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A \$35 and Under California Mix

New reviews of 12 assorted reds and whites from California for \$35 or less

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Posted: December 19, 2011

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Tasting Highlights bring the best wines from our editors' most recent tastings to WineSpectator.com members.

California reds and whites priced at \$35 or less are the theme of this report. They're distinctive and impressive wines, made in a range of styles to please every palate.

At the top of the list is a new label, Argot, the creation of Karissa Kruse and Justin Harmon, and so far we're impressed with this small operation. Happenstance is a blend of Roussanne and Chardonnay, barrel fermented in French oak barrels to give it a rich texture, but with enough acidity to keep the flavors elegant and light. This should appeal to fans of both Chardonnay and white Rhône wines.

Another distinctive wine is JC Cellars' The Imposter, an exotic blend of Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Grenache, Mourvèdre and Viognier. The blend for this wine changes every year, but it has a track record for being exotic, aromatic and delicious.

Also of note is Wine Guerrilla, another new label to us, this one focused on expressions of Zinfandel. These two wines showcase some of the range that Zinfandel can offer, from the jammy Forchini bottling to the more densely structured Clopton bottling with white pepper aromatics.

ARGOT Happenstance Sonoma County 2009 Score: 91 / \$35

Offers yellow raisin, pear and apple custard notes that are framed beautifully by a silky texture, with details of nutmeg, toasted peanut and vanilla. Elegant and lithe. Roussanne and Chardonnay. Drink now through 2016. 78 cases made.—*M.W.*

JC CELLARS The Imposter California 2009 Score: 91 / \$35

Exotic and altogether distinctive, with aromas of smoky black cherry and Asian spice that lead to rich, lush flavors of huckleberry and date bread. Zinfandel, Syrah, Petite Sirah, Grenache, Mourvèdre and Viognier. Drink now through 2017. 1,200 cases made.—*T.F.*

MARKHAM Merlot Napa Valley 2008 Score: 91 / \$21

Sleek and well-focused, with appealing aromas of red currant and toasty tomato leaf that lead to rich flavors of plum, mocha and cedar. Tannins firm up the finish. Drink now through 2017. 21,500 cases made.—*T.F.*



Courtesy of Markham

Markham's 2008 Napa Merlot, with its high quality-to-price ratio and more than 20,000 cases made, is one of this week's best finds.

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10 California Values

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More from California:

Friday, December 23, 2011

Foppiano Siblings Settle

Wednesday, December 21, 2011

Who Needs Champagne When You Have California?

PERRY CREEK Zinfandel El Dorado Altitude:2401 Legacy 2008

Score: 91 / \$24

Dense and complex, this is a Zinfandel built for the cellar. Offers toasty huckleberry aromas and rich flavors of black raspberry, licorice and loamy cedar that lead to firm but ripe tannins. Best after 2013. 300 cases made.—*T.F.*

Wednesday, December 21, 2011

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Tuesday, December 20, 2011

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Monday, December 19, 2011

[A Petite Sirah What If ...](#)

SBRAGIA FAMILY Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley La Promessa 2009

Score: 91 / \$28

Ripe and plush, offering black cherry and toasty vanilla aromas, with layered flavors of black raspberry, licorice and brown baking spices. Drink now through 2017. 784 cases made.—*T.F.*

More from topic California

WRATH Pinot Noir Monterey Pommard 4/777 2009 Score: 91 / \$35

A firmer, tighter expression of Pinot, with an emphasis on Pommard clones, this nonetheless delivers a complex mix of savory herb, berry, cola and light oak shadings, with the fruit gradually working through the tannins and gaining the upper hand. Drink now through 2018. 211 cases made.—*J.L.*

DENNER Theresa Paso Robles 2010 Score: 90 / \$32

Nicely done, with mouthwatering Key lime and passion fruit flavors that are tangy and bright on a medium body, with plenty of mineral, coconut water and pineapple details. Roussanne, Grenache Blanc, Marsanne and Viognier. Drink now through 2015. 617 cases made.—*M.W.*

MAZZOCCO Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Warm Springs Ranch 2009 Score: 90 / \$34

Ripe and jammy, but well-focused, with aromas of cherry pie and smoky sage that lead to zesty huckleberry and licorice flavors. A distinctive style. Drink now through 2018. 800 cases made.—*T.F.*

WINE GUERRILLA Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Forchini Vineyards Old Vine 2009 Score: 90 / \$35

Jammy and juicy, with lively raspberry and licorice aromas and sleek, ripe cherry, licorice and caramel flavors. Drink now through 2016. 240 cases made.—*T.F.*

WINE GUERRILLA Zinfandel Russian River Valley Clopton Vineyard 2009 Score: 90 / \$35

Densely structured but still lively, with aromas of boysenberry and sage that lead to layered flavors of blueberry, raspberry and cracked white pepper. Drink now through 2017. 120 cases made.—*T.F.*

WRATH Pinot Noir Monterey 115/667 2009 Score: 90 / \$35

Sleek and well-structured, with a dash of cola joining the ripe cherry and berry fruit, this fans out nicely and gains complexity and depth without weight. Drink now through 2018. 290 cases made.—*J.L.*

NEWTON Claret Napa County 2009 Score: 89 / \$25

Offers appealing red currant and cedar aromas and focused cherry and dried herb notes that finish with slightly drying tannins. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc. Drink now through 2016. 21,000 cases made.—*T.F.*