



TradeSmart

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PICK OF THE CROP

TradeSmart shows how to find the perfect wines for every occasion and budget. **By Winsor Dobbin**

There's a bewildering choice of wine out there but there is one simple key to making sure you always impress when you pull out a bottle at a dinner, party or barbecue. Knowledge.

Not your knowledge, but tapping in to the knowledge of experts whose job it is to make sure you are happy with your choices and keep going back to their restaurant or bottle shop.

There are several ways to ensure you drink well at the right price; something that's of increasing concern with the drought set to cause significant price rises before year's end.

Arm yourself with some basic facts first.

Find a friend or colleague who is a regular wine drinker and ask them where they buy their wine.

If price is your only criterion you'll probably want to shop at one of the supermarket-owned wine outlets. You'll save heaps of money buying by the dozen but you'll largely be restricted to the plethora of labels produced by big wine companies. If you know you want a dozen Rosemount Estate chardonnay or Nottage Hill shiraz that's fine, but if you want to be more adventurous you'll need to find a store that has informed staff who have the time to guide you.

That often means small, independently owned stores that make the effort to seek out wines from

smaller wineries that lack the financial muscle and large inventories to do business with Vintners Cellars or Dan Murphy's.

In Sydney, check out the Ultimo Wine Centre, Five Ways Cellars in Paddington or Annandale Cellars. In Melbourne, try Nicks Wine Merchants or the Prince Wine Store and in Brisbane try the Wine Emporium. In New Zealand, try Accent on Wine in Auckland and Vino Fino in Christchurch.

If you are holding a party, try before you buy and the same advice goes for cleanskins. Buying a few bottles and sampling them over a few days before making your choice may be a bit more

Inset, top: Ross Brown of Brown Brothers. Inset below:
Bimbadgen Estate's Simon Thistlewood and Jane Hoppe

PRICES SET TO RISE

THE disastrous 2007 vintage, which saw wineries across the country hit by the drought, frosts and fires, means volume will be down by over 30 per cent nationally. That is bad news for consumers because it means prices will rise quite substantially over the next six months.

"It was a bizarre vintage for all of us in the wine business," says Simon Thistlewood, chief winemaker for Hunter Valley winery Bimbadgen Estate.

"It was so warm in the Hunter that we'd finished vintage before we would normally have expected to have started.

"I think only the Hunter Valley and Margaret River escaped some sort of mayhem, and our volume is still way down. Everyone else had issues."

Ross Brown, managing director of Brown Brothers, is blunt in his assessment.

"The 2007 vintage was the vintage from hell and consumers can expect to be paying the price for that," says Brown. "Wine buyers have had bargains for three

or four years now, but that can't continue.

"There are too many wines out there at \$15 that should be selling for \$20 or more. Either the prices rise, or the winemakers stop producing wines of the quality they are making today. Economically it just doesn't make any sense.

"Either the punters are prepared to pay what a wine is worth, or they will have to accept a drop in quality at the price point at which they buy their wines.

"It costs at least \$20 to produce a good bottle of Heathcote shiraz, but there are many selling today for \$15 or less.

"Prices will never be as good for wine drinkers as they are right now, so the canny consumer should be snapping up bargains that simply won't be there in 12 months' time."

Thistlewood sees cleanskins gradually disappearing due to a lack of fruit, and predicts grape growers will get more money for their grapes. He echoes Brown's predictions of higher bottle shop prices.



are invaluable sources of information.

If you are going to a reputable restaurant, there should be a sommelier on duty. Don't rely on your waiter for wine advice; ask for the sommelier. A sommelier should have an encyclopaedic knowledge of all the wines on the restaurant's list. His or her job is to recommend wines to suit what you have chosen to eat, not to recommend the most expensive wine on the list.

Sommeliers are usually delighted to introduce guests to wines they haven't tried before. Stuart Knox, the former sommelier at Forty One in Sydney and now owner of his own wine bar and restaurant, Fix St James (also in Sydney), says too many diners are frightened of seeking advice.

"A lot of people are scared of sommeliers," he says. "They are afraid we want to sell them the most expensive bottle on the list. Actually, a good sommelier wants to give a guest the best possible experience.

"A good sommelier can open up a whole range of new experiences and will suggest much more interesting wines you won't find at a bottle shop. If people put their faith in you, then you want to make sure they enjoy themselves. Try wines by the glass, to see if your taste matches that of the sommelier."

You don't even have to give a sommelier an

extra tip. "It's appreciated, but not necessary," says Knox.

It always pays to write down the names of any wines you particularly enjoy. That way you can walk into a restaurant or wine store and give the staff some idea of your tastes.

"If you are able to say, 'I had a great bottle of Bowen Estate Coonawarra cabernet last week, do you have anything similar?' you've given them something to work on."

If all else fails and the choice is just too bewildering, cut out and keep this next paragraph. Certain regions are known for being the best for particular grape varieties, so it's hard to go wrong with:

Rieslings from the Clare and Eden Valleys, chardonnays from Margaret River and the Adelaide Hills, semillons from the Hunter Valley and sauvignon blancs from the Adelaide Hills and Orange. With reds, Coonawarra and Margaret River produce our best cabernets, the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale big shirazes and the Hunter more savoury styles, while the best pinots noir come from the Yarra, Mornington Peninsula, Geelong and Macedon ranges and Italian varieties are usually excellent when they come from the King Valley.

Good luck! ■

ensive, but is a better option than having disappointed guests or a cellar full of wine you can't face drinking. And trust me – there is an awful lot of bad wine out there, despite what you hear in the trade will tell you. Wine writers are another good source of information. Find a wine writer whose selections you enjoy and follow his or her tips for a few weeks. If you still like what you are drinking, then you share similar palates and know you can trust their recommendations. Magazines such as *Gourmet Traveller* (Australia), *Winestate* (Australia and New Zealand) and *Cuisine* (New Zealand)