

Never Buy a Bad Bottle of Wine Again

Slate's guide to the importers you can count on.

By *Mike Steinberger* Posted Wednesday, May 6, 2009, at 8:02 PM ET



My father swears he once had a girlfriend who sent him a postcard from Paris saying that she liked France but couldn't understand why all the cars had foreign plates. I can't help but think of that story whenever the issue of foreign wines and their often-confusing labels arises. For many Americans accustomed to shopping for Chardonnays and Merlots, the French practice of identifying wines not by type of grape but by place of origin can be baffling, even intimidating, and Italian, Spanish, and German labels can be equally daunting. But while there is no easy solution to the problem of French vehicles bearing French tags, there is a simple, usually failsafe means of determining whether or not a foreign wine is worth buying if you are having trouble deciphering the label: Flip the bottle around and see who imported it. To facilitate this corner-cutting, ***Slate*** proudly unveils its [wallet-size Foreign Wine Cheat Sheet](#) listing importers whose wines can be depended on to deliver pleasure.

PRINT DISCUSS E-MAIL RSS RECOMMEND... SINGLE PAGE
YAHOO! BUZZ FACEBOOK MYSPACE MIXX DIGG REDDIT DELICIOUS FURL MAGNOLIA
SPHERE STUMBLEUPONCLOSE

Generally speaking, being an importer sounds about as sexy as being an accountant. In wine circles, however, importing is actually a very glamorous pursuit—nearly as exalted as winemaking itself. That's because importers have played a central, even defining, role in the

emergence and growth of American wine culture. Combining impeccable taste with evangelical zeal, people like Kermit Lynch, Robert Chadderdon, Robert Haas, and Terry Theise have not only introduced Americans to many of the greatest wines that Europe has to offer; they have helped cultivate several generations of palates. But the wine world has broadened dramatically in the decades since these importers started out; entire regions—entire countries—that produced mostly rotgut 20 years ago are now making respectable wines. Amid this global quality revolution, a number of newer importers are continuing the work started by Lynch, Chadderdon, and their generation and are scouring the Languedoc, Galicia, Sicily, Mendoza, and McLaren Vale for tomorrow's star winemakers. The ***Slate*** Foreign Wine Cheat Sheet includes the best of the old guard and the new.

Although the Berkeley-based Lynch wasn't the first celebrity importer—that distinction belongs to Frank Schoonmaker, the premier talent scout of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s—he is widely regarded as a pioneering figure in the wine trade. Beginning in the early 1970s, Lynch built a portfolio that included what are now some of the most iconic names in wine—Chave, [Coche-Dury](#), Raveneau, Clape, Lapierre, Vieux Télégraphe. (As talented a writer as he is a taster, Lynch also authored one of the all-time-great wine books, *Adventures on the Wine Route*.) It wasn't just the caliber of the wines that set Lynch apart, it was also the way he handled them; he was the first importer to have wines shipped via refrigerated containers to ensure that they didn't suffer heat damage in transit. (Exposure to heat can be lethal for wines.) Seeing Lynch's distinctive label on a bottle, replete with the quote from Thomas Jefferson ("Good wine is a necessity of life for me") was an ironclad guarantee of satisfaction. That's still the case, and names such as Chadderdon, Theise, and Neal Rosenthal likewise remain synonymous with excellence. The importance of importers—the quality of their selections, the care with which they treat their wines—remains paramount, a point I was reminded of at a New York tasting of the Louis/Dressner "portfolio" of wines last fall. Joe Dressner and his wife, Denyse Louis, started their company 20 years ago and today boast what many people, myself included, consider to be the most compelling portfolio around. Louis/Dressner specializes in "un-spoofulated" wines. (*Spoofulated*—*spoofed* for short—is a term fashionable among oeno-geeks and refers to wines that are egregiously manipulated, made with excessive oak, manufactured yeasts, and other methods that give them a "tarted-up" taste; click [here](#) for insight into the word's etymology.) They work with artisanal producers who mostly farm organically—who hand-harvest their grapes and vinify them with wild yeasts, little if any [chaptalization](#), minimal sulfur and new oak, etc. Louis/Dressner is best known for its Loire Valley selections, but it has an exemplary array of wines from across France (the Beaujolais offerings are stunning) and has now branched out into Italy. Tasting through the company's entire roster last October was bliss: a vivid reminder of what an importer with great vision and a palate to match can bring to the table.

According to Steve Cornwell of MacArthur Beverages, one of Washington, D.C.,'s premier wine shops, Louis/Dressner is the inspiration for a number of newer importers. "[Joe] Dressner is like a beacon of

light for a lot of these people," he says. Among the importer portfolios that I sampled for this article, the ones that most excited me were very clearly guided by a Dressnerian sensibility. Jenny & François Selections, which specializes in natural wines (organic or biodynamic viticulture, no spoofing techniques in the cellar), boasts an outstanding lineup; its wines, mostly French, are full of vigor, character, and charm. Jon-David Headrick, who previously worked for acclaimed importer Eric Solomon, has an exclusively French book and brings in a bevy of excellent wines, notably from the Loire and Champagne. I was impressed, too, by what I sampled from Liz Willette of Willette Wines and Roy Cloud of Vintage '59, both of whom also focus on France. (In addition to her importing business, Willette distributes the brilliant wines of the aforementioned Domaine Jean-Louis Chave.) Savio Soares, a former New York sommelier, sources very good wines from France, Germany, and Austria and is now moving into Italy. Monika Caha has assembled an intriguing collection of Austrian wines, all made by eco-conscious family estates, some of which are using indigenous grape varieties seldom seen here in the United States until recently.

