

## Food &amp; Drink

## Love a bargain?



**Jancis Robinson**  
Wine

Although those who supply the UK's hugely competitive supermarkets have been under extreme pressure, not least because of continuous increases in duty, it is possible to find one or two almost incredibly good reds for under £5 a bottle (perhaps helped by the weaker euro). White wines are more transparent and less forgiving and I have not been able to find any I could recommend to an FT wine lover at under £6.99 – but I am proud of all the wines below, which show that specialist wine retailers can also offer some real value under £10.

#### WHITE WINES

##### Plaimont, Tesco Finest Saint Mont 2010

Seriously distinctive blend of historic local Gascon varieties Gros Manseng, Petit Courbu and Arrufiac from the excellent co-op that dominates wine production in Armagnac country. Dry but juicy and well structured. No hurry to drink this bargain. 13%, £6.99 Tesco

**Origin Wine, Tesco Finest Swartland Chenin Blanc 2011**  
Cult winemaker Adi Badenhorst advised on this blend of Chenin Blanc from South Africa's most fashionable recuperated wine region with a little Grenache Blanc, Clairette and Roussanne. 13.5%, £6.99 Tesco

**Quintay, Berrys' Chilean Sauvignon Blanc 2011 Casablanca Valley**  
The Chileans are really giving the Kiwis a run for their money. A piercing nose is followed by the electric buzz of bone-dry fruit with a hint of nettle sting about it. Clean finish, though pretty light on the mid-palate. 13%, £7.95 Berry Bros & Rudd

**Rudi Rabl Grüner Veltliner 2010 Kamptal**  
Dull label but wonderfully intense, herby perfume of Austria's signature grape. Dry but spicy. 12%, £7.99 Marks & Spencer

**Casa Lluç Verdil 2010 Valencia**  
Really distinctive white made from rare Verdil grapes grown at high altitude to produce a smoky, tense wine with broad lemon and lime fruit. 13%, £8 Oddbins

**Luis Felipe Edwards, LFE Gran Reserva Chardonnay 2011 Casablanca Valley**  
Sweet in a vaguely butterscotch way but also fresh, thanks to cool drift up this Chilean valley off the Pacific. An easy drink to like. Some of the fruit was aged in barrique so the price is excellent. Very persistent indeed. 14%, £8.74 Majestic



#### Jordan, Barrel Fermented Chenin Blanc 2011 Stellenbosch

Very lively and flirtatious. More transparent and racy than many South African Chenins. Although there is some light green apple and honey flavour, there is no sweetness. Admirable grip on the palate. 14% £8.75 The Wine Society

#### Dom de la Perrière, La Petite Perrière Sauvignon Blanc 2011 Vin de France

This wine from Sancerre is so full and ripe that it's almost unrecognisable as a French Sauvignon Blanc, but still a good-value blackcurrant-leaf-flavoured drink. 12.5%, £8.95 Roberson

**Barbadillo, Tesco Finest Manzanilla Barbadillo** specialises in this lightest, palest, driest, most appetising style of sherry. The sample I tasted was tingling fresh and superlative value. Saves paying Ryanair to fly you to Jerez! 15%, £5.99 for 50cl Tesco

**Stefan Ehlen Riesling Feinherb 2008 Mosel**  
Pretty awful label but a great buy that has off-dry pungent slate flavour. Could be a comfortable aperitif or a good accompaniment to some Asian dishes. 11%, £9.90 The Sampler

**Valdesil Montenovio Godello 2010 Valdeorras**  
Forget Albariño. Godello is the hot new north-west Spanish grape variety with great class. This is far from the finest example, but it still knocked spots off Majestic's Mâconnais whites at the same price. Cool but firm and with obvious inherent nobility. 12.5%

£9.99 (two bottles at £7.99 each) Majestic

**Royal Tokaji, Dry Furmint 2010 Tokaj**  
This dry version of Hungary's most famous wine is not quite ready yet (the 2009 is drinking beautifully now) but is a particularly good price. Buy to drink from November? 13.5%, £9.99 (two bottles at £8.49 each) Majestic

**McWilliam's, Isabelle Mount Pleasant Chardonnay 2011 Tumbarumba**

Still very youthful, new wave Australian challenge to white burgundy from a high-altitude wine region in New South Wales. Real potential for development. 13% £9.99 Waitrose

#### Bootstraps Chardonnay 2010 Eden Valley

Australian wine scientist Peter Leske has fashioned this very restrained, racy, authentic wine for a label owned by Scottish importer Alliance Wine. It should keep well under its screwcap. 14.5%, £9.99 Sainsbury's

