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## Think inside the box for 'value wines'

You've probably heard the term "value wine." Once I heard it used to describe a \$25 bottle, as in, "Have you ever had a better \$25 bottle than this one?" Fact is, it's harder to find a good \$10 bottle but, I'm happy to report, not impossible.

A kind reader recently sent me an e-mail reminding me that I had not given much space to good value, meaning \$10, wines in a while. So mindful of that, I plan to devote some upcoming columns to value wines in that price range. You know them, the kind of wines most of us drink and can afford.

Here's a surprise for you: Let's start with wines in a box, something I've never written about. While most box wines are best left in the box, a few are well worth letting out and actually drinking. Take the box wines just released by Boisset America under the name "French Rabbit."

Three things make these box wines different: First, they are mercifully smaller than a suitcase. They come in a compact, squarish orange and silver box that holds a full liter of wine, not the 0.75 liter that most glass bottles hold. Second, they actually have varietal labels. The current releases are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Third, at 10 bucks, they are not bottom-shelf wines, but rather ones I put in the value category.

Recently, I had a chance to sample the French Rabbit wines with Boisset reps Raymond Nantel and David Bantey at a dinner at High Cotton. The dinner was great and made the wines even better. So, I put them to the acid test. I tried them again in the cold, harsh light of day sitting at my kitchen table. That second tasting confirmed my first impression that they are indeed value wines.

Though I have made no secret of the fact that I am not a great fan of Merlots, the 2004 French Rabbit Merlot was my favorite of the line. With rich, chocolate-cherry aromas and flavors, it would marry well with just about anything from a midweek pizza to a burger. At 13 percent alcohol, it was not overly punchy, and that made it all the better as a good food, value wine.

The 2004 French Rabbit Chardonnay also was quite good. With sweet fruit and butterscotch aromas, this is about all the fruit this grape can show when it is not overly oaked. With a nice, acid finish, it would be a good match for anything from grilled chicken to a simple broiled fish fillet.

Are you a Pinot Noir fan looking for a good \$7 version? That is what the 2004 French Rabbit works out to when you figure you are buying a liter for \$10 rather than a 0.75 liter bottle. With decent earthy-fruit flavors that show varietal character, it would be hard to argue that this is not a value wine. The next time salmon goes on sale, pair it with this and you'll have a dinner fit for a king but at a bargain-basement price.

Coming behind these, but not by far, is the 2004 French Rabbit Cabernet Sauvignon. My notes on this wine are simple ? it has a bit of cassis in both aroma and flavor, and is easy to approach. The sweet, forward fruit would do well with just about anything, including a supermarket rotisserie chicken.

And, environmentally speaking, wines in a box have a lot over bottled wines.

xPlus, French Rabbit wine boxes are constructed in such a way that you can bend up their "ears" and get most of the air out, allowing you to have a glass or two and then recap the box to drink later. With the air squeezed out, they easily will keep for four or five days.

The soft box is great for packing in a picnic basket and poses no danger of rupture.

And you know I would not write about them if they weren't good value wines ? a generous liter in a box smaller than a regular bottle. Give them a try and see if you agree.