



And now for something completely different

With SW's help, **Wayne de Nicolo** says try a new wine to impress your Valentine

It's Valentine's Day. Time to put your heart on your sleeve and impress your Valentine. I set out to find some good wines at various price levels which are relatively unknown here, or which offer alternatives to well known styles. To test the popular appeal of these wines, I enlisted the help of Sarah and the staff of SW in tasting some of them. This proved to be enlightening. For instance, thanks to the imagination of one of the SW team, a new word entered the lexicon of wine descriptions – "minging"! The wine in question did not make the final line-up.

Unless you want to pay over £20 a bottle, many champagnes are as thin as

George Bush's lips and as green as Tom Jones' front lawn. But there are alternatives. So why not be patriotic and try some home grown sparklers? Chapel Down Century Extra Dry NV (SB £15) made in Kent, is actually slightly sweet, with a hint of apples, a good mousse and an easy drinking style. Considerably better, and widely praised, is Nytimber Premier Cuvee 1999 (WT £22) from Sussex. Exceeding the £20 psychological barrier can be justified by the quality. A distinctive honey smell precedes a full, classy butterscotch flavour, which puts it in the league of some vintage champagnes.

Good, cheaper alternatives are the Australian Green Point Vintage Brut

2003 (£10-13 OD, WT, SF) which shows creamy gooseberry fruit, and Pelorus NV (£14-15 MW, TH, SF) from Cloudy Bay. SW tasters thought this subtle, smooth and dry. It is better than the more expensive Pelorus Vintage, the higher alcohol level pointing to riper fruit as the probable reason.

Still wine Gruner Veltliner has been a relative stranger on these shores until now. It is a widely grown and popular grape in Austria. Some say it is the new alternative to chardonnay, but it is really quite different in style. Sainsbury's own label example from 2005 is a winner, literally. It was awarded gold and a trophy in the International Wine Challenge 2006.

With good fruit on the nose and palate, a clean flavour and a whisper of honeyed sweetness, at £7 it offers an inexpensive way to be adventurous.

Dessert wines are an acquired taste, but the best fetch high prices from aficionados. De Bortoli Noble One 2003 (MW £13 for 37.5 cl) is made from Semillon grapes infected by the mould botrytis, as (together with sauvignon) are the great Sauternes and Barsacs. The similarity does not end there though. In 1985 the first vintage of this Australian wine (1982), labelled Sauternes, beat the world's best sweeties, including French No.1 Chateau D'Yquem, in a blind tasting organised by merchants Avery's of Bristol. Now that went down like a brick in a downdraft with the French, and allegedly precipitated the protests which were made to the EU about the use of their regional names (e.g. Burgundy) on Antipodean wine labels. The resulting ban on the importation into EU countries of sweet wines from Australia and New Zealand was only lifted, for Australian exporters, following the signing of a treaty in 1990.



So this is no ordinary wine. Strong orange and honey aromas introduce a sweet taste dominated by marmalade, toffee and apricot, which will gain complexity with age. It goes beautifully with Cambazola cheese, semi-dried apricots and walnuts on crackers. Relatively speaking, this is a bargain – half bottles of some recent vintages of Y'quem cost well over £100.

If feminine reds are your preference, divert from Burgundy to the distinctive pinot noirs emerging nowadays from New Zealand. At a recent trade tasting of its wines, the best of the 24 pinots I tried was the Villa Maria Taylor's Pass Pinot Noir 2005 (EV £127 for 6). Full of ripe fruit, it has more depth than most Kiwi pinots. Another charmer is the first vintage Mount Rosa Pinot Noir 2003 (www.lenzwine.co.uk £93/6) from Central Otago, the southernmost vineyard area in the world. Because of its microclimate, it is producing some much admired pinots. This elegant wine has smooth berry fruit. The 2003 is still available and preferable to the 2004 shown on the website.

Amarone is made in the Veneto region of Italy from Valpolicella grapes which have been partly dried on straw mats after the harvest. This produces a concentrated flavour, high alcohol levels – typically 15% – and a lengthy lifespan (for the wine, not necessarily the drinker!). Sainsbury's TTD Amarone 2003 (£11) has some intensity and characteristic cherry and vanilla flavours. Ripasso is made by adding Amarone grape skins to re-ferment the wine, giving complexity and depth. La Cassetta di Ettore Righetti Ripasso 2003 (MW £10) is justifiably popular. This well-made wine has leathery aromas and smokey, slightly sweet, full flavours. It's hard to imagine that these wines are related to those thin Valpolicellas in big bottles which used to materialise at student parties. Now they are minging!

Good ports do not come cheap, but there is one often-overlooked version which offers real quality and good value. Paradoxically, unlike late bottled vintage and vintage character ports, it does not have the word vintage in its name, yet it is the nearest in quality and character to the real thing. Crusted port is so named because, like vintage port, it throws sediment and needs to be decanted. An excellent example is Grahams Crusted Port (SB £13), which had three years maturation in cask before bottling in 2000.

As vines age they produce less and less fruit and the concentration of flavour of the wine they produce increases accordingly. The reduced yield, quality and the comparative scarcity of wines from genuinely old vines produce premium prices.

St Hallett Old Block Shiraz 2001

(SB £15) is made in the Barossa Valley from 60-100+ year old vines. Ripe fruit and richness come through after lengthy aeration in a jug, but the strong tannins invite cellaring for 5-10 years. This will reveal a wine worthy of the vines it came from.

Cape Mentelle Cabernet Sauvignon 2000 (P&S, SF, HN £25) from Margaret River, Western Australia is not an alternative or particularly different. Except that it is benchmark cabernet. A deep black-red colour heralds an intense, characteristic black current taste with great depth. Beautiful wine if you can afford it.

And finally something truly different – and exceptionally good. Cheval des Andes 2002 (HR, SF EV £45) is the product of a joint venture between the St Emilion Grand Cru Chateau Cheval Blanc and Terrazas de los Andes in Argentina where it is made. This first vintage is made from 60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Malbec. An opaque black ink colour introduces a rich, complex, chocolate and figs palate with restrained tannins. This fine wine compares well with its Grand Cru cousins in Bordeaux. While it is still young, and will improve over the next decade, its magnificence is apparent already. Here is the Nigella Lawson of wines – a voluptuous, seductive beauty with an excellent pedigree and irresistible to those with expensive tastes. ■

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Suppliers SB: Sainsburys. WT: Waitrose.
MW: Majestic Wine Warehouse. SF:
Selfridges. HN: Harvey Nichols. HR: Harrods.
OD: Oddbins. P&S: Philglas & Swiggot 7924
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EV: www.everywine.co.uk

