

# “UNDER A TON”



**Rick Staff**  
with a remit to sniff, taste,  
and spit his way around Nanjing  
and disseminate the drinkable.

POINT SYSTEM	
0-10	A WARNING
11-14	A Feasible Party Prop.
15-17	Heartily Recommended
17-19	Exceptionally Good
20	The Apogee Of WINE EXPRESSION

■ **A**t a recent Ningxia vs. Bordeaux tasting at Hilton Nanjing, I was struck not only by the better than expected Chinese wines overall (results, analysis, recommendations pending - some howlers, but with some corkers in there too), but also how I have habituated to wine prices in China in just a few short years. Retail prices for these wines veered around the ¥900 mark to a mere ¥200.

I barely flinched. But, hang on; I'm buying wine in a country with a monthly per capita income estimated at ¥4134, ranking it 57 in the world. The equivalent of ¥200 for a bottle of wine is pushing the boat out in most peoples' language and currency outside China, though it is only at the lowish end for good wines here. Are these prices just a result of greedy profiteering in an immature and status-driven market?

## Who's trousering the money?

China's upper echelons' thirst for foreign wine does change the game. Combine import duty, value-added tax and consumption tax for imported wine and that will add about 48% to the landed cost of the wine, which is high by global standards. Then things become more abstruse with the importers and distributors (often the same company) and their own margins, ranging from 30 to 60%. Still, China is a big place and consequently distribution is not always cheap. Next come the retailers, hotels and restaurants, adding a whack of around 35%, pretty typical of the trade generally, but in the case of restaurants and hotels the whack may also be a mighty 300%.

Can we beat the rap? The straight answer is not always if you want to keep a good and varied vinous diet. However, I decided to put my nose and palate to the grindstone to see what could be found when limited to just ¥100 a bottle...

First up, Camino de Castilla, Crianza 2006 (¥83, Metro). A full bodied Tempranillo from the Ribera Del Duero (a lauded Spanish winemaking area north of Madrid), where firm, yet smooth, cassis-edged fruit smothers the taste buds and packs a punch of some spicy intensity, with just a hint of dark chocolate (16.5 points).

Smoky black cherry flavours make the densely fruited Argentinian Lo Tengo Malbec 2011 (¥62, Auchan) an accessible, though hefty, contender for cooler days and richer fare. But in torrid weather, try chilling it and drinking with grilled seafood. Really, it works (16 points).

The Obikwa wines from the Cape make uncomplicated and reliable company, and the Shiraz, Merlot and Pinotage are bargains at a current price of just ¥68 from Carrefour. My pick from the Obikwa crop, though, is a white: the Obikwa Chenin Blanc 2011 (¥80, BHG), similarly simple and boasting a mouth-filling hit of melons, peaches and pineapples (with a hint of strawberry if you concentrate). You could live on this stuff. Chill a few down and get some friends over (15.5 points).

Back to Metro for the best wines of the bunch: The Marius 2010 (¥99, Metro), from France's Pays d'Oc region, though created by Rhone Valley supremo Chapoutier, just slips under the price bar and slips over the palate with a suave and toothsome take on a blend of Grenache and Syrah. Earthy, with a dash of finely ground pepper and a sweet finish. Interesting and satisfying (17 points).

And the winner, with 18 points, hails from broadly the same part of the world as above (more exactly Vin de Pays l'herault) and the same supermarket, the Chateau Capion Fiona 2009 (Metro, ¥76) is a Bordeaux-style blend of 40% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Franc and 10% Syrah. A light and easy going manner on first impression, then interesting edges develop to give warmth and real character underneath. The typical cigar box cedar notes of a Bordeaux style combine with a dash of pepper from the Cab Franc, and attractive herby inflections throughout betray its warmer origins. A smooth and unruffled performer overall with surprising length; the wine quits the throat like Gielgud leaving the stage (a lasting resonance). **N**

