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WINE & SPIRITS

Say hello to Forty Buck Chuck

Blended by négociants, a new breed of bulk wine is priced to impress. But is it worth drinking?

By Corie Brown, Times Staff Writer

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It's all a matter of taste

Turning excess wine into marketable brands is the role of **négociants**. Like négociants in Burgundy, France, they buy wine made by others to create blends sold under their own brand.

NÉGOCIANT wines can be made from any grapes grown anywhere. While the rules are the same for all California wines — for a specific appellation, 85% of the wine must come from that district — that's really all a consumer knows. A fabulous cult wine-maker could have made the wine. Or it might come from the garage of a grower who turns his unsold fruit into bulk wine using rented equipment.

And then there are additives such as tartaric acid and grape concentrates marketed under names such as Mega-Purple. Adding grape-based acids, sugars and coloring to mask deficiencies is allowed in all California wines. With bulk wines, these additives are a necessary part of the blending process, Leigon says. "There are better bulk wines because of technology."

Most consumers don't know the difference between a négociant wine and a wine controlled by a vintner from vineyard to bottle, retailers say. The more ambitious négociant wines sell if consumers like the way they taste, Knight says.

Cameron Hughes sells his wines through Costco, e-mailing customers to announce the latest addition to the portfolio. "This hurly burly Barbera will knock your socks off," he wrote in a recent e-mail. "We only have a couple hundred cases, so get it while you can. Sourced from a winery who sells a slightly different blend for just under \$40 a bottle."