

Stephen Tanzer's Winophilia



Screaming Values

Stunning California Bargains from Cameron Hughes

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In the course of my exhaustive tastings this spring of new wines from California, I've been thrilled to bring a few really good ones to your attention that are priced in the moderate \$20 to \$25 range. And there will be more to come. To a jaded drinker such as myself, finding characterful California wine at this price level is rare, especially considering that I enjoy easy access to varietally accurate, complex and concentrated wine from Southern France, Italy, South Africa, Argentina and elsewhere.

So when I caught up with a modern *négociant* company offering some downright competent and tasty California wines whose prices are more likely to be \$10 to \$15, these bottles really grabbed my attention. The youthful Cameron Hughes began his wine career as a self-described cellar rat, then learned the distribution end of the business. He then immersed himself in tasting as many exceptional wines of California, since his longer-term objective was to make very good wines at very gentle prices, mostly from specially selected bulk wine purchases, and he needed to know the competition.

Hughes started his company in 2001, raised money in 2002, then ran out of cash in 2003. He eventually bought out his investors and began again in 2005. The second time was the charm, as he will bottle 400,000 cases of wine in 2011, at five different facilities in California. (He's also bringing in wines from Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Argentina and New Zealand.)

When I asked him what he's trying to accomplish with his various Lot # bottlings, which can vary in size from 200 to 20,000 cases, he said "we want Rutherford cabernet to taste like Rutherford cabernet. But we also offer plenty of Napa blends that are a bit less specific in their soil character but are clearly from Napa Valley." Today Hughes makes spot market purchases of wine, sometimes putting it back into barrels for longer aging. He also has entered into several winery partnerships. And today his own team of winemakers vinifies 50% of the company's total wine.

Not every wine in the portfolio rated my recommendation (some wines struck me as a bit dilute, or too oaky, or somewhat alcoholic), but the standard was generally high. And a surprising number of them were shockingly gratifying for their prices. For California wines under \$15, they overdeliver in a big way.



Here are my favorite values from among Hughes' current portfolio of California wines. Note that new Lot #s are coming out all the time. To stay abreast of Cameron Hughes' current and new offerings, and to track down specific wines, go to www.chwne.com.

The **2009 Lot 240 Albarino Clarksburg** (\$10) carries a low 12.8% alcohol. With its aromas and flavors of lime, apple, peach, flowers and spices, it's supple, floral and light on its feet. It's not a particularly powerful wine but boasts attractive fruit and nice inner-mouth perfume.

The **2009 Lot 222 Chardonnay Los Carneros** (\$13), aged partly in French oak and partly in stainless steel, offers a bright yellow color and attractive spicy lift to its aromas of lemon peel and stone fruits. It's a round, sweet, easygoing, fruit-and-spice bomb with good texture and palate presence and considerable immediate appeal.

The **2008 Lot 210 Merlot Napa Valley** (\$10) is absurdly cheap for a merlot with sound varietal character. The nose shows black cherry, redcurrant and a hint of leather, along with a subtle spicy element. The wine enters the mouth sweet, then shows good vinosity in the middle and finishes with sweet red and dark fruit flavors and dusty tannins.

Every bit as cheap by the standards of syrah, the **2009 Lot 237 Syrah Clear Lake Lake County** (\$18) is a big boy at 15.8% alcohol. It offers aromas of black cherry, black olive, plum and sweet oak. I found it to be a step up in concentration from the other current syrah bottlings in the portfolio, with a firm spine supporting its flavors of black fruits, licorice and minerals. It's fresh and powerful, and not at all overly sweet considering its high alcohol. Finishes with solid tannins.

The **2009 Lot 219 Zinfandel Monte Rosso Vineyard Sonoma Valley** (\$16), also an elevated 15.3% alcohol, delivers classic zinfandel aromas of brambly berries and black pepper, along with a whiff of licorice. It's juicy but not overly sweet, with good spicy energy to the dark fruit flavors. This was aged in 50% new oak (half French and half American) but has the fruit to support the lumber. Finishes with dusty tannins and good persistence.

I like what the extra two years of bottle age have done for the **2007 Lot 179 Cabernet Sauvignon/Syrah Napa Valley** (\$15). The complex nose of this dark red-ruby blend melds blackberry, leather, chocolate and spices. It's broad, suave and classically dry, with a fine-grained texture for a \$15 red wine. The finish features dusty, horizontal tannins and lingering leather and pepper notes. This wine is actually the 2007 Havens Black & Blue, which Cameron Hughes told me he purchased as "shiners" (bottled but unlabeled wine). Long-time fans of this wine at Havens know that it would have sold for as much as \$40. By the way, Hughes also bought barrels of the 2008 Black & Blue and expects to bottle that wine as Lot 208.

The bright red-ruby **2008 Lot 211 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley** (\$17) displays pure, aromatic scents of cherry, redcurrant and cedar accented by lavender and pepper. It's juicy, spicy and intense, and slightly high-toned in an attractive way. Lively acidity carries the berry fruit through a persistent finish featuring a fine dusting of tannins and a late hint of leather. This is a real bargain in Napa cabernet.

Finally, the **2007 Lot 172 Cabernet Sauvignon Atlas Peak Napa Valley** (\$22) shows very rich, slightly jammy yet lively aromas of cassis, redcurrant and minerals. In the mouth, it's sweet, dense and chocolatey, revealing less of the dried berry character displayed by the nose. There's no shortage of power here. This cabernet finishes with substantial broad tannins and lingering notes of currant and spices. According to Cameron Hughes, this wine would have been priced as high as \$85 had it been released under its original label.

