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FIND THE PERFECT HOUSE WINE

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LIQUID CULTURE

## HOME SWEET HOME

A GUIDE TO MIXING, ENTERTAINING & DRINKING AT HOME



# The House Wins

How to find your perfect house wine.

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Forget the old commandment about never ordering the cheapest bottle on the wine list. Thanks to sommeliers committed to spotlighting undervalued varietals and off-the-beaten-path regions, the long-maligned “house wine” section of menus has become a reliable source of discovery and everyday enjoyment. As Chris Horn, wine director for Purple Café and Wine Bar in Seattle, says: “A big old Barolo is great—but the finest wine on the planet isn’t necessarily what you want to have with dinner tonight.”

So what about the 300-plus days a year that dinner is burgers on the grill or takeout Thai? If you’re someone who’s serious about wine—or just seriously enjoys drinking it—the surest way to guarantee there’s always a decent bottle on hand at home is to take a page from the professional’s playbook: develop your own “house” list.

Unsure of where to begin? To demystify the buying process and help uncover some sleeper hits, I asked industry insiders for their everyday drinking strategies, and names worth looking to again and again. Their message: Buying wine in bulk no longer has to mean a choice between blowing your budget or settling into a rut with a jug brand. Natural wines are moving out of the margins; smaller, upstart importers are embracing nonmarquee grapes and forging relationships in underrepresented regions; and wine clubs are helping to make high-quality, inexpensive, independent wines available from coast to coast.

So, take notes—and prepare to find a lot more excuses to stay in.

## 1. Go Easy.

Think of your house wines as ensemble actors, not scene stealers—versatile enough to do well with just about any role you throw at them. They ought to be good, but greatness isn’t the point. “For everyday wines, I generally stay away from big, bold Cabernets or oaky Chardonnays,” says Adrienne Voboril, founder of Summit Street, a Brooklyn-based private sommelier and education service. “Not because those bottles don’t have a place—but because your house wine shouldn’t be the star of the show.”

Whether you’re opening a bottle for a Friday-night steak dinner or just chilling on the couch with a bowl of popcorn and the remote, having a roster of easygoing, food-friendly wines will always serve you well. That usually translates to bottles that are medium-bodied, dry and brightened by a bit of acidity or bubbles. “Our house wines run the gamut, but they’re never too precious,” say Orenda and Peter Hale, owners of Maine & Loire and Drifters Wife in Portland, Maine. “Usually we keep something bubbly around, or a white that’s mineral and savory. With reds, we skew to the lighter side, towards mellow Gamays or lush Pineau d’Aunis.”

For Melissa Gisler Modanlou, owner of the California-based natural-wine club Rock Juice, there’s another essential factor: a low alcohol level. “If I’m going to split a bottle with my husband on a Tuesday night, I need to know I’m going to feel okay when I

have to wake up at 6:30 a.m. and pack a school lunch,” she says. “So almost all the wines I drink and sell through the club are less than 13 percent ABV.”

## 2. Play It Cool

It’s simple enough to recommend “bright, high-acid wines”—but translating buzzwords into concrete shopping suggestions can be tricky. That’s why Voboril suggests a handy cheat: “If you don’t know where to begin, look for bottles from high-elevation regions.” The tougher growing conditions and cooler temperatures tend to yield wines that are dynamic, taut and lower in alcohol than their warm-climate counterparts. Names to know include the Alto Adige and Piedmont in Italy, Salta in Argentina, Germany’s Mosel, France’s northern Rhône and California’s Santa Cruz mountains.

## 3. Drink What You Like

“Serious” wine may come with lots of rules, but at home the only mandate is to drink what you like. “Drink what makes you happy,” says Orenda Hale. “In the Maine winters, when we’re all bundled up, I actually want something refreshing—so I tend to drink whites more than reds, and tons of bubbles. There are so many great pét-nats [*pétillant naturel*, the French term for naturally sparkling

wines], you could drink bubbles every day.” One of the Hales’ favorite finds? The Oyster River “Morphos” (\$20), a pét-nat made in tiny Warren, Maine, from a blend of Northeastern hybrids Cayuga White and Seyval Blanc, and vinified following the *méthode ancestrale*, without added enzymes or yeast.

