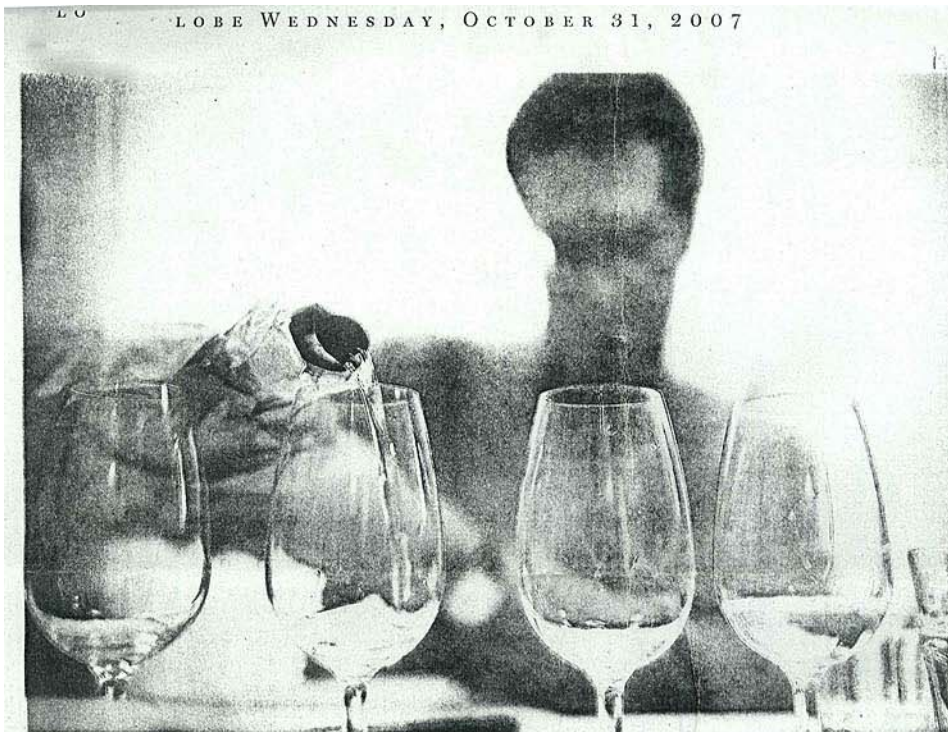


Dorchester, MA  
October 31, 2007  
Circulation: 360,695



Erik Johnson, wine director at L'Espalier in the Back Bay and Sel de la Terre, is one of the professionals at this year's blowout tasting.

## PLONKAPALOOZA

Four wine experts take part in the tasting of 50 bottles that cost \$12 or less and come up with a few real deals

By Stephen Meuse  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Their names may never grace the entrance of a grand estate, be seen on anyone's Top 100 list, or send chills up the spine of an ace sommelier, but in this world of overrated pleasures, simple, inexpensive wines with the power to please enjoy a celebrity status all their own.

We know this because in three years of celebrating little wines in a series of monthly columns and one blow-out annual tasting we call Plonkapalooza, there seems to be endless interest from readers, retailers, and distributors. So we set out once again to find the best for the least.

The task of nominating candidate wines of exceptional value and ready availability goes to five well-regarded retailers. We ask each to name six or eight whites and reds (priced at \$12 or less) that they consider the year's best. After eliminating duplicates, we choose 25 of each to taste blind (no labels visible) by a panel of professionals at a single go. Joining me this year were Deborah Hansen, owner and sommelier of Brookline's Taberna de Haro; Theresa Pao-pao, manager and wine director at Oleana restaurant in Cambridge; and Erik Johnson, wine director at L'Espalier in the Back Bay and at Sel de la Terre on the Waterfront and in Natick. They were asked to identify their top picks in each category and explain what won them over.

