

Let's Go Shopping!

By Deborah Damery Lazear, CSW

Every woman loves to shop, don't they? No! They don't! Sometimes shopping can be intimidating—especially if you are looking for something you only know a little about, or perhaps are not feeling adventurous. Like what, you say... how about wine!

I am in the wine education business so I am frequently asked “Where do you shop?” As if where I shop would help anyone make good choices. The answer is always the same. I shop everywhere. The secret is in knowing how to shop.

Shopping for wine can be a daunting experience. So many bottles, so little time! Isn't it just easier to stop at the grocery store, grab something familiar, run home, and open it for supper? Easier, maybe, but interesting or exciting...probably not.

For me, wine shopping is a great adventure full of surprises, disappointments, and maybe a great bargain or two. Put your feet up and for the next few minutes shop with me on a virtual journey through San Diego's wine meccas. By the way, these tips will apply in any city where you live or visit.

Let's begin with what wine likes and what it doesn't. Sounds like your mother-in-law, right? Wine is happy when kept at around 55-57 degrees F., in the dark, and with no vibrations. Now this part sounds like my old college roommate with a hangover! I don't know where you shop, but for me it is rarely cool and most definitely not dark. Except for the occasional earth tremor, the vibration part is not usually a problem.

Take your local supermarket, they are all about the same temperature, with nice bright lights so you can see all the advertising: Bad for wine, but good for wine distributors who pay a lot of money for choice visual space: Eye level, end of aisles, and smack dab in the middle on an angle! A few

years ago I had surgery that required me to use one of those electric carts in the grocery store. Took out a whole display of Merlot in one turn! Anyway, my point is that shelf space costs a lot to the retailer so as savvy shoppers we need to remember that the unusual wines will never be front and center. Have you also noticed the highest priced wines are on the top row, right under the brightest lights? Bottom line is to buy pricey wine, \$35 and up, from a wine merchant with the proper storage shop, not at the grocery store.

I shop for wine at the grocery store when picking up food



for the week. I take advantage of the “buy 6, get 10% off” offers. I buy wines that move fast; names are well known, bottles in the middle or lower of the racks, and are meant to be drunk young. Young means right now! For whites, buy the most recent vintage on the shelf especially if it is a lemony, crisp Pinot Grigio (Pinot Gris is the same grape), or a grassy Sauvignon Blanc (also called Fume Blanc, aren't those marketers clever?). Avoid the bargains of either red or white from Central Valley. If it is good for cantaloupe, it is not good for wine varietals. Every class I teach someone asks me about \$2buck Chuck a.k.a. Charles Shaw wines sold at Trader Joe's. I always reply the same way: If it gets a beer drinker to try wine, go for it. If you are having a huge party and are providing the wine on a budget, go for it. If you are learning about wine and searching for that true varietal experience, maybe not! I keep throwing around this word, varietal, which simply refers to the type of grapes used to make wine. Examples familiar to you would be Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and many, many others. Table grapes and blueberries are not the varietals I am referring to.

Occasionally I find some real treasures in the grocery store. Sometimes they are in a cart at the end of an aisle (marked way down) or on the shelf. Often this means the wine will no longer be carried in the store. Buy 6 of these, and you have made out like a bandit! But buyers beware; hold the white wine up to the light. This shouldn't be hard in the market. If the color is golden yellow and you are not looking at a desert wine, put it down. That golden color, as pretty as it is, is an indicator of oxidation. This means that some air has gotten into the bottle and it is flawed. We have probably all tasted this type of wine. I have a girlfriend who loves it! Go figure! It will taste extra ripe and a little flat instead of fresh, and fruity. It won't hurt you, but it doesn't taste very good either.

Always examine the bottle neck for leakage. Avoid bottles of table wine that show signs of residue around the foil. You are more likely to see this in red than whites.

I adore sparkling wine. I must be a real romantic at heart. The secret to not breaking the bank is to search out the other name that a winery uses for its "second" label. An example



is Schramsberg, that bastion of wonderful sparkling wine from California- Napa in particular. The family has been making the best, in my lowly opinion, sparkling wine in America for generations. It doesn't come cheap, however. They also make another sparkling wine at less than half the price under the label Mirabel. Trust me; there is nothing "second" about it. Google on winery names and look for their other labels. A winery with a great reputation for fine wine will never sell their second label made from plonk; after all they have a reputation to protect. This is an especially important buying tip for Bordeaux.

For special bottles and special occasions, I rely on the small shops where you can often talk to the owner who will be very knowledgeable. They frequently have tastings of the better wines at a reasonable price. Take advantage of these to expand your knowledge and palate. Help them to get to know you; it opens all kinds of doors to treasures you might not otherwise experience.

I haven't forgotten the big box stores. Did you know that Costco is currently the largest retailer of wine in the US? Why? Because they buy large quantities and they buy smart. The turn over is fast and huge. It is a great place to shop for your \$25 and up wines. You don't get the volume discount on the cheap stuff like you do at the grocery store, so save that kind of shopping for your next trip to Vons. Costco frequently has people to assist in the wine aisles. I haven't had great experiences talking to them, so do your homework before you go. Did I tell you they have a great dry sparkling wine under the Kirkland label? Well, I never! Beverages and More are working hard to have educated staff on their floors. I know this first hand because I have had several of them in my classes at SDSU College of Extended Studies, Business of Wine Certificate Program.

So, next time you enter a wine aisle, be bold, and be smart, and if it is warm in there, don't reach for the top!

WINE PAIRING TIP OF THE SEASON

This insert is a new addition to San Diego Woman magazine's wine column. Every edition I will share my research and knowledge of wine and food pairing that is appropriate for the season.

This month we celebrate spring produce. Pairing asparagus, artichokes, and salads can be difficult. So many dressings fight with the wine making it taste like tin or metal. Asparagus is easier to pair if grilled with a light sprinkling of olive oil. If you insist on steaming it, and it really is lovely this way with poached wild salmon, choose a Sauvignon Blanc as your match. Best countries would be Loire Valley in France, Washington State, Sonoma Coast, and Chile. I am not a lover of New Zealand

Sauvignon Blanc with asparagus or artichokes as they tend towards the gooseberry and grassy side a little too heavily for me. Try it yourself to see if you agree or disagree. Artichokes with a mayonnaise or aioli type dressing also work well with Sauvignon Blanc or a dry Riesling: try the one from Hogue or Columbia Crest; a great value. Washington State is doing a fabulous job with this grape. I have a friend that grills halved artichokes and serves them with a Thai influenced peanut dipping sauce- incredible.

Now for salads. Dressings made with vinegar can be a disaster with wine. Think about it. Bad wine can taste like vinegar so eating food with vinegar can turn a lovely wine into a bad memory. The secret is making dressings using lemon juice lightly for the acid. Have you discovered verjus yet? This is the unfermented grape juice (do not pick up a bottle of Welch's grape juice in the supermarket thinking this is what I meant) used in salad dressing in place of vinegar. Google on verjus or go to Dean & DeLuca to see what they offer.