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Feeding a wine passion

Nowadays, many college students strap on a backpack and head for Europe.

During his sophomore year on summer break, Robert "Bobby" Kacher did just that.

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While backpacking in France, he discovered a lifestyle of wine, food, family, vineyards and cuisine. These grew to be his all-consuming passion which he began to fulfill by first working in a retail wine shop and eventually becoming a retail wine consultant in Washington D.C. Before long, he became a top executive at World Shippers and Importers. At 22 years old, he founded Robert Kacher Selections, and today,

has developed one of the finest portfolios of French boutique estate wines.

KNOW THE GROWERS

The best importers of small-production wines strive to know the growers and producers intimately. To do this during the first 20 years of Robert Kacher

Wine picks

Peak oyster season ends next month. If you like oysters, here are your sauvignon blancs (they're good with sushi, too):

Outstanding:

2007 Sauvignon Republic Marlborough, NZ \$18

Excellent:

2006 Dry Creek Vineyard Fume Blanc Sonoma County \$15

2007 The Crossings Marlborough \$16

2007 Kim Crawford Marlborough, NZ \$17

2006 Kenwood Reserve \$20

2006 Joseph Phelps Napa Valley \$32 -- fermented sur lie 10 months in combo of new and season French oak. Sophisticated rendition.

Very Good:

2007 New Harbor Marlborough, NZ \$11

2006 Benziger Family North Coast \$13

2006 Flora Springs Soliloquy \$25

2006 Benziger Family Casey's Block Mendocino County Sauvignon Blanc \$29

Wallet Friendly:

2007 Sebeke South Africa \$9

2007 Man Vintners South Africa \$10

If a retailer does not stock a specific wine we recommend, ask that it be ordered from the distributor, or if it's a domestic wine, order it direct from the winery.

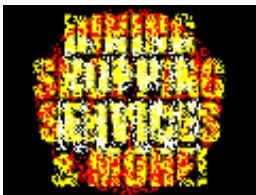
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Selections, Kacher spent half of each year in France, traveling from region to region with a hands-on approach, working side by side with growers and producers to ensure the quality and authenticity of wines in his collection.

Today, Kacher is aided by the president of his company, Antoine Songy, who respects his owner's passion and knows the background of each wine in the Kacher portfolio. Recently, Songy introduced us to the following wines which we highly recommend that you seek out at your favorite wine shop because they are available and affordable.

WHAT TO BUY

If you're looking for a light-bodied dry white, they don't get better than 2006 **Domaine de Pouy**, Cotes de Gascogne (\$9.75) in the foothills of the Pyrenees, near the appellations of Madiran and Jurancon. It's 60 percent ugni blanc (known as trebbiano in Italy) and 40 percent columbard with an intense green apple and ripe pear skin fruit profile that is refreshingly crisp. Great with sushi.

It's peak oyster season, so make a perfect match with 2005 **Benjamin de Vieux Chateau Gaubert** (a 50/50 blend of sauvignon blanc and semillon) from the Graves region (\$18). White peach fruit and fresh fig notes are accompanied by a wet stone minerality and intriguing textural components.

Seeking a new red wine taste experience at a great price? **Domaine de Gournier** is located in the Cevennes region of France, between the cities of Avignon and Nimes. The 2006 Grenache Noir (\$10.50) from this producer is a 100 percent stainless steel production to focus on the purity of grenache fruit. Cherries and spice notes dominate both the aromas and flavors of the well-structured wine that's hard to beat at the price.

So, you're still bashing merlot? You won't after you taste the 2004 **Domaine de Gournier** Merlot (\$10.50) with dark cherry-berry fruit elements in and easy-drinking value wine.

Wines from the southern Rhone Valley of France are among the hottest wines in the marketplace. Showcasing attractive red fruits, cherries and currants with a hint of spice, 2005 **Domaine Andre Brunel** Cotes du Rhone (\$13.50) is a blend of grenache, syrah and cinsault. It's food-friendly with a rich finish.

If that style appeals to your taste buds, here's a real bargain: 2004 **Domaine Sainte-Eugenie** from the Corbières region (\$11). It's generously fruited from nose to finish as a blend of carignan, grenache and syrah.

Jumping up in price a little, but worth every penny are two other red Rhone varietal blends: From **Domaine de Gournier**, 2004 Hommage (\$15.50), a blend of syrah cabernet and mourvedre is full, rich and generous; and 2005 Domaine

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Santa Duc Cotes du Rhone Les Vieilles Vignes (\$15) with splendidly ripe, rich fruit and a delicious finish as a blend of grenache, syrah and mourvedre.

Go wine shopping. You won't see French wines at these prices much longer.

The devalued U.S. dollar against the Euro is making it nearly impossible for producers to sell to the U.S. at moderate pricing since they can get top prices from consumers in China and Russia.

Eleanor & Ray Heald are contributing editors for the internationally respected Quarterly Review of Wines and Troy residents who write about wine, spirits, and restaurants for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. Contact them by e-mail at focusonwine@aol.com.

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