Spain seems to be especially fertile ground for importers these days; a number of them are focusing on the Iberian Peninsula. But while there is much to like about Spain—it is enjoying a viticultural boom and offers more high-quality bargain wines these days than probably any other country—there is also reason for concern: A lot of Spanish wines are being made in an overripe, aggressively oaky style. From what I understand, these wines are popular with younger Spanish consumers, but here in the United States, retailers have reported a growing backlash against this style. While Australia and California are, for the moment, the primary victims of this silent boycott, Spain is probably not going to be spared. In fact, there is already talk that Spain is becoming the next [Australia](#) (talk encouraged by the fact that more than a few Spanish reds could easily be mistaken for Australian wines). That said, I found a few importers who are doing really innovative, compelling work in Spain. De Maison, based in North Carolina, offers some very interesting and delicious wines, particularly from northern Spain. I was also taken with what I tasted from José Pastor, whose company is called Vinos and Gourmet. A 28-year-old native of Valencia who now lives in the Bay Area, Pastor has a fabulous portfolio of Spanish wines, all of them distinctive, earthy, and brimming with personality.

Although more good wine is being made in more corners of the globe than ever before, the importing business, never easy to begin with, is becoming more challenging. Doug Polaner of Polaner Selections, which is based in suburban New York and distributes wines for several top importers, including Louis/Dressner and Eric Solomon, and also imports excellent wines itself, says that with retailers increasingly able to have wines shipped to them directly from overseas, middlemen are under growing pressure to justify their existences. "It is a much more mature market now," says Polaner. "Importers really need to prove their worth, to prove that they are adding value to the supply chain." Cornwell agrees and says that importers are being squeezed in all sorts of ways. With the consolidation of the wholesale market, distribution channels have constricted. Likewise, with more and more retailers

importing directly and the Internet giving consumers many more outlets from which to purchase wines, profit margins have steadily shrunk. "It's really tough now," says Cornwell. "For the first five or six years, you have no hope of making any money."

Indeed, David Schildknecht, a former retailer and importer who now writes for Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate*, fears that with the changes now sweeping the business, there may not be much of a future for specialty importers in the mold of Lynch and Dressner and America's blossoming wine culture may suffer as a result. Like independent booksellers, people who sell boutique wines tend to be driven by passion above all else, but enthusiasm doesn't cover the rent, and if the economics of niche importing continues to deteriorate, there are going to be fewer players and less diversity on offer to consumers. "Unless the price is paid for the value the importer creates in ferreting out and promoting the wines of perhaps heretofore little-known vintners," Schildknecht said in an e-mail, "there will be fewer discoveries made, or at the very least, far fewer American wine lovers will become aware of or be able to enjoy them."

But against the steepening odds, a handful of importers have established themselves as rising stars, and for now there seems to be no shortage of people hoping to join them. In fact, Schildknecht mentioned several reputable importers whom I neglected to consider for this article, and I suspect that I will probably need to update the cheat sheet sometime in the next year. Depending on where you live, wines brought in by the importers listed below may not be available to you locally; you should ask nearby retailers or e-mail the importers to find out. (The Web sites of the up-and-coming importers are listed [here](#).) Lastly, it bears noting that Monika Caha is not actually an importer; she is a broker whose wines are shipped by several different American importers. But her name goes on the bottles and she sources some very interesting wines, so I decided to include her.

Herewith, then, the list of up-and-coming importers (and for a list of the wines that I especially liked, click [here](#)):

Wines Worth Trying:

Domaine Romaneaux-Destezet/Hervé Souhaut St Joseph 2007 (Jenny & François Selections) \$48.75

Domaine Les Genestas Côtes-du-Rhône Village 2007 (Jenny & François Selections) \$15.50

Domaine Laureau Savennières les Genets 2005 (Jon-David Headrick Selections) \$29.99

Françoise Bedel Champagne "Entre Ciel et Terre" Brut NV (Jon-David Headrick Selections) \$99.99

Domaine Lucie et Auguste Lignier Morey Saint Denis Clos Les Sionnières 2005 (Willette Wines) \$62

Guy Charlemagne Blanc de Blancs Réserve Brut NV (Willette Wines) \$45

Domaine Franck Balthazar Cornas Chaillot 2006 (Savio Soares Selections) \$60

Domaine Mathieu Côtes-du-Rhône Cuvée Châteaumar 2006 (Savio Soares Selections) \$14

Montirius Gigondas Terre des Aânés 2005 (Vintage '59 Imports) \$34

Domaine Joseph Voillot Volnay Les Fremiets 2006 (Vintage '59 Imports) \$83

Do Ferreira Albariño 2007 (De Maison Selections) \$30

Bodegas Gurrutxaga Txakoli Bizkaiko Txakolina 2007 (De Maison Selections) \$22

Aforado O Rosal 2007 (Vinos and Gourmet) \$20

Bodegas Hermanos Peciña Señorío de P.Peciña Rioja Reserva 1999 (Vinos and Gourmet) \$30

Caves de Donnas Rosso 2005 (Polaner Selections) \$25

Cantina Convento Muri-Gries Müller-Thurgau 2008 (Polaner Selections) \$19

Anita und Hans Nittnaus Pannobile 2004 (Monika Caha Selections) \$33

Johann Donabaum Setzberg Riesling Smaragd 2006 (Monika Caha Selections) \$42