

WINE

4.28.2005

Section F

Bargain Wines

Producers get playful and flashy

Here are 10 wines you can enjoy right away

By Leslie Sbrocco

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Forget about wine being a beverage for special occasions. These days it's all about enjoying wine anytime. Employing colorful labels, playful names and approachable drinking styles, producers are widening the circle of wine drinkers in this country.

To kick off the fun, uncork a Fat Bastard. The new 2003 Fat Bastard Vin de Pays d'Oc Sauvignon Blanc (\$10) from the south of France is zesty yet plump (not fat in any way, mind you). While it sports citrusy freshness with ripe melon notes, this Sauvignon Blanc is of a round style.

The name comes from owners Thierry Boudinaud and Guy Anderson who dubbed their first wine a "fat bastard," which is their slang for something really great. The name stuck and a brand was born.

For a similar style of Sauvignon Blanc, grab some Dynamite. The 2003 Dynamite Vineyards Kelsey Creek Lake County Sauvignon Blanc (\$10) is also on the fleshier side of the Sauvignon scale, yet has explosive grapefruit and pear flavors.

When it comes to Chardonnay, the 2003 Foxglove Edna Valley Chardonnay is worth at least twice its \$10 price tag. Balanced and lush, with a core of crisp acidity and layers of flavor, this wine from California's cool Edna Valley is one to stock up on by the case.

The 1960s group the Mamas & the Papas singing their hit tune

"California Dreamin'" comes to mind when sipping Twin Fin wine. This newly launched brand with twist-off tops and labels depicting a surfboard sticking out of a retro convertible parked at the beach embraces the spirit of the California lifestyle.

The brand is aiming to make a splash with a full line of varietals from Chardonnay to Cabernet Sauvignon. The 2004 Twin Fin California Pinot Grigio (\$10), which is tangy and bright with a tinge of spice notes, leads the white portfolio. The winners in the red portfolio are the 2004 Twin Fin California Pinot Noir (\$10) and the 2002 Twin Fin California Shiraz (\$10). Pinot Noir is tough to nail in this price range and Twin Fin's version isn't overly serious, but it's seriously fun to sip. Medium-bodied and jam-packed with red berry fruit, it could easily go in the refrigerator for a quick chill and be served on a warm day with grilled fish or barbecue chicken. The Shiraz is more powerful and rich with a peppery kick. This is one to throw in the picnic basket with salami, cheese and a loaf of crusty French bread, and head to the beach for the afternoon.

For a red with a unique character, reach for the 2003 Barahonda Yecla Monastrell from Spain (\$10). The grapes are grown in the southeastern portion of the country, where dramatically hot days are tempered by cold nights, which helps give the grapes their intensity and concentration. Monastrell, otherwise known as

Mourvedre, expresses earthy aromas and notes of exotic wild berries. Think grilled sausages with caramelized onions and peppers when uncorking this wine.

Blending different grape varieties together is a traditional way of achieving balance and complexity in wine. The 2002 Luna di Luna Delle Venezie Merlot-Cabernet (\$9) from northern Italy is packaged in a stylish, fire-red bottle. You can't miss it on store shelves. Smooth and elegant with a touch of herbal aromas, it's a wine that belongs at the dinner table with a simple meal of grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup.

A blend that delivers on quality is the 2003 Waterbrook Columbia Valley Melange from Washington state (\$10). Made of an eclectic

melange (blend of grapes) such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese, Merlot, Syrah and Cabernet Franc, this vibrant red is seamless and succulent.

Finally, the 2002 Guardian Peak Western Cape Frontier from South Africa (\$10) is nearly equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz with some Merlot. It's structured and fairly tannic with bell pepper aromas and deep, dark fruit character. The label is adorned with Kalahari desert lions.

Leslie Sbrocco is author of "Wine for Women: A Guide to Buying, Pairing and Sharing Wine" (William Morrow, 2003). E-mail her at wine@sfchronicle.com.



CHRIS HARRY/The Chronicle

These eye-catching wines are also great fun to drink.