#### RED WINES

##### El Guía Tinto 2011 Campo de Borja

This northern Spanish region is the most wonderful source of rich red wine value, thanks to its stocks of low-yielding Garnacha bushvines. The Borsao bodega is responsible for this ridiculously underpriced wine, a new addition to Waitrose that has far more fruit and exuberant appeal than its previous basic Spanish red. 13.5%, £3.99 Waitrose from next month

**Pasquier Desvignes, House Beaujolais NV**  
New blend, new supplier in a smart, screwcapped bottle. Light, fresh, frank. Simple, but not too industrial. 12%, £4.49 Sainsbury's

**Terso Rosso NV Puglia**  
A sweetish blend of 50% Nero di Troia, 30% Primitivo and 20% Montepulciano from the heel of Italy with a velvety texture. A barbecue wine? 12.5%, £4.79 Waitrose

**La Grille Pinot Noir 2010 Vin de France**  
This must be one of the cheapest Pinot Noirs anywhere, barring soupy counterparts from Romania. Wine broker Charles Sydney put this together and bemoans the fact that the new

appellation regulations for St-Pourçain demand at least 40% Gamay grapes in the blend, so this strawberry-like 100% Pinot has to be sold as a geographically vague Vin de France. 12.5%, £6.99 (two bottles at £5.99 each) Majestic

**Cellier des Dauphins, Tesco Finest Plan de Dieu 2011 Côtes du Rhône-Villages**

Probably the best value of the southern Rhône package negotiated with a big supplier. A far better buy than the thin Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2010 at £16.99, and arguably twice as satisfying as the basic

Tesco Simply Côtes du Rhône 2011 at £3.79. Drink this spicy blend of Grenache with Syrah and Mourvèdre any time over the next two or three years. 14%, £6.99 Tesco



#### Bodega Pirineos, Tesco Finest Somontano 2010

From the Aragonese foothills of the Pyrenees, this blend showcases the local Moristel grape with Garnacha (Grenache in France) and Syrah. Very aromatic with a dry finish. This is real wine at a bargain price, presumably because Somontano has no great reputation. 13.5%, £6.99 Tesco

#### Dominio Lasierpe, Taste the Difference Navarra Red 2010

Another northern Spanish bargain blend, in this case 54% Garnacha, 30% Graciano and 16% Tempranillo unadorned by oak. The result is fresh, polished and cool. I'm not sure I can detect the Graciano, but it's a nice idea to include a grape variety that was until recently on the verge of extinction. Appetising. 13.5%, £6.99 Sainsbury's

**Porta Velha, Valle Pradinhos 2009 Trás-os-Montes**  
Just one of many bargains currently available from Portugal, in this case a juicy, delicate blend of Tinta Roriz, Tinta Amarela and Portugal's Touriga Nacional grapes, grown on a vinously revived noble estate in the mountainous north-east of the country. 13.5%, £7.75 The Wine Society

**Robert Sèrol, Vieilles Vignes 2011 Côte Roannaise**  
Quintessential French country wine made from Gamay grapes. Lively and full of fruit with a rather stylish label, a silky texture and great persistence. Juicier than the average Beaujolais, it's good enough to be the Troisgrs house wine. 12%, £7.95 The Wine Society

**Vidal Fleury 2010 Côtes du Rhône**  
Rich nose. Vibrant, well-integrated and serious wine that is too dry to drink without food but it is proper artisan stuff from Guigal's sister company. Should last another three years. 14%, £9.99 (two bottles at £6.99 each) Majestic

**Dom des Garrigues 2011 Lirac**  
Syrah/Grenache/Mourvèdre blend that is much more appetising and succulent than the more expensive Abeille bottling. Very juicy and spicy for current drinking. Good value at the two-bottle price. 13.5%, £9.99 (two bottles at £7.99 each) Majestic

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# Know your place

At Michelin-starred temples of dining, laying a table is a millimetre-precise art. Tim Hayward gets a tutorial at London's Dorchester hotel

A couple of weeks ago, an odd message appeared on Twitter. An American food writer, sitting in a very exclusive restaurant, posted a picture of a spoon. Unlike the average tweeted food porn, this was accompanied by a plaintive request: what is this thing and what is it for? The tweeter, Kat Kinsman, is managing editor of CNN Eatocracy and she was sharing a table with a group of other high-powered foodists at the time she hit "send". Kinsman has prior form with flatware, as she mentioned later: "I have an MFA [master of fine arts] degree in metalsmithing and am always deeply amused by antiquated or single-purpose items like grape shears, lamb handles, fish knives, etcetera." The spoon, as a rapid Google search established, was a *cuillère à sauce individuelle*, with a spatula-like bowl, so sauce can be scraped from the plate without tilting it, and a notch through which any superfluous fat can drain.

