

Eureka! Ten good Zinfandels and Syrahs for \$10 or less

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One day, California wine drinkers may look back on 2006 as the end of a golden era, when cheap, delicious Zinfandel was widely available, before it became the state wine.

Wine blogger Alder Yarrow of Vinography.com suggested in a letter to the Wine section last week that if state Sen. Carole Migden's bill anointing Zin as our state wine

Bargain Wines

passes, Zinfandel would be illegal to pick, drink or sell for profit.

Yarrow was probably kidding. Probably.

"Regulatory processes are strange things," says Anne Joseph, acting professor at UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law. "It would depend on what the statutory scheme is."

Picking the state flower, the California poppy, is illegal, as is catching the state marine fish, the garibaldi. The state reptile, the desert tortoise, is an endangered species, which puts it in better shape than the state animal, the California grizzly bear — the last confirmed sighting of one of those came from the folks who killed it in 1922.

On the other hand, you can hunt the state bird, the California quail. You can make furniture from the state tree, the California redwood. And you can shout the state motto, "Eureka," whenever you find a great wine at \$10 or less — whether or not the grapes were grown in the state soil (San Joaquin Soil).

Striking Zinfandel gold

Eureka! Here are five fine affordable Zinfandels. And to prepare for the possible consequences of Migden's bill, we also present five good cheap Syrahs, because Syrah (also known as Shiraz) is the closest-tasting grape to Zinfandel.

Both tend to be big-bodied and high in alcohol. Both can taste of either black or red fruit — it's hard to predict which until you open the bottle — and sometimes have an interesting spiciness. And both can sometimes be deficient in acidity, making those bottlings a challenge to pair with food, though they're fine to drink on their own.

My favorite of the five Zinfandels by a large margin is the 2001 Cameron Hughes Lot 5 Sonoma County Zinfandel (\$10). Hughes is a negotiator who buys surplus wine



MIKE KREKA/The Chronicle

If Zinfandel were taken off the market tomorrow, Shiraz would be the best available substitute.

from wineries and sells it under his own label, mostly at Costco. He finds a lot of bargains this way, but the nature of the negotiator business means that he's not completely in control of the wines, so it's difficult to establish a house style.

This is the rare bargain wine that could easily pass for a \$30 masterpiece — which, in fact, is the price its makers originally planned to sell it for. The reason is its ever-evolving complexity, a quality rarely found this affordably. Flavors of blackberry, black tea, oak and vanilla keep shifting on the tongue throughout the medium-long finish.

The most recent version of the nonvintage (NV) Barefoot California Zinfandel (\$6) that I tasted is very different, full of jammy red fruit, with mild tannins and a medium-long finish. It's simple but likable, and would still be worth rec-

ommending if it cost \$15.

The 2002 Tamas Estates Livermore Valley Zinfandel (\$10) delivers more black fruit — blackberry and black plums — with firm tannins and a note of vanilla. The 2003 Ravenswood Vintners Blend California Zinfandel (\$10) is similar, though with slightly more red-fruit character. Both have lighter bodies than you might expect, but that makes them easier to drink with dinner.

The 2003 Beringer Founders' Estate California Old Vine Zinfandel (\$10) is a good version of a standard red bargain wine: simple, decent flavors and aromas of cherry and oak, with mild tannins.

While Zinfandel is originally from Croatia and is grown in a few places outside California, including Italy (where it's known as Primitivo), it's as definitively Californian as our state insect, the California dogface butterfly; our state prehistoric artifact, the chipped stone bear (found on a dig in San Diego County in 1985); and our state fife and drum band, the California Consolidated Drum Band.

Well-traveled grape

In contrast, Syrah has a passport full of prestigious stamps: France, Italy, the United States, South Africa, Chile, Argentina, New Zealand, Switzerland, even China. Any country that grows wine grapes these days probably has Syrah planted somewhere. But the world leader in the varietal, particularly in the bargain price range, is Australia.

The 2003 Devil's Marbles Limestone Coast Shiraz (\$10) from kangaroo country is my favorite of this week's Syrahs. It smells and tastes strongly of black pepper, along with juicy blackberry fruit and a lit-

tle earth. Lip-smacking fruit keeps unfolding on the medium-length finish.

The 2004 Bulletin Place South Eastern Australia Shiraz (\$8) is great for fans of straight-out jammy black fruit. It has enough acidity to make it food-friendly.

From closer to home, the 2004 McManis Family Vineyards California Syrah (\$10) is instantly appealing, with aromas and flavors of deep, rich cherry and vanilla. Surely the flavors are the product of oak almost as much as fruit, and it's not particularly recognizable as Syrah, but still, anything that has this much persistent, juicy fruit throughout a long finish is a real pleasure to drink.

The 2003 Concannon Central Coast Syrah (\$10) is also in the standard red wine mode, with good black cherry flavor and well-integrated oak.

Few if any companies make better ultra-cheap wines than Bronco Wine Co., creators of Two Buck Chuck. The 2003 Forestville California Shiraz (\$6) is another example: It's light-bodied but eminently drinkable, with flavors of red currant, cherry, earth, licorice and baking spice.

When I find a \$6 wine this good, it always makes me burst out into my slightly adapted version of the state song, "I Love You, California:

"I love you, California, you're
the greatest state of all.
I love you in the winter,
summer, spring and in the
fall.
I love your fertile valleys; your
dear mountains I adore.
I love your state marine
mammal, but I love Zin and
Syrah more."

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Shopping list

These are the best deals The Chronicle found this week.

SYRAHS

- 2004 Bulletin Place South Eastern Australia Shiraz (\$8)
- 2003 Concannon Central Coast Syrah (\$10)
- 2003 Devil's Marbles Limestone Coast Shiraz (\$10)
- 2003 Forestville California Shiraz (\$6)
- 2004 McManis Family Vineyards California Syrah (\$10)

ZINFANDELS

- NV Barefoot California Zinfandel (\$6)
- 2003 Beringer Founders' Estate California Old Vine Zinfandel (\$10)
- 2001 Cameron Hughes Lot 5 Sonoma County Zinfandel (\$10)
- 2003 Ravenswood Vintners Blend California Zinfandel (\$10)
- 2002 Tamas Estates Livermore Valley Zinfandel (\$10)