Retailers bringing bottles to the table this year were Esprit du Vin of Milton, Market Wine & Spirits of Salem, the Back Bay's Bauer Wines, Nejaime's Wine Cellars of Stockbridge and Lenox, and Brookline Liquor Mart.

Expectations were understandably high this year, since 2005 and 2006 (the years most of these wines were bottled) were strong vintages in Europe. In defiance of the weak dollar and stiff competition from Chile, Argentina, and Australia, Old World vineyards remain the source of the most interesting wine for the least money. On this score at least, the exercise produced no surprises. The overwhelming number of candidates — and winning



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Read about young sommeliers like Eastern Standard's Erin O'Shea. E4

PLONKAPALOOZA, Page E5

### ONE WHITE

appeared on all four tasters' lists as a top pick:

2006 Willm Alsace Pinot Blanc

### TWO WHITES

were rated tops by three tasters:

2006 St. Peyre Picpoul de Pinet Coteaux de Languedoc (France)

2006 La Chasse du Pape "Prestige" Cotes du Rhone Blanc (France)

### THREE REDS

were chosen by three panelists:

2006 Cantine San Silvestro "Ottone I" Piemonte Barbera (Italy)

2005 Luc Piret Vin de Pays d'Oc Syrah-Mourvedre (France)

2005 Quinta de Ventozelo "Vinzelo" Douro (Portugal)

# Plonkapalooza finds some real deals

► **PLONKALOOZA**  
Continued from Page E1

wines — were either French, Spanish, or Italian.

Only one wine proved talented enough to beguile all four panelists: a white, the 2006 Willm Alsace Pinot Blanc from France. Hansen called it “delectably creamy,” while Johnson praised it as “very groovy stuff” with “layers of flavor.”

Two other French whites garnered three votes each: the feisty 2006 St. Peyre Picpoul de Pinet Coteaux de Languedoc, and La Chasse du Pape’s 2006 “Prestige” Cotes du Rhone Blanc. Paopao found a well-balanced cocktail of “sweet white flowers and jasmine” in the Picpoul (more than one taster found the floral component so persuasive they surmised it might be viognier). Hansen described the white Cotes du Rhone as “lovely and smooth with notes of chalked stone.” Sella & Mosca’s 2006 “La Cala” Vermentino di Sardegna and the 2006 Adegas Marea Alta “Do Zoe” Rias Baixas Albarino won over the palates of two panelists.

Three votes were all any red achieved, and this distinction was earned by three wines: the Cantine San Silvestro 2006 “Ottone I” Piemonte Barbera, which Hansen praised for its “Old World intrigue”; Luc Pirlot’s 2005 Vin de Pays d’Oc Syrah-Mourvedre (“It’s making me hungry!” moaned Johnson); and the 2005 Quinta de Ventozelos “Vinzelo” from Portugal’s Douro region, a wine Paopao cheered for its distinctive “grip.”

Two reds elicited a pair of up-turned thumbs each. These were the 2004 LAN Rioja Crianza, a wine whose “ripe, long finish” Spanish-specialist Hansen appreciated, and Guidobono’s 2005 Nebbiolo delle Langhe — my top pick among reds.

► **MORE PLONK**  
To find previous lists of wines from “Plonk of the Month,” which appears on the last Wednesday of each month, go to [boston.com/food](http://boston.com/food).

Overall, the panel found more value among whites than reds — judging all the whites clean, correct, fresh, and appealing. There was some concern about what was perceived as a relatively narrow range of expression on offer. The panel also chafed a bit at the amount of sweetness exhibited by the red wines. Everyone wondered aloud if this constituted a conscious attempt by winemakers at making modest wines more ingratiating to entry-level drinkers — or Americans in general. That led the experts to think that they wouldn’t have these bottles on their own lists. But when the time came to reveal identities, several were surprised to recognize wines that either were, or had been, on their restaurants’ wine lists.

Paopao says that choosing wines to pour by the glass at Oleana she has to “kiss a lot of frogs” to find a prince. Our tasting shows that, with a bit of determined smooching, a royal or two can still be found out there.



