckhorn Vineyards in Napa, has evolved over the years. In the beginning, back in 1985, it was a Cabernet blend made from grapes that didn't make the cut for other Duckhorn wines. According to Alex Ryan, president and CEO of the Duckhorn Portfolio, the wine was so successful that in 2010, Decoy became its own brand, with its own winemaking team and winery.

The decision was not made lightly. "A second-label wine has its own rules. If it doesn't have a place or a story or a reason for being, it could bring down sales or cannibalize your primary brand," Mr. Ryan said. But a good second label can lift up the sales of the original. After the economic crisis of 2008, sales of the less-expensive Decoy wines rose. When the economy improved and Decoy drinkers were willing to spend a bit more, some "upgraded" to the founding label, Duckhorn.

Meanwhile, former second-label Decoy has continued to be such a success, the company is launching a sibling, Decoy Limited, priced in between the Decoy and Duckhorn labels. I wondered: Does that make Decoy Limited a second label of Decoy or a third label of Duckhorn?

Perhaps, instead of second-label, these should be called extra wines. Who doesn't want something extra, especially in times such as these?

RAISING THE BARGAIN / Second-label wines from premium producers



1. 2018 Dr. L Riesling, \$10

Ernst Loosen of the Dr. Loosen estate is an acknowledged star of Germany's Mosel Valley, and his top bottlings don't come cheap. But this light, low-alcohol, sprightly white gives budget drinkers a taste of his talent and Mosel Riesling, too.

2. 2019 Clos de la Grange Touraine Sauvignon François Chidaine, \$13

Mr. Chidaine turns out terrific Chenin Blanc-based wines in Vouvray, and he does great work in less-heralded parts of the Loire Valley too. This white from the Touraine is racy, mineraly and a true deal at this price.

3. 2017 Tenuta San Guido Guidalberto, \$45

Serious wine collectors will pony up hundreds of dollars for the great Super Tuscan Sassicaia; everyone else can taste Tuscan terroir in Sassicaia's sibling Guidalberto, a deliciously earthy, soft, approachable Cabernet-based Bordeaux blend.

4. 2018 Cloudline Willamette Valley Pinot Noir, \$20

The Drouhin family crafts exemplary Pinot Noir in both Burgundy and Oregon for often-lofty prices. Their second-label Cloudline offers Willamette Valley Pinot fans a bright, cherry-inflected red at a daily drink price.

Delamotte Brut Non Vintage Champagne, \$45

Sister house to Champagne Salon—the rare bubbly at a high three-figure price—Champagne Delamotte, under the same director, produces this very elegant, nuanced Côte des Blancs Chardonnay-dominant Champagne.

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Write to Lettie at wine@wsj.com

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