It's reassuring to a food geek, of course, that such a specialised piece of kit exists. Yet the idea that a culinary Pythia of Kinsman's stature had to connect with a worldwide network to find out what the hell she was eating with means something is a little out of whack. As she puts it, "I felt in the presence of exceptional schmanciness."

Any way you look at it, the use of utensils at table is culturally specific. In our own history, it was common to carry a knife in readiness for food. Only in the 17th century did the fork reach the English aristocracy, by way of France and Italy. Even then, it was regarded as an affectation and



dishwasher: that's a man, not an appliance.

Nicolas Defrémont, the effortlessly suave restaurant director, dressed me in a brown overall and a pair of cotton gloves and took me through the process of setting one of the more ordinary tables. Table and chairs are aligned to the geometry of the room and centred under individual pools of light. The tablecloth is ironed into position. Crockery and cutlery are wheeled to the table on a special cart and polished, before being laid out using a complex system of measures based on the width of a finger (God help you if you don't have Michelin-approved digits). As each piece is placed relative to the last, a simple error of millimetres at the beginning can snowball, resulting in the whole table having to be reset. Defrémont believes that a setting should be as simple as possible – there's no terrifying phalanx of weaponry these days. The starter instruments are laid on either side of the "show" or decorative plate and the waiter will exchange them for the correct bespoke tools according to your order.

Today's show plates have a pattern which must be aligned perfectly to the diner. When the aesthetic of the food requires plain ones, Defrémont explains, they are set

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#### Precision

Nicolas Defrémont (left), restaurant director at Alain Ducasse, oversees Tim Hayward's napkin arrangement Dan Burn-Forti

occasionally banned by the church in parts of Europe as an affront to God. The use of cutlery by ordinary people wasn't common in England until the 18th century.

Like pretty much everything else the English have adopted, we quickly made cutlery into a class signifier. Throughout the Georgian and Victorian periods place settings expanded with great armouries of specialised and elaborately decorated utensils. Some, such as the soup spoon – with a wide, deep bowl and offset to remain level when bringing the soup to the mouth – were fantastically useful when eating socially and sumptuously dressed. Others, such as the fish knife, were worse than useless and became symbolic of arriviste ostentation. Perhaps this is the root of the rumour that the royal household doesn't use fish knives (though they do appear at formal banquets).

John Betjeman's poem "How to Get On in Society" ruthlessly minces such pretensions, listing fish knives, serviettes, frills on cutlery, cruetts, pastry forks and dolies. That's six references to place settings in a 20-line poem widely regarded as one of the wittier comments on the British class distinction. As a nation we're probably more obsessed with what's set around our plates than we are with what's on them.

The haute cuisine restaurant is the exemplar of the notion that to dine well, one must lay the table well. My chance to understand the extent of contemporary table theatre came when I was offered a place on "The Art of Fine Dining" master-class at the three-star Alain Ducasse restaurant at The Dorchester. The dining room contains what is often billed as the most beautiful table in London, "Table Lumière", which is "surrounded by a luminous oval curtain of 4,500 shimmering fibre optics" and equipped with what I can only describe as the Mother of All Sideboards, a floor-to-ceiling display cabinet containing three sets of Hermès china, Pui-forcat silverware and Saint-Louis crystal. Table Lumière also has its own separate

so that, should the diner flip them over to read the manufacturer's name on the underside, they will be able to do so without the need for any troublesome rotation.

Sessions followed on napkin folding and the selection of the correct glass for various kinds of wine. Every single element was planned so the customer's experience should be seamlessly enjoyable. In fact, my abiding impression was of the incredible amount of work that goes into the setting that should never be noticed – a kind of antithesis of ostentation created with some of the most reassuringly expensive kit I've ever been allowed to handle.

As Ducasse represents the highest level of three-star table art, there is an opposing philosophy. It doesn't have a name but you'll sense its presence in restaurants that use plain white crockery and simple, even unmatched, cutlery. Probably the best example is St John – no "art" to distract, no music and staff in something more like chef whites than the starched outfits of traditional waiters. Other London restaurants such as Andrew Edmunds have a similar, almost monastic aesthetic which is intended to focus attention on the food while escaping the social pressures of formality.

At both ends of the scale the table setting remains a social bellwether – cutlery and crockery are still about class. We either espouse the pretensions of our forebears in new and subtle ways, or knowingly subvert them to show how little we care for bourgeois values (while remaining resolutely bourgeois). In the end, both positions rely on a forensic reading of social convention. Betjeman would have approved.

*Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester, 53 Park Lane, London W1, tel: +44 (0)20 7629 8866, [www.alainducasse-dorchester.com](http://www.alainducasse-dorchester.com).*

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