

# Independent gems

**Independent wine shops may not be able to compete with supermarkets on price, but they have well-chosen options. Here, four of them nominate their best buy under €15**

**A** RECENT COLUMN highlighted the difficulties facing independent off-licences. Under the 2008 Intoxicating Liquor Act, they must close at 10pm, an hour and a half earlier than before, hitting the lucrative last-minute trade. This follows on from the abolition of the Groceries Act in 2006, allowing supermarkets to sell alcohol at below cost. Combined with their superior buying power, the multiples are now offering wine at ever-decreasing prices. These days, no supermarket seems to be without a wine promotion of some sort to entice us. As a wine writer, I taste a lot of these wines; there are certainly some incredible prices at times, mixed with a large number of dubious offers and barely drinkable wines.

The independent sector will never be able to compete with the purchasing might and marketing resources of the supermarkets. This is truer than ever in the current trading conditions. During the good years, many off-licences were able to operate profitably without putting in too much effort. I have always argued that the long-term future of a wine shop or off-licence lies in doing something different; this hasn't changed. Offering the same limited range of brands as the bigger retailers may seem easier, but it is not a recipe for long-term survival. Neither is buying in the cheapest wines you can find, whatever the quality. Many of us are still prepared to pay a little extra, but only if we feel we are getting something in return.

The successful small retailers are those who have built up loyalty with their customers, by adding a genuine personal touch, something that is difficult to find in a supermarket. With a wine shop, this means offering a more

interesting range, and having an in-depth knowledge of wine, combined with an ability to explain without intimidating the customer. There is still a core group of very good, competitive wine shops and off-licences which are not exactly thriving, but are certainly weathering the current storm.

Others, who failed to innovate, or are joining the race to the bottom, are finding life much more difficult. It is, I suspect, easier for those that are based in large cities, or have a strong online presence. Some off-licences have shown the way by stocking a range of quality beers rather than competing on the well-known mass-produced brands. Others are succeeding because they offer better wines – not necessarily at €5.99, but real value at €10-€12, where you will find genuinely interesting wines that add something extra to your enjoyment.

There has been much talk about supporting local retailers. We tend to buy our weekly goods in a variety of outlets. Those lucky enough to have a good off-licence or wine shop nearby should certainly encourage them. If not, try the more enterprising online retailers.

One of the downsides of the recession is the decreasing range of wine that is available. Too many lesser-known but interesting bottles have disappeared from shop shelves to be replaced by, at best, boring mass-produced wines. This week, I asked four leading independent retailers to nominate a wine under €15 that offers that extra something.

**Picpoul de Pinet 2010, Domaine Reine Juliette, 12.5%, €12** Picpoul de Pinet will be familiar to any of you who travel to the Languedoc, where it is the perfect partner for all things fishy. It seems to be growing in popularity here, too. This fine example, selected by Paul Kiernan of Bubble Brothers in Cork, has lots of clean, zippy, citrus and green apple fruits with a refreshing minerality. Perfect on its own or with seafood. **Stockists:** Bubble Brothers, Cork, available online from bubblebrothers.com

**Henschke Julius Riesling 2005 Eden Valley, Australia, 13%, €11.99** The supermarkets are not the only ones to offer huge discounts. This wine usually retails at around €30 a bottle.



**HIDDEN TREASURES**  
Somewhere in the wine rack you will find those lesser-known but exquisite bottles



**JOHN WILSON**  
**drink**

Donnybrook Fair has the 2006 at €16.99 a bottle, but leading retailer The Vintry in Rathgar, top that with the 2005 at €11.99. Henschke is one of great names of Australian winemaking. Usually it is its red wines that receive all the attention, but a bottle of 1997 Henschke Julius was the greatest Australian Riesling I have tasted. This may mature into something similar, but for the moment, in the words of Evelyn Jones of The Vintry, it is “a serious Riesling at a very good price, with mature floral aromas, with lemon and lime. It has good weight and balance, tangy green fruit, lovely texture and minerality with layers of complexity.” I couldn't have put it better myself. **Stockist:** Limited quantities available from The Vintry, Rathgar.

**Tempranillo-Petit Verdot 2010, Dominio de Punctum, Vino de la Tierra de Castilla, 13.5%, €10.95** Peter Boland of Cases is very excited about this new find of his: “A lot of Tempranillo at this price tends to be a bit leathery and without much fruit. This is very different, and the Petit Verdot rounds it off and adds a little depth.” On opening, the wine is nicely firm and meaty, with a savoury touch and some balanced tannins on the finish. As the evening progressed, it opened up beautifully to reveal elegant, dark fruits. This would be great with red meats. It is a biodynamic wine. **Stockist:** Cases Wine Warehouse, Galway. Available online from cases.ie

**Chono Syrah Reserva 2009, Chono Elqui valley 14% €12.99** O'Briens seems to be thriving as a halfway house; there are now 31 branches but it remains a family-owned business. It has well-trained staff, an interesting range of wines, as well as the benefits of being a fairly large buyer. I suspect in some areas it may actually be the stiffest competition for the small retailer. The Chono Syrah, selected by buyer Lynne Coyle, is from the Elqui Valley, a region to the north of Chile that is making some seriously good wines. This medium-bodied wine has very seductive dark cherry and blackcurrant fruits and a smooth finish. **Stockist:** O'Briens.

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