

Boozeclues

Gimme five

By James Oliver Cury



THIS GUY NOSES WINE
Oenophile Kevin Zraly surprised us by agreeing to sample nine \$5 wines in a blind tasting.

Every wine store and website broadcasts its bargain picks with exclamations like “Best wines under \$15!” or “Ten bottles under \$10!” The problem is, I don’t want to spend \$10 on a bottle, only to watch half of it die a sad, lonely death in my fridge. My holy grail is a drinkable \$5 bottle. I won’t bring it to a dinner party of course; I just want one that I can enjoy with take-out.

The mission doesn’t seem impossible: Prices have dropped as consumers scramble to buy inexpensive-but-not-awful brands like Charles Shaw (a.k.a. “two-buck Chuck”) and Yellowtail. Wine shops, however, now stock so many low-cost bottles that it’s hard to know which are good and which are plonk—a situation that begs for a world-class wine guru.

I called Kevin Zraly—vice president of wine for the Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group and author of *Windows on the World: Complete Wine Course*—and asked him if he’d stoop to taste some sub-five-dollar bottles with me, in a blind tasting. To my surprise, he agreed.

Our samples came from all over the world—Italy, France, Chile, Argentina, Australia and Portugal—though for our purposes, they came from three stores. I asked the salespeople at Acker, Merril & Condit (160 W 72nd St between Broadway and Amsterdam, 212-787-1700); Astor Wines & Spirits (12 Astor Pl at Lafayette St, 212-674-7500) and Warehouse Wines & Spirits (735 Broadway at Astor Pl, 212-982-7770) to direct me to their best stuff for less than five dollars—avoiding close-out deals. We ended up tasting four whites and five reds.

Zraly moved like a pro: He picked up each glass, eyeballed it, swirled, sniffed and then commented. “This color scares me,” he said, referring to a dark-yellow chardonnay that shouldn’t have been so gold. We scratched it off the list. Then he started tasting. After his first sip, he fell into a deep trance and I watched, wondering if the flavors had

transported him somewhere far, far away. Turns out he wasn’t bowled over by the delicate balance; he was trying to formulate an opinion without gagging.

Zraly had no problem knocking one glass out of the competition after just a whiff. Our sample of **Les Deux Rives Corbières**—a French blend of grenache, syrah, mourvedre and carignan—smelled like it had oxidized and he instantly declared it undrinkable. Later, we discovered that it was a 1999, way too old to be in the \$5 range. This is the first lesson for cheapskate wine-buyers: Seek out the youngest wines, even 2005 vintages. Inexpensive bottles don’t age gracefully.

As Zraly swished each wine around in his mouth, the list of imperfections grew: “No fruit,” “too tannic,” “sulphur scents”—we heard it all. “I want 60 seconds of fruit,” he said after one disappointing glass. He didn’t find anything close. Lesson #2: Cheap wines don’t have the balance or lingering finish found in more expensive wines. For this reason, opt for red over white; it hides acidity better.

Of the whites, Zraly liked the **2003 Casa de Campo Chardonnay** from Argentina best, sold at Acker, Merril & Condit. It had a sweet bouquet and a decent balance of acid and fruit, even after 30 seconds. His favorite red was a **2001 Jaja de Jau Cabernet Merlot** from France that we scored at Warehouse Wines—a deep, dark wine that smelled “organically farmed” and showed good fruit.

At the end of our session, Zraly warned that at this price, even decent bottles might not fare so well next time we buy them. A whole case could turn if the winery, the importer or the retailer doesn’t store it properly. “If the consistency isn’t there,” he posited, “then what good is it?” That’s lesson #3: Higher prices generally deliver greater dependability. If you want a reliably good value for five bucks, Zraly says, drink beer.

EAT OUT

PHOTOGRAPH: ASTRID STANWARTZ

Recently opened (too new to review)

NEW Ludo

Beloved Chez Es Saada is gone but not forgotten. This equally sensuous restaurant and lounge has opened in its place. Chef Einat Adimony is serving global meze plates. 42 E 1st St between First and Second Aves (212-777-5617). Subway: F, V to Lower East Side—Second Ave. Dinner. Average main course: \$22.

NEW Mundo Café and Restaurant

Co-owners Guillermo LuceroFabbi and Canalp Caner have expanded Astoria’s offerings with their new café, which serves dishes from around the globe. 31-18 E Broadway at 32nd St, Astoria,

Queens (718-777-2829). Subway: N, W to Broadway (W weekdays only). Dinner. Average main course: \$10 (cash only).

NEW My Moon

This sprawling, Turkish-inspired restaurant and lounge is set in a recently converted factory. 184 North 10th St between Bedford and Driggs Aves, Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-599-7007). Subway: L to Bedford Ave. Dinner. Average main course: \$15.

NEW Paris Match

France meets Japan on the Upper East Side at this bistro and sushi bar. Most of the decor has been imported from

Europe, along with many of the 300 wines and 20 sakes. 29 E 65th St at Madison Ave (212-737-4400). Subway: 6 to 68th St—Hunter College. 11:30–1am. Average main course: \$22.

NEW Regional

As its name implies, Regional celebrates the lesser-known culinary gems of 20 Italian regions. A former Pladina chef helms the kitchen. 2607 Broadway between 98th and 99th Sts (212-666-1915). Subway: 1, 2, 3 to 96th St. Dinner. Average main course: \$18.

NEW Roberto Passion

The namesake chef who worked at Hotel Cipriani in Venice and Le Zoccolo and Putanesca in New York has a place to call

his own, serving simple Italian dishes. 741 Ninth Ave at 50th St (212-582-5599). Subway: C, E to 50th St. Lunch, dinner. Average main course: \$15.

NEW Sakura Café

Tokyo-born Fumiko Akiyama has opened this sake bar and restaurant, serving Japanese home cooking, plus sushi (flown in from Japan). 388 Fifth Ave between 6th and 7th Sts, Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-832-2970). Subway: F, M, R to Fourth Ave—9th St (M weekdays only). Dinner. Average main course: \$14.

Sarabeth’s

The baked-goods counter has been replaced by a bar at this new 200-seat