Plonkapalooza judges sampled and made notes on 25 white wines and 25 red wines in a blind tasting.

## The wine list

Here is the complete list tasted by the professionals, in the order in which they were tasted. You’ll see notes for wines that received a top pick from at least one panelist, along with a typical retail price and the name of the retailer that nominated the wine. Other shops carry these bottles, so check your local stores too.

### WHITES

2006 Walch “Prendo” Pinot Grigio IGT Vignetti delle Dolomiti Pinot Grigio (Italy). Nejaime’s Wine Cellars (800-946-3988) About \$12.

2007 Gazela Vinho Verde (Portugal). Nejaime’s. About \$6.

2006 Domaine de Pouy Vin de Pays des Cotes de Gascogne (France). Bright, pleasing citrusy aromas; hint of minerals; ripe, slightly creamy feel. Esprit du Vin (617-296-9463). About \$11.

2006 St. Peyre Picpoul de Pinet Coteaux de Languedoc (France). Vivid orchard fruit flavors; fine brightness and zip; appealing mineral edge. Bauer Wine and Spirits (617-262-0363) About \$9.

2006 San Marco Frascati (Italy). Esprit du Vin. About \$10.

2006 Cantine Gries IGT Vignetti delle Dolomiti Pinot Grigio (Italy). Vivacious spicy/floral aromas and lively acidity; brisk attack. Brookline Liquor Mart (617-734-7700) About \$11.

2006 Domaine du Tariquet Vin de Pays des Cotes de Gascogne Blanc (France). Pretty, spicy, little lemon-drop. Nejaime’s. About \$9.

2006 Willm Alsace Pinot Blanc (France). Big, ripe mouthful with some earthy aromas; nicely balanced and with good persistence; lot of wine for the money. Nejaime’s. About \$11.

2006 Sella & Mosca “La Cala” Vermentino di Sardegna (Italy). A whiff of sea breeze; crisp orchard fruit and a mineral edge animated by a trace of spritz. Bauer. About \$12.

2006 Espelt “Vaillet” Emporda Blanco (Spain). Esprit du Vin. About \$11.

2006 Verget du Sud Vin de Pays du Vaucluse Roussane (France). Unmistakable savory-minerally-peachy southern Rhone profile; solid, steady fruit. Bauer. About \$12.

2006 La Chasse du Pape “Prestige” Cotes du Rhone Blanc (France). Hefty, with attractively integrated fruit and earthy notes; some spice and floral elements. Market Wine and Spirits (978-745-6319). About \$10.

2006 Santa Isabel Mendoza Torrontes (Argentina). Brookline Liquor Mart. About \$10.

2006 Salz Bergeland Gruner Veltliner (Austria). Bauer. About \$12.

2006 “Saint M” Pfalz Riesling (Germany). Easy-drinking, summery sip with modest but genuine riesling character; spicy citrus; whiff of petrol. Market Wine. About \$10.

2006 Huber Gruner Veltliner “Hugo” (Austria). Market Wine. About \$12.

2006 Adegas Marea Alta “Do Zoe” Rias Baixas Albarino (Spain). Firm, shapely, peachy fruit veering toward the tropical; lively aromatics; persistent acidity. Bauer. About \$12.

2006 Vignarco Orvieto Classico (Italy). Lovely fresh-air aromatics and crisp mineral-tinged pear-lime fruit. Nicely put together. Esprit du Vin. About \$11.

