

Wines that pair well with party season

Between now and the holiday season, we'll no doubt tout a few wines that aren't so light on the wallet. But our picks today are terrific values and worth stocking up on for parties to come. Each is a welcome reminder that drinking well doesn't always require spending a lot. The folks at Michael David — Michael and David Phillips, as it happens — seem acutely aware of same. They're responsible for both the Earthquake and the 7 Deadly Zins, a potent one-two punch.

Unless otherwise stated, the prices listed are what Spec's charges for a cash purchase and bottles were available at the chain's Midtown store at press time. But that doesn't mean you won't find the wines elsewhere locally, or by ordering directly from the winery.

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2011 Michael David Earthquake Cabernet Sauvignon

Overall Score: 19 (9 for quality, 10 for value)
Our tasters: Missed a unanimous recommendation by one-tenth of a point while receiving a high score of 9.3 and five scores of at least 9. "Delicate black cherry and vanilla flavors with a long, satisfying finish."
My score: 8.6. It was one of our last wines in the tasting, so maybe my palate was getting pooped. But, for several of our panelists, this dark, boldly tannic cab caused spasms of delight, if not actually visible shaking. The Lodi vineyard where the grapes are grown was planted about the time of the San Francisco earthquake. Needless to say, the vines themselves are somewhat younger. Alcohol: 15 percent.
Buy It: \$23.74



Courtesy photo

2010 7 Deadly Zins Zinfandel

Overall Score: 18.9 (8.9 for quality, 10 for value)
Our tasters: Gave it a unanimous recommendation with a high score of 9. "Smoky tobacco notes. Ripe black fruit. Seductive."
My score: 9. A blend of fruit from seven of Lodi's most prized old zinfandel vineyards — and the Lodi area is almost synonymous with delicious zin — it's earthy, spicy, peppery and, hooray, cheap! Michael and David Phillips are fifth-generation vintners and the family seems to have a knack for this wine thing. Alcohol: 15 percent.
Buy It: \$12.59



Courtesy photo

Turning Leaf Merlot

Overall Score: 18.7 (8.7 for quality, 10 for value)
Our tasters: Gave it a unanimous recommendation with a high score of 9.4 and six scores of at least 9. "Yummy blackberries and plums."
My score: 8.8. I know what you're thinking. Turning Leaf? Really? Yes, really. It may be a wine Gallo makes a gazillion gallons of every year, but it packs a flavorful wallop for mere pennies, relatively speaking. One taster pegged it as a \$35 bottle. Another guessed \$25. And Turning Leaf's pinot noir fared almost as well. If you're trying to impress guests, decant and serve, then chuckle to yourself. Alcohol: 15 percent.
Buy It: \$6.29



Courtesy photo

2012 Saint-Pierre de Mejans Blanc

Overall Score: 18.3 (8.8 for quality, 9.5 for value)
Our tasters: Two didn't offer recommendations, but three gave it a score of 9. "Crisp and lemony with great minerality."
My score: 9. The fresh, flowery wine is a classic Provençal blend that's half clairette, 30 percent vermentino and 20 percent grenache blanc. The historic property near Puyvert in France's idyllic Luberon — Peter Mayle's "Year in Provence" neighborhood — has been in winemaker Brice Doan de Champpassak's family since 1969, and there are church records of the place going back to the 12th century. Brice took over in 1993. Alcohol: 13 percent.
Buy It: \$14.99



Dale Robertson / Houston Chronicle



Michael Paulsen / Houston Chronicle
Sébastien Laval in the wine cellar at Restaurant Cinq inside La Colombe d'Or Hotel.

Sommelier's pick

Who: Sébastien Laval, Maître d'hôtel-sommelier at La Colombe d'Or, 3410 Montrose. Born and raised in Cahors in southwest France, I graduated from high school in both France and Canada and earned my college degree at the University of Abertay in Scotland. I became the youngest in France to receive the diploma of Guide Lecturer from the French Ministry of Tourism and Culture. While in Scotland, I worked in hospitality at the famed Old Court in Saint Andrews. I was trained in wine

by my grandfather and by Alex Aland of the Hotel ZaZa, where I have also worked in Houston. I managed two restaurants in Avignon in the Rhone Valley, where I gained my appreciation for the wines of the Côtes-du-Rhone and the Languedoc-Roussillon. These regions are using the best of their terroir, combining history and the dynamism of a new generation of vintners to create complex, spicy, earthy and exceptionally food-friendly wines. They're my personal favorites because

they're not just wines but also story-tellers.

What: 2010 Domaine d Pallières "Les Racines" Gigondas

Why: The terroir of Les Pallières, I believe, is the most interesting of Gigondas. It's a single vineyard with northwest exposure (most in Gigondas face to the southwest) at a high altitude under the striking limestone range of the Dentelles de Montmirail with their extreme slopes. The Grenache, syrah, cinsault and clairette vines

grow on terraces in a thin layer of soil with very low yields due to exposition and temperatures, and no irrigation is allowed. Those factors combine with the master hands of the winemaking Brunier brothers from Châteauneuf-du-Pape, creating a velvety, refined, harmonious, balanced and complex wine with cherry, plum and blackberry notes, hints of vanilla and tobacco and persistent spices.

Buy It: \$110 for a bottle at Cinq in La Colombe d'Or