



## Go for cheaper wine

### Wine snobbery no longer palatable says study

By Misty Harris, Postmedia News September 12, 2011 [Comments \(1\)](#)

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**Ottawa's Natalie MacLean, a self-professed "wine cheapskate," says recent improvements to quality technology, stiffer retail competition and less pretentious approaches to wine criticism are also playing roles in helping people rediscover entry-level labels.**

**Photograph by: Handout, Natalie MacLean**

For decades, cheap wine paired best with trouser cleavage and brown paper bags.

Since the recession, however, it's more likely to be served with a side of prestige, as consumers flaunt bargain bottles that taste like a million bucks — or at least \$30.

Though prices vary across the country, the industry's definition of inexpensive wine is anything under 20 bucks — though in many provinces, the bar is closer to

\$15, or even \$10.

On balance, Antonia Mantonakis, a fellow with the [Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute](#) at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont., says people purchasing bottles for about \$12 represent one of the fastest-growing segments of wine consumers in the country.

"Consumers in general, have become more price-conscious, and are better at getting what they want while still saving money," says Mantonakis, an associate professor of marketing.

For example, in less than two years, 90+ Cellars generated nearly \$5 million in revenue by negotiating bargain prices on the recession glut of award-winning wines rated 90 or higher. The Boston-based business re-labels the bottles (a reputation-saving practice for the elite winemakers unloading their surplus vintages) and sells them to savvy drinkers for a fraction of their original price.

Because even as consumers seek frugal options, they're apparently still snobs at heart.

In a recent study co-authored by Mantonakis and student Bryan Galiffi, people consistently claimed preference for bottles with hard-to-pronounce labels, as opposed to those that sounded ordinary — despite the fact the wines were secretly identical.

"There's this intuitive theory that if the name sounds rare or unique, it must be better," says Mantonakis.

In other words, people still want to know that what they're drinking is "good wine": they just aren't willing to pay what they would in the past for the privilege.

In the first year of recession alone, Nielsen reported a year-over-year increase of 12 per cent in wines costing between \$9 and \$12. And Shelley Boettcher, executive editor of [Wine Access](#), says the magazine's annual International Value Wine Awards issue — out Oct. 1 — has come to be the Canadian magazine's top seller.

"In the past, it was very much about price and prestige: bragging that you'd tried something incredibly rare, incredibly expensive and that nobody else could get their hands on," says Boettcher, the Calgary-based author of *Uncorked*.

"That started to change two or three years ago, after the first (stock market) crash . . . It's not cool to boast about a wine that cost \$1,000 when so many people are unemployed."

Ironically, winemakers are their own biggest obstacle to the trend moving forward.

Fred Tibbitts Jr., a global wine consultant, explains that the industry was so successful in getting people to trade up in the past that consumers, now more than ever, know the difference between good and bad swill. Even at \$8 or \$9, nobody wants wine that tastes as though its grapes were crushed by a funky-footed hobbit.

"People's palates have matured and they aren't willing to accept plonk," says Tibbitts, who notes winemakers have thus begun giving more complexity, depth, fruit and varietal character to cheaper bottles than normally would be afforded.

"It means working on less margin, but it's an investment in brand-building. They're saying, 'We're going to get them to think our wine is a great value so that two, three, four years from now, when people can trade up again, they'll stick with us.'"

Ottawa's [Natalie MacLean](#), a self-professed "wine cheapskate," says recent improvements to quality technology, stiffer retail competition and less pretentious approaches to wine criticism are also playing roles in helping people rediscover entry-level labels.

"All those factors are coming together to give consumers better choice, at much better prices than have ever been possible in the past," says MacLean, who publishes bargain wine picks on [nataliemaclean.com](#).

"But there is a breaking point where what you're dipping into is basically just alcoholic grape juice."

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Wine list: Bargain Bottles

Peter Lehmann, Layers (Australia) — About \$15

Beringer, Founder's Estate, Cabernet Sauvignon (California) — About \$18

Cono Sur, Viognier (Chile) — About \$12

Loosen Bros., Dr. L Riesling (Germany) — About \$16

Segura Viudas (Spain) — About \$17

Source: Shelley Boettcher

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