2006 Folie a Deux “Menage a Trois” California White (USA). Nejaime’s. About \$11.

2006 Pomelo California Sauvignon Blanc (USA). Market Wine. About \$10.

2006 Alamos Mendoza Chardonnay (Argentina). Esprit du Vin. About \$10.

2005 Firestone Central Coast Chardonnay (USA). Brookline Liquor Mart. About \$10.

2006 Santa Isabel Mendoza Chardonnay/Viognier (Argentina). Brookline Liquor Mart. About \$10.

2006 Alexander Valley Vineyards “New Gewurz” North Coast Gewurztraminer (USA). Brookline Liquor Mart. About \$12.

2006 Ten Mile “Lost Horizons” California White (USA). Market Wine. About \$10.

### REDS

2005 Vina Antigua Maipu Sangiovese/Bonarda (Argentina). Slightly tart red fruits here feel a little staid; if it would shine with a platter of salami. Market Wine. About \$7.

2006 Antano Chianti (Italy). Brookline Liquor Mart. About \$10.

2006 Cantine San Silvestro “Ottone I” Piemonte Barbera (Italy). Bright, lively red fruits; simple and straightforward but with verve. Nejaime’s. About \$9.

2006 Masi IGT Sangiovese di Toscana (Italy). A little pie of plums, cherries, and some intriguing tannins; plus for structure and minerality. Brookline Liquor Mart. About \$9.

2005 Vega Sindoa Navarra Cabernet/ Tempranillo (Spain). Market Wine. About \$11.

2006 Finca Luzon Jumilla (Spain). Market Wine. About \$9.

2005 Chateau Les Grandes Versennes Bordeaux (France). Stony, earthy, minerally, and a little vegetal — won’t be everyone’s cup of tea. Brookline Liquor Mart. About \$9.

2004 LAN Rioja Crianza (Spain). A hint of camphor, some sweet oak and something like bottle age; some cushy tannins. Nejaime’s. About \$12.

2005 Martilde Oltrepo Pavese Bonarda (Italy). Bauer. About \$12.

2006 Dievole “Pinocchio” IGT Sicily (Italy). Esprit du Vin. About \$11.

2006 Bodegas Farina “Spada” Toro (Spain). Pretty rich; sweet, dense, dark red fruit; a little rough and ready. Market Wine. About \$10.

2005 Luc Pirlot Vin de Pays d’Oc Syrah-Mourvedre (France). Nicely dense, cheery, red fruit; some leathery notes; rustic maybe, but winsome. Brookline Liquor Mart. About \$11.

2005 Guidobono Nebbiolo delle Langhe (Italy). Finely tuned fruit-acid-tannin integration; sweet-tempered and persistently appetizing; modest complexity. Esprit du Vin. About \$12.

2006 Viu Manent Colchagua Valley Reserva Malbec (Chile). Nejaime’s. About \$11.

2005 Quinta de Ventozelo “Vinzelo” Douro (Portugal). Satisfyingly full-bodied with fine lift, some real grip, and a few layers of interest. A standout. Bauer. About \$9.

2006 Domaine Brunet Vin de Pays d’Oc Pinot Noir (France). New world sweetness and heft, but with little edge. Big, amiable softy. Bauer. About \$12.

2006 Tilia Mendoza Malbec (Argentina). Brookline Liquor Mart. About \$11.

2004 Red Dust Southeastern Australia Shiraz (Australia). Esprit du Vin. About \$12.

2004 Napa Landing Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (USA). A plateful of sweet, ripe, oak-tinged cherry fruit served with some genuine — and welcome — acid structure. Nejaime’s. About \$11.

2005 Root: 1 Colchagua Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (Chile). Bauer. About \$12.

2005 San Fereolo Dolcetto di Dogliani (Italy). Raspberry-ish keynote; firmish with some dusty Dolcetto character. Bauer. About \$12.

2005 De Bortoli Vat 4 Petit Verdot (Australia). Market Wine. About \$10.

2006 Cono Sur Central Valley Pinot Noir (Chile). Nejaime’s. About \$10.

2005 Valderiz “Senorio de Valdehemoso” Ribera del Duero (Spain). Esprit du Vin. About \$12.

2006 Domaine de Gournier Vin de Pays des Cevennes “Grenache Noir” (France). Esprit du Vin. About \$12.

— STEPHEN MEUSE

## Tasters’ choices Our wine-tasting experts offer their favorites



### Erik Johnson

Transplanted Wisconsinite Erik Johnson has been wine director at L’Esplanier since 1997 and of Sel de la Terre in Boston and Natick.