## 4. Sip a Story

Another strategy: Instead of automatically grabbing a crisp white for your fish dinner or a rich red with a roast, think of how certain wines evoke a feeling or mood because of memories you associate with them. “I always encourage people to attach a story to their wines,” says Voboril. “Is it a bottle you first had on your honeymoon? Did you discover it at a great little restaurant you love? Recalling those relationships will give you pleasure each time you open the bottle.” I’ve definitely found that to be true. For instance, the latest addition to my house rotation is Cantine Valpane Rosa Ruske (\$16), a light, floral, slightly funky Piedmont red that I first sipped at a beach picnic last September on the Rhode Island shore—and have been dreaming of since, along with those long, sunny days of Indian summer.

Chris Horn concurs. “There are certain bottles that I always have on New Year’s or Father’s Day, or that I pop open anytime I cook a particular dish. Those traditions create a



PISTOLETA  
2016  
QUADY ★ NORTH  
ROGUE VALLEY, SOUTHERN OREGON

LA BOUTANCHE

MADE IN CALIFORNIA  
ALC. 11.8% BY VOL.  
2016  
GAMAY  
SANTA BARBARA



'mind-mouth connection.' We're used to thinking about comfort food that way, but we don't always pay the same attention to what we're drinking."

## 5. Bigger Can Be Better

Affordability is a factor when thinking about everyday wines—but that doesn't mean you need to compromise on quality. Instead, Gisler Modanlou suggests keeping an eye out for reasonably priced liter bottles, such as the Cacique Maravilla Pipeño País (\$20), a rustic, earthy biodynamic red made just outside Santiago, Chile. "There are regions—like Austria, Chile and parts of Germany—where the liter size is traditional, and if you know what to look for, you can get some amazing value wines. Just because it comes in a larger quantity, doesn't mean it's cheaply or poorly made."

## 6. Think Like a Cook

Chances are you always have some dried pasta and canned beans on hand for an emergency supper. Why not take the same approach to wine? "When I'm picking wines for my house, I think of it as stocking a pantry or culinary tool kit," says Horn. "If I have a light-bodied red, a richer blend, a bright Riesling and steely Chardonnay, I can cook just about anything and know I'm covered."

But it's not just wine as an ingredient that's worth considering—it's also the ingredients in the wine itself. "Do you make a point to eat organically and avoid chemicals and additives? If wine is something you're putting in your body almost every day, you should choose one that's the same quality as your food," says Gisler Modanlou. "Grapes are always on the 'dirty dozen' list [for pesticide use]. But people forget wine is an agricultural product—even among people who know exactly where their kale comes from, there's a disconnect."

Drinking naturally used to require an investment of both time and money, but the surge of interest in organic and low-intervention wines means that more reasonably priced bottles are making their way into the mainstream. Le Telquel (\$16), an easy-drinking Gamay from Loire Valley producer Pierre-Olivier Bonhomme, is a perennial favorite among wine pros and a great

gateway to the world of natural wine. Another of the Hales' go-tos is the Boutanche line, a collaboration between importer Selection Massale and a roster of small European producers that's designed to offer high-quality natural wine at a price below \$20. Closer to home, in California's Santa Barbara and San Ynez AVA, childhood friends Mike Roth and Craig Winchester are making a line of lovely minimalistic wines under the Lo-Fi label that strike a balance between Old World restraint with New World ripeness.

## 7. Explore the B-sides

Marquee varietals like Cabernet and Pinot Grigio may be easy to pronounce, but because there's such a glut of them on the market, it can be challenging to separate the surprises from the swill. That's why it's helpful to identify a region you like, then look beyond the headliners to the B-sides. "If you love Sancerre, try a Touraine; if you like Chinon, try Anjou Rouge," suggests Morgan Calcote, wine director and general manager at FIG in Charleston, South Carolina. Oregon may be renowned for its Pinot Noir, but in the south end of the state, winemaker Herb Quady of Quady North is making a line of excellent Rhône-style table wines including a rich, tangy white blend of Viognier, Roussanne, Marsanne and Grenache Blanc called "Pistoleta" (\$20). "When you look beyond the usual suspects like Chardonnay and Cabernet, you can find a lot of surprising values," says Calcote. Horn agrees. "If you talk to winemakers in the Piedmont, they're more excited about their Barbera than their Barolos," he says. "Those are the wines they're making for themselves."

