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ON WINE ROBERT WHITLEY

Hughes' "Lot" in life is providing great bargains

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Imagine serving a \$30 bottle of wine every night with dinner. On special occasions, you might even splurge on the \$40 or \$50 bottle, or open two or three of them when you have guests.

Dream on, you think. You wouldn't consider running up an annual tab of more than \$10,000 on wine (\$30 times 365 days equals \$10,950). So there's no way to enjoy wines of that quality on a regular basis.

Obviously, you have never met Cameron Hughes or become acquainted with his wines. Hughes is a San Francisco-based wine negotiant. He purchases wine in bulk, bottles it in his own package and sells it directly to consumers or retail wine merchants.

There is nothing unusual about this practice. "Two-Buck Chuck" is a negotiant wine. There is a difference, though. Cameron Hughes has taken the time-tested negotiant model and given it a

twist for today's discerning consumer. His publicist has dubbed him "Mr. Extreme Value," and friends think of him as the Robin Hood of wine. Hughes' "Lot" wines are not bottom-of-the-barrel price bargains that are blended to be palatable and provide the wine consumer with a cheap fix.

Hughes scours the better wine regions of California seeking small lots of high-class wines that failed to make the cut when an expensive final blend was assembled. "Many negociants would buy these wines and back-blend them with less interesting wines to improve the overall product they are selling," he said.

Not Hughes. He creates a Lot and prices it to sell. He's blessed with an outstanding palate, and he chooses his wines very well.

For example, the **Cameron Hughes "Lot 7" is a juicy Knights Valley cabernet sauvignon (with a small splash of cabernet franc) that offers lovely aromas of mint, spice and red currant. It is**

beautifully balanced and elegant.

It was offered on the Cameron Hughes Wine Web site (www.chwine.com) for \$15 and appeared in Costco for \$9.99. It was a steal at either price.

The Cameron Hughes "Lot 10" is another cabernet sauvignon, this one a blend of three Sonoma County appellations – Alexander Valley, Dry Creek Valley and Knights Valley.

"Those are the three finest areas in Sonoma County for growing cabernet," Hughes noted.

I also tasted and highly rated the **Cameron Hughes "Lot 9" (\$13), a syrah from Paso Robles that delivers interesting notes of spice and earth; and a fleshy pinot noir, "Lot 8" (\$13), from Monterey County.** The "Lot 8" will be available at Costco soon for less than \$10.

All four wines have one thing in common: exceptional value. And the prospects of more of the same appear to be very bright.

"There is plenty of really good excess wine out there," said Hughes. "And that's with short crops in 2003 and 2004. But the 2005 vintage was huge."