**Whites** 2006 Domaine du Tariquet Vin de Pays des Cotes de Gascogne Blanc (France); 2006 Willm Alsace Pinot Blanc (France); 2006 La Chasse du Pape “Prestige” Cotes du Rhone Blanc (France); 2006 “Saint M” Pfalz Riesling (Germany); 2006 Adegas Marea Alta “Do Zoe” Rias Baixas Albarino (Spain)

**Reds** 2006 Cantine San Silvestro “Ottone I” Piemonte Barbera (Italy); 2006 Masi IGT Sangiovese di Toscana (Italy); 2005 Luc Pirlot Vin de Pays d’Oc Syrah-Mourvedre (France); 2005 Guidobono Nebbiolo delle Langhe (Italy); 2004 Napa Landing Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (USA)

### Stephen Meuse

**Whites** 2006 St. Peyre Picpoul de Pinet Coteaux de Languedoc (France); 2006 Willm Alsace Pinot Blanc (France); 2006 Sella & Mosca “La Cala” Vermentino di Sardegna (Italy); 2006 Verget du Sud Vin de Pays du Vaucluse Roussane (France); 2006 Adegas Marea Alta “Do Zoe” Rias Baixas Albarino (Spain)

**Reds** 2005 Chateau Les Grandes Versennes Bordeaux (France); 2004 LAN Rioja Crianza (Spain); 2005 Luc Pirlot Vin de Pays d’Oc Syrah-Mourvedre (France); 2005 Guidobono Nebbiolo delle Langhe (Italy); 2005 Quinta de Ventozelo “Vinzelo” Douro (Portugal)

### Deborah Hansen

Deborah Hansen has been chef, sommelier, and an owner of Taberna de Haro in Brookline for nine years. Her wine list is exclusively Spanish.

**Whites** 2006 St. Peyre Picpoul de Pinet Coteaux de Languedoc (France); 2006 Cantine Gries IGT Vignetti delle Dolomiti Pinot Grigio (Italy); 2006 Willm Alsace Pinot Blanc (France); 2006 Sella & Mosca “La Cala” Vermentino di Sardegna (Italy); 2006 La Chasse du Pape “Prestige” Cotes du Rhone Blanc (France)

**Reds** 2006 Cantine San Silvestro “Ottone I” Piemonte Barbera (Italy); 2004 LAN Rioja Crianza (Spain); 2006 Bodegas Farina “Spada” Toro (Spain); 2006 Domaine Brunet Vin de Pays d’Oc Pinot Noir (France); 2005 Quinta de Ventozelo “Vinzelo” Douro (Portugal)



### Theresa Paopao

Theresa Paopao has been the manager and wine director at Oleana in Cambridge for four years. A native of Hawaii, she holds a certificate from the Court of Master Sommeliers.

**Whites** 2006 Domaine de Pouy Vin de Pays des Cotes de Gascogne; 2006 St. Peyre Picpoul de Pinet Coteaux de Languedoc (France); 2006 Willm Alsace Pinot Blanc (France); 2006 La Chasse du Pape “Prestige” Cotes du Rhone Blanc (France); 2006 Vignarco Orvieto Classico

**Reds** 2005 Vina Antigua Maipu Sangiovese/Bonarda (Argentina); 2006 Cantine San Silvestro “Ottone I” Piemonte Barbera (Italy); 2005 Luc Pirlot Vin de Pays d’Oc Syrah-Mourvedre (France); 2005 Quinta de Ventozelo “Vinzelo” Douro (Portugal); 2005 San Fereolo Dolcetto di Dogliani (Italy)

