

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

GOOD LIBATIONS

WINE REPORT WHETHER MOTIVATED BY THE BOTTOM LINE, PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY, OR MISSION FERVOR, SOMMELIERS ARE PLEASING DINERS WITH GOOD WINES LISTED AT BUDGET PRICES. JEFFERY LINDENMUTH REPORTS.

"Imagine if the price of admission to classical music was always \$1,000. The ticket is too expensive, and no young people can go to the concert. Well, in a generation you have lost the appreciation; you have lost part of our history," explains Eric Simonis, who, as the sommelier for Philadelphia dining destination Lacroix at **The Rittenhouse**, is less concerned about perpetuating music, of course, than wine. Simonis is one of many sommeliers who choose to augment his wine list with the sorts of bargains you would expect to find in a bistro or casual ethnic restaurant rather than shoulder-to-shoulder with the award-winning cuisine of **Jean-Marie Lacroix**.

Simonis' list includes 80 wines under \$45 and 35 wines under \$40. For him, it's simply the right thing to do. "A restaurant focusing only on the wealthiest guests does not fulfill its mission, which is to share and expose the world of haute cuisine to the young generations. By allowing the guests to order good and fairly priced wines, we set the tone of the establishment," says Simonis.

When looking for wines to fill this niche, Simonis speaks of "the hunt." Indeed, with the dollar run through the global washing machine and competition for the best deals intense, a keen eye and quick trigger finger are helpful in bagging these wines. From the Rhône Valley and Languedoc-Roussillon, Simonis offers many gems under \$40, like a 2000 **Domaine des Tuileries Minervois**, and a 2001 **Carbades** from **Château de Pennautier**. French émigré grapes are represented as well, with **Malbec** from Argentina, **Carmenere** from Chile, and **Uruguayan Tannat** among his trophies.

Far from being homely stepchildren, one senses that these wines are Simonis' greatest pride. "Once you have caught that very special wine at that very special price, there's a real pleasure in recommending a \$38 wine. There lies the challenge!" he says.

At just 25 years of age, **Nicolas Rouet**, sommelier at **Le Paradou** in Washington, D.C., is naturally sensitive to the budget of the recent graduate. "Young people come in more and more, and they pay a lot of attention to the wines. Maybe it's because I'm

young also, but they're always asking a lot of questions and are very interested." While the average bottle sale remains about \$200, Rouet finds that lunch guests, shorter on time, and money, also light up at finding a few wine choices at \$40.

His favorite regions for bargain shopping include France's **Loire Valley** and **Portugal**. "I'm looking to expand my values with Eastern Europe, Croatia, and Romania, to simply say to people that there are many countries that produce good wine."

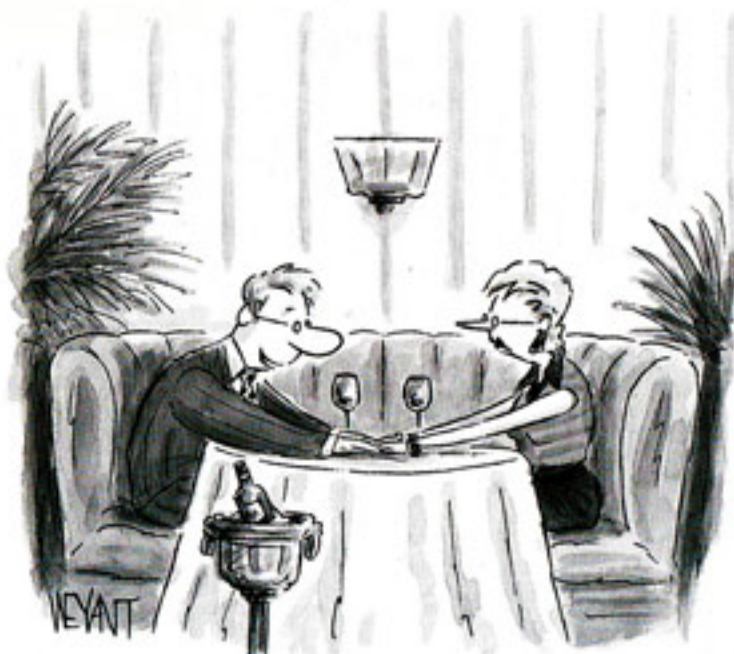
Rajat Parr, wine director of **Mina Group**, finds wines under \$40 are naturally suited to certain properties, like **Seablue** at the **MGM Grand** in Las Vegas.

"Seablue was probably the most fun list I've ever worked on. The restaurant is meant to be high-volume, fun, and energetic, so I wanted to put fun, interesting, esoteric wines on the list. And, honestly, the most fun wines are not really the most expensive ones," says Parr, whose **Seablue** list includes about 40 wines priced under \$40.

Part of Parr's strategy for selling value-priced wine is to group them beneath innovative headings. "I think people need an endorsement," says Parr. "You need to make it exciting and intriguing, or people just assume the \$30 wine is the worst one." At **Seablue**,

these wines are collected in a section called "Off the Beaten Path," promoting their unusual origin. Well represented are up-and-coming regions of Spain like **Valdeorras** and **Penedès**, and from Slovenia he offers **Vila Marija Pinot Grigio 2003** (\$35). Parr ventures to the islands for aromatic whites, including the Greek grape **Moschofilero** from producers **Boutari** (\$34) and **Skouras** (\$33) as well as **Argiolas Vermentino Costamolino Sardinia 2003** (\$34) and **Maestracci Vermentino E Prove Corsica 2002** (\$40).

At the flagship restaurant **Michael Mina** in San Francisco, Parr collects his budget wines, ranging from \$27 to \$82, under the grandiose title "Wines of Consequence," describing them as wines that offer "personality and individuality, along with value." The highly international selection of about 30 wines includes **Freja**



"Susan, this might be just the wine talking, but I think I want to order more wine."