

MATT KRAMER

Buy Bas, Drink Haute

In the years I've spent listening to Frank Sinatra, it's become apparent to me that he was at his greatest as a singer when performing songs that were not intrinsically great.

Of course, Sinatra did beautifully with the now-classic songs of Cole Porter and George and Ira Gershwin. But if you want to know why Sinatra was so extraordinary, what you actually need to hear is his way with lesser songs, which he informed with a depth untapped by others.

I mention this because it's no different when it comes to wine. Now, greatness in wine—true, soaring greatness—can only come from the site itself. No “wine Sinatra” can create the real *grand cru* thing from a nothing vineyard.

But it is possible that deeply rewarding, even uplifting, wines can be coaxed from sites previously thought unremarkable in the same way that Sinatra extracted layers of meaning from minor compositions. Lower yields, better vineyard management and more astute, even intuitive, winemaking can help reveal unsuspected depths in a good but not intrinsically great site.

This is performed today, more often than not, by already high-achieving producers who apply their rigor, insight and, not least, capital. They are the Sinatras of the wine world.

Let me give you an example. There's a thrilling dry red wine from Portugal's Douro zone called Quinta da Manoella Vinhas Velhas 2010. It's a single-vineyard wine in a great site endowed with a field blend of some 20 indigenous grape varieties, many grown on vines nearly a century old. Created by a small family winery called Wine & Soul, the wine can hardly be called cheap at \$100 a bottle, great though it is.

However, the owners of Wine & Soul, a husband-and-wife team who are both enologists, offer other wines that may not reach quite the same pinnacle, yet, because of their rigor, achieve a level of accomplishment previously unseen.

I took just that sort of wine to a dinner with a friend who is



More astute, even intuitive, winemaking can help reveal unsuspected depths in a good but not intrinsically great site.

a wealthy Burgundy lover. For this guy, dinner just isn't dinner unless it's washed down with a thousand bucks worth of great wine. He does know his stuff, I do have to say.

I brought a bottle of Wine & Soul's dry white Douro wine called Guru Branco. A field blend of four indigenous Portuguese white varieties—Vosinho, Rabigato, Códaga do Larinho and Gouveio—the wine comes from a small (7.5 acres), high-elevation (1,650 feet), 53-year-old vineyard rooted in rocky schist soil. Yields are very low at 1.6 tons an acre (or 22 hectoliters per hectare).

Fermented and aged in new French oak for seven months, Guru Branco is like a really fine white Burgundy—except, of course, that it's not Chardonnay and it's not from Burgundy.

I served it to Mr. Gotbucks and, to his credit, his eyes opened wide and said, “This is remarkable. What is it?” I told him what I just told you. He asked, “How much?”

“Thirty-seven dollars,” I replied. He shook his head, whether in amazement or disappointment, I'm not sure which. Probably both.

A list of these sorts of wines could fill a whole page. Think of any Bourgogne rouge or blanc from almost any Burgundy estate noted for achievement with its high-end wines, such as Domaine Leflaive or Mugneret-Gibourg or Marquis d'Angerville, among many others.

In Oregon, there are the “basic” Pinot Noirs (i.e., not vineyard-designated) from wineries such as Westrey, Cameron or Evesham Wood, all of which regularly issue lovely, detailed, rewarding Pinots for about \$25 a bottle.

Italy, Spain, Greece, France and Portugal are happy hunting grounds. In Italy's Piedmont region, for example, it's hard to go wrong buying the (much lower-priced) Barberas or Dolcettos offered by the best Barolo and Barbaresco producers.

In any wine region in the world, if you choose from wineries recognized as exceptional, then you can hardly go wrong buying *bas* and drinking *haute*. Like Frank Sinatra, these producers simply can't help themselves. They overdeliver, adding something special to every wine song they sing, no matter how modest the vineyard tune.

Matt Kramer has contributed to Wine Spectator regularly since 1985.

WINESPECTATOR.COM

Don't miss Matt Kramer's Web-exclusive essays and lively online discussions at www.winespectator.com/kramer. (Only members may post comments, but all visitors may read them.)