## 8. Get a Guru

You don't have to be a wine geek to drink well at home—but it does help to know one. "Start a conversation with the folks at your local wine shop," says Calcote. "They'll be able to look at the wines you've enjoyed in the past and help curate a mix of others you'll like."

That strategy works well in cities where there are thriving wine scenes and deep distribution channels. But what about drinkers who live in towns where most wine is sold in grocery and

# 12 to Try

### **Le Sot de l'Ange, "La Boutanche," Melon 2016 (\$17, [henrys.nyc](http://henrys.nyc))**

One of the rotating and reliably delightful natural wines in the "La Boutanche" series, this bright, biodynamic Melon de Bourgogne is made by upstart young winemaker Quentin Bourse in France's Loire Valley. When you spot it, stock up. Great with oysters or cheese and crackers.

### **Champalou Vouvray Sec 2016 (\$20, [shop.kermitynch.com](http://shop.kermitynch.com))**

Balancing restrained dryness with flavors of peach and honey, this easy-drinking Chenin Blanc is made by a sustainable, family-run winery in France's Touraine region. Try it with Thai food.

### **Glatzer Grüner Veltliner 2015 (\$13, [youngswines.com](http://youngswines.com))**

Crisp and peppery, this Austrian Grüner Veltliner is a classic and an absolute steal for the price. Try it the next time you roast a chicken.

### **François Cazin Cour-Cheverny 2014 (\$14, [wineworksonline.com](http://wineworksonline.com))**

This rich, mineral Loire Valley white is one of the few made from the Romorantin grape, a rare planting that's been grown in the region since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Elegant and enjoyable with food or on its own.

### **Oyster River Winegrowers "Morphos" (\$17, [vinoshipper.com](http://vinoshipper.com))**

Naturally fermented and unfiltered, this earthy pét-nat from the envelope-pushing Oyster River Winegrowers in Warren, Maine, is made from a blend of the American hybrids Cayuga White and Seyval Blanc. Naturally effervescent, it starts with a burst of green-apple tartness before settling into a warm, yeasty finish.

### **Tenuta La Pergola "Il Gocetto" (\$12, [shop.kermitynch.com](http://shop.kermitynch.com))**

This bargain-priced gem hails from Monferrato, one of the most storied regions in Italy's Piedmont. The Brachetto grape that accounts for 75 percent of this light-bodied red is usually vinified fruity and frizzante, but this version is wonderfully dry—and dangerously drinkable.

## 12 to Try, continued

### **Domaine les Deux Terres “Zig-Zag” 2016 (\$21, suburbanwines.com)**

Smooth and lush with notes of dark cherry, black pepper and limestone, this natural, unfiltered Rhône-style blend is made with a combination of Syrah and Grenache. A collaborative effort by two friends turned passionate winemakers, this is wine with heart.

### **Lo-Fi 2016 Gamay Noir (\$25, shop.lofi-wines.com)**

One of a handful of exciting New World Gamay-Pinot blends to hit the market in recent years, this light red wine from Santa Barbara County’s Lo-Fi vineyards is a delightful oddball: juicy, sharp, vegetal and ever-so-slightly effervescent.

### **Terres Dorées 2016 Beaujolais “L’Ancien” (\$15, wineworksonline.com)**

With his commitment to traditional Burgundian technique and unflashy focus on pure, honest winemaking, Jean-Paul Brun has been one of the godfathers of the modern Beaujolais renaissance, and his “L’Ancien” is one of the most dependably lovely and well-priced icons of the genre. Serve it with steak frites, mushroom soup—or just pour yourself a tumbler and do nothing.

### **Bonhomme Le Telquel 2016 (\$18, dedaluswine.com)**

The little cartoon dachshund on the label may make you smile, but pull the cork on this Loire blend and you’ll soon realize this is some seriously good wine. A low-ABV (around 11 percent) mix of Gamay, Grolleau and occasionally Pineau D’Aunis, it’s light, balanced and everything you want an everyday wine to be.

