

The Times (London)

July 10, 2010 Saturday

Edition 1;

National Edition

Label table

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SECTION: WEEKEND;FEATURES; Pg. 15

LENGTH: 625 words

Do Times readers have the wit not to judge a book by its cover, or a wine by its label? I think so. Research from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the American Association of Wine Economists has shown that novice US drinkers are duped by fancy labels and high price tags. In the studies, tasters rated wines marked with expensive prices over cheaper bottles, even though the contents were the same, and gave higher marks to swanky-looking labels. The research also showed that novice US drinkers tended to prefer the cheaper wines in blind tastings.

Everyone acknowledges that deciphering labels is not straightforward - just as well, as otherwise I would be out of a job. Yet in 35 years of writing about wine, I have witnessed the British moving from being insecure novices, who are happy to knock back sugary Blue Nun liebfraumilch and Mateus Rosé, to become more discerning wine drinkers. The big milestone was 1998 when, for the first time, British drinkers spent more on wine than beer; another was when we started to drink as much red wine as white. Wine had finally become fashionable. Today the nation's palate has shifted from easy-swigging, lighter, sweeter reds, such as juicy beaujolais and merlot, towards more complex reds made from grapes with more oak, alcohol, tannin and structure. Even the wily, obscure pinot noir grape has its fans.

All of which explains why I don't buy this American research. Such stories reinforce that traditional, elitist view that drinkers cannot tell the difference between good, bad and appalling wines. I maintain that our wine drinkers can tell the difference and are happy to pay extra for better bottles when they want to splash out. Few of us can afford fine wines at

every meal, so what's wanted is a range of wines at all sorts of prices, from everyday sub-£6 midweek supper bottles to fancy fare for a summer dinner party.

Labels can irritate as well as inform, and while I concede that those with grand châteaux and elegant script, or with fancy abstract art, might persuade people to pay a higher price, or dupe them into thinking that they are drinking a finer wine, I doubt whether our increasingly sophisticated wine drinkers would fall for this for long. My postbag is full of letters from knowledgeable drinkers who notice and fret over rolling blends and vintage changes, grumble about the taste of re-sourced wines and producer substitutions, and carry on like the demanding, informed folk they are.

This week's best buys

2008 Red Burgundy Pinot Noir Reserve, Cave de Lugny, France Asda, down to £5.12

Bargain-basement red burgundy that oozes light, lively, summery damson plum and spice.

2006 Castillo Albai Crianza Rioja, Pagos del Rey, Spain Asda, down to £4.93 Ridiculously good sub-£5 rioja. Its classy, tobaccoscented style and vanillaladen finish is given away.

2009 Chapel Down Flint Dry, Tenterden, Kent Waitrose, £7.69 Fine hedgerow-scented English white. With its lively, lemony palate and elegant, smoky finish, it is a good fish and seafood wine.

2008 See Saw Semillon-Sauvignon Blanc, Australia Waitrose, £7.99 Hunter Valley semillon and Central Ranges sauvignon make this mouthwatering, bold, grassy blend.

The keeper

2004 Framingham Marlborough Dry Riesling, New Zealand Harvey Nichols, £11.25 This gorgeous dry, leafy, floral, lemon zest-spiked riesling was the star turn at a Kiwi tasting this year. In the same class as a fine mosel, it is already developing the intense rich, kerosene notes that single-estate German rieslings develop with age. Hang on to it for a few more years and this impressive '04 will turn into a richer, more toasty mouthful still, with that lime juice streak that aficionados of German riesling, such as me, adore. Drink now until 2013.