



Is expensive wine worth it?

While there's no accounting for taste, bottles that cost more than \$20 are better, experts say



Janet Dorozynski

In my profession, I am lucky to taste thousands of Canadian and international wines each year. But after viewing someone's recent social media post that read: "I have the means to buy expensive wines, but prefer to drink cheaply," I've been left wondering

about the definition of expensive wine.

Whether a bottle is considered pricey at \$20, \$30 or more than \$50, ultimately rests with the buyer's budget. But like luxury cars, smart phones and designer handbags, the cost of a bottle of wine is determined by several variables: the price of the grapes (whether purchased or grown by the winery can add up to one quarter of the total cost), the use of oak barrels, labels, closures (cork, screw cap or glass), the bottle itself, winery operation and overhead costs, staff size for production, sales and marketing, and transportation costs.

DOES PRICEY WINE TASTE BETTER?

While there is no accounting for taste and I'm a firm believer that everyone should drink what they like and spend what makes them feel comfortable, there is consensus among those who evaluate wine for a living (critics, judges, sommeliers who purchase wines for restaurants) that many more expensive wines, say about the \$20 price point, usually taste better. In general, they tend to be more complex and have a range of concentrated flavours as opposed to one dominant fruit taste, like mass-market Australian Shiraz or the sea of watery and tasteless Pinot Grigio lining store shelves and restaurant wine lists.

More expensive wines should also be more integrated or harmonious, so that you don't feel or taste one single component or sensation, like the tannins, acidity or oak, overwhelming your palate and the overall flavour should linger on the palate as opposed to disappearing quickly.

IT'S ALL RELATIVE

For many people, spending more than \$20 on a bottle to sip with friends on a summer day might seem frivolous, yet shelling out \$100 to toast the closing of a big deal is easier to swallow. In the end, I've had great wines that cost much more than \$100 and many that cost less than \$20, but I would be hard-pressed to say that the former brought five times more pleasure.

WHAT MAKES A WINE EXPENSIVE?

Are expensive wines made with more expensive grapes? Do they come from better wineries or is it just clever marketing and what the market will bear? All of the above combined with high winery startup costs, taxes and the markup by the wine seller, which in Canada, is usually a liquor board. In general, inexpensive wines are produced by larger wineries (100,000-plus cases a year). They are machine-harvested with minimal or no aging, use oak chips as opposed to barrels and are made with average-quality grapes from a mix of different vineyards within a region or appellation. Think a California red versus Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon or VQA Ontario versus VQA Beamsville Bench. Most of the world's expensive wines are made by smaller wineries, (between 1,000 to 25,000 cases a year) who hand-harvest the grapes, use French oak barrels (priced from \$1,500 for a 225-litre barrel) for extended aging, with reds in general using more

oak and, therefore, more barrels needed. (Many of the most coveted wineries in the world age their wines in oak.) More expensive wines use higher-quality grapes from single vineyards and often come from sub-appellations, which are highly sought after or grown in limited quantities.

What it comes down to is production economies of scale, along with a winery's startup and ongoing costs, some of which are among the highest for small- and medium-sized businesses. In addition to equipment, wineries that grow their own grapes have a three-year lag before the vines produce grapes and a bottle of wine even leaves the winery. Land costs are significant and vary according to location. In regions, like Burgundy, France and British Columbia, land prices have skyrocketed making it next to impossible for the younger generation of winemakers to enter the business. Over and above actual production costs, each bottle of wine sold to a restaurant or retailer will include the cut taken by the agent or distributor representing the winery, taxes, bottle and environmental levies and the retail markup. In Ontario, although the ad valorem markup for wine is among the lowest in the country, it nonetheless ranges from 61 to 74 per cent, regardless if they are bought at a liquor store, winery, or online and shipped to your home. According to provincial law, Ontario wines must be the same price wherever they are sold. This means that the markup goes to the winery, not the liquor board, which is one of the reasons why many Ontario and Canadian wineries — and throughout the world — consider direct-to-consumer sales a more lucrative way to sell their wines.

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Best bets



Cherry Avenue Pinot Noir 2013
VQA Twenty Mile Bench,
Tawse Winery, Niagara, \$49.15
Available: tawsewinery.ca

The year 2013 was a fantastic vintage for Pinot Noir in Niagara and this is one of several exciting single vineyard Pinots from Tawse. The Cherry Avenue Vineyard is their oldest estate planting and is farmed organically, biodynamically and producing low yields. A savoury, almost crunchy cranberry and red cherry flavour, this medium-bodied wine with balanced acidity and fine tannins is sure to improve with age.



Pierre Gimonnet Cuvée Fleuron 1er Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne 2009
VINTAGES# 340133, \$72.95. Available: [Vintages](http://Vintages.com),
[Trialto Liquid Art, trialto.com](http://trialto.com)

The Gimonnet family has been growing their own grapes in Champagne since the mid-1700s and made the jump to producers in the 1930s. The house is one of the region's specialists of Blanc de Blancs (100-per-cent Chardonnay) with the 2009 Brut being no exception. A complex nose and palate of citrus, brioche and roasted pineapple with intense depth and texture. Dry with a dosage of 4.5 grams/litre and a very long finish. Gorgeous!



Domaine du Coulet Brise Cailloux 2014
AOP Cornas, France, \$79. Available:
[Nicholas Pearce Wines Inc., npwines.com](http://NicholasPearceWines.com)

A very refined expression of Syrah from the Northern Rhone. An inviting nose of red and black fruit, smoke and licorice that follows through to a generous, but dry palate with finely grained tannins and long finish. A smart and stylish wine.



Closson Chase Vineyard Chardonnay 2014
Closson Chase Vineyards, VQA Prince Edward County,
\$28.95. Available: [LCBO #148866](http://LCBO.com), clossonchase.com

Closson Chase from Prince Edward County has been known for opulent creamy Chardonnay, though the recent vintages are seeing a newer, fresher style and refined elegance. Toned-down oak, refined citrus and apple notes come to the fore with a touch of creaminess and well-balanced acidity. Drinking well now, although it will shine for several years to come.