### **Fabien Jouvès, “Tu Vin Plus Aux Soirées” 2016 (\$16, discoverywines.com)**

Iconoclastic natural winemaker Fabien Jouvès has become beloved for his line of *vins de soif*—young wines that are fresh, festive and way above their price point. This one, a blend of Cab Franc and Malbec, is dark and taut, with a ripe, herbal edge. Get a little chill on it and gulp it up.

### **Pfneiszl Blaufränker 2015 (\$16/1 liter, bluedanubewine.com)**

Made by a pair of sisters in Sopron, Hungary, this big-bottle wine is light, dry and slightly spicy, with just enough juice to keep you coming back for more. If you’ve never had a Blaufränkisch before, you’re in for a happy surprise.

big box stores? The Hales suggest that if you can’t find a full-service retailer in your town, noodle around online until you find a quality shop that offers shipping and foster a relationship with them in the digital realm. “Those sorts of relationships are what we love about our business,” they say. “Wine is difficult to make but doesn’t have to be complicated to enjoy.”

Social media has also made once-insider wine circles more accessible. “Instagram is a fantastic resource,” says Vorobil. “It’s such an effortless way to peep in on what people you admire are drinking.” Another trick? The next time you’re facing down a wall of bottles in a shop, study the *back* of the labels—that’s where you’ll find the importer’s name. “If you keep seeing the same name on bottles you like, follow them,” says Horn. “That name is a person saying they believe in this wine.”

Among Horn’s importers to watch are Becky Wasserman, who specializes in Old World Burgundies, and Neal Rosenthal, who’s known for terroir-driven European wines. If you’re interested in natural wines and smaller, up-and-coming producers, importers like Zev Rovine Selections, Louis/Dressner, T. Edwards, Jenny & François, and SelectioNaturel are all reliable sources. “Good importers treat their portfolios like a living thing, a changing thing,” Horn says. “When you’re drinking with them it’s like listening to college radio, not the Top 40 station.”

## 9. Take Notes

Coming across a memorable wine at a dinner party or a restaurant is a great way to expand your repertoire, but only if you can remember the name when you head out to shop. A pocket-sized notebook is easy, or a snapshot on your phone gets the job done. (And once you’ve taken a few, organize all those label shots in a dedicated folder.) Or take it a step further with a wine app like Vivino, which not only recognizes wine labels, but also allows you to build a personalized catalog of bottles you’ve enjoyed, read reviews, search for similar wines and shop online. And did you love the way that Beaujolais paired with the pork

tenderloin you made last night? Scribble a note of its name right in the margins of the cookbook, so the record will be there the next time you start cooking.

## 10. Join the Club

With a slew of new sommelier-led services transforming the market, many wine clubs are now aimed at bridging the gap between industry insiders and casual wine enthusiasts. These curated monthly or seasonal mailings speak to different budgets and niches and offer access to high-quality wines, often sourced from smaller, under-the-radar producers that might never make it onto shelves at local stores. Pour This, the brainchild of sommelier Ashley Ragovin of spots like Animal and Osteria Mozza in Los Angeles, consists of a monthly \$125 themed three-bottle subscription that spotlights small, sustainable producers spanning the globe.

At the Dedalus Wine Shop, Market & Wine Bar in Burlington, Vermont, the focus is on value. Members of the \$30-per-month “Thirst” club receive two bottles of gulp-worthy house wines from up-and-coming regions each month. Sign up for the \$100 “Glou Glou” subscription from Boston’s Wine Bottega and you’ll get a monthly mailing of two reds, two whites and two wild cards—which might include rosé, orange wines, sparkling wines or even cider.

After Gisler Modanlou sold her San Francisco wine bar and retail shop in 2012, she was beset by calls from friends and former customers hoping she’d still help source their favorite natural wines. Thus, Rock Juice was born. “I realized that so many people wanted access to natural wine but just didn’t know how to find it on their own,” she says. What started small, with a network of friends and friends of friends, grew organically and has kept going. If customers fall hard for a particular mailing, Gisler Modanlou is happy to help order in quantity (and offers a case discount). “These aren’t cellar wines; they’re fun and meant to be enjoyed right now,” she says. “You may not find them on the shelf at Safeway, but once you know how good they are, you can’t unknow it.” ■

