



Taste Test

DISCOVER WHAT COMPARATIVE WINE TASTINGS REVEAL ABOUT THE VALUE OF VARIETALS.

By Ashley Ryan

Sometimes it's hard to know what it is that makes a wine so costly to purchase. On the other hand, the price of select bottles may seem too good to be true. But it's not always easy to tell why varietals are priced as they are.

"When it comes to wine, price doesn't always equate to quality, and understanding the value in wine requires more than just glancing at a label or a price tag," says Andrew Cichon, beverage manager and sommelier at Newport Beach Country Club. "For enthusiasts and beginners alike, one of the most effective ways to grasp what truly gives a wine its value is through comparative tasting. By sampling the same varietal at both low and high price points, we can explore how quality, craftsmanship and perception contribute to cost and, more importantly, to value."

Recently, Cichon and his team held a wine education event at the club, showcasing the value of wine through comparative tastings. Armed with just a little bit of knowledge, members can take what they learned and translate it to everyday occurrences, whether it's choosing which crisp white to sip by the pool or which bold red to pair with a luxurious steak at the next dinner party.

THE COMPARATIVE PROCESS

Do as they did at NBCC and start by selecting a single varietal—Cichon suggests a chardonnay, pinot noir or cabernet sauvignon. Then, purchase one bottle at a lower price point, around \$15 or less, and another at a higher price point, ranging from \$40 to upwards of \$100. "Ideally, both should be from the same region and vintage, allowing you to isolate variables and better assess what makes one wine command a higher price than the other," he explains.

As you sip, consider how each of the wines impacts your senses. From the flavor profile to the aroma, mouthfeel and finish of the

wine, you can learn a lot if you simply pay attention and take notes.

“Higher-end wines often exhibit more nuanced aromas, layered flavors and a smoother, longer finish,” Cichon says. “This doesn’t necessarily make them better in a personal sense, but it can demonstrate technical quality, aging potential and skilled winemaking. These characteristics often justify a higher price due to costlier production methods such as barrel aging, hand harvesting or low-yield vineyards.”

Alternatively, Cichon notes that wines that cost less definitely shouldn’t be overlooked. “In many cases, affordable wines deliver excellent value, especially if produced in large volumes or from lesser-known regions,” he says. “These wines can be fruit-forward, approachable and enjoyable without the same depth or aging potential. For everyday drinking, they often provide great satisfaction at a fraction of the cost—showing that value is often relative to purpose.”

THE TAKEAWAYS

Through the act of comparison, there is a lot you can learn and, by contrasting high- and low-end options, it really reveals how subtle the differences can be. “Through this comparative tasting method, we begin to see that wine value isn’t purely economic, it’s experiential,” Cichon explains.

More expensive labels may not be priced higher based on taste alone: Brand reputation, aging, rarity and “emotional



factors, like nostalgia or occasion,” can all be important factors, according to Cichon. Similarly, if a budget wine is better than expected, it may offer enough personal value to make it worth sacrificing other elements that would increase its price point.

Essentially, when keeping all of this in

mind, how much a bottle is worth may vary from person to person. It’s all about what it means to you and the lasting memories it provides. “Ultimately, understanding the value in wine is about aligning cost with expectations and experience,” he says. “By directly comparing wines of the same varietal but different price points, we can develop a clearer sense of which aspects—whether structure, balance or story—justify a wine’s price. This not only refines our palate, but empowers us as consumers to make more informed, satisfying choices.”

Wine is an ever-complicated subject. While varied tasting notes and diverse techniques allow each bottle to be something special on its own, it’s the experiences we have with it that truly shape our view of each bottle. After all, it means something a little different to each person who consumes it.

“In the world of wine, value is as much about personal connection and context as it is about objective quality,” Cichon says. “Comparative tasting grounds that understanding in direct experience, helping us move beyond marketing and price into a deeper appreciation of what’s truly in the glass.”

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