

wine on the cheap

She lived across the hall in my apartment building, like me, newly divorced. Contrary to the old maxim, familiarity does not breed contempt, and our friendship, born of shared hardship, ripened into something more.

By John Chacosa

WE HAD A lot in common. Both of us were artistic (or in my case, possessed of an artistic temperament, if not an art), and we shared a love of good food and wine. But epicurean tastes are difficult to maintain on an artist's income. The bottle of wine that we split nightly at dinner was a luxury that we would need help to sustain.

We found that help, and in a rather unlikely place — the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's wine and spirits stores. We found a tall, chatty employee at the Yorktown Centre state store, Don Grotkowski, as unlikely a wine expert as one is likely to find. Gangly and looking a bit like the man the teenage hero in the cult film "Napoleon Dynamite" might grow up to become, Grotkowski nonetheless knew his wine.

Our parameters were simple — good wine for the lowest possible price. This isn't as easy as it sounds. Personal taste counts for a lot (I'm not big on German wines or most whites, for instance). Despite the apparent ease of using Robert Parker's numeric rankings (Och, an 89 in "Wine Spectator," Better buy it!), wine is deeply subjective.

And, to be fair, Grotkowski recommended a number of bottles with gaudy numbers. But he also pointed out wines from places wine snobs dare not go: Argentina, Spain and Australia among them.

I asked him about the science of this, and he showed me a spiral bound book. On each page were descriptions of various wines offered for sale by the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board in its 600-plus state stores. Scrawled in the margins were Grotkowski's notes, the sacred texts, if you will, of the wine buff looking to drink above his or her means.

Some of these were conventionally descriptive. "Great barrel notes. Complex. Lots of flowers and a little tobacco at the end." Others were laugh-out-loud funny. "Not just a typical Aussie jam-job, a 'three-

sips-and-you're out' chardonnay."

These notes were as subjective as a Parker score, but more vivid and immediate. The key to finding good wine on a budget — any budget — Grotkowski seemed to suggest, was to actually taste them, to see how they worked with food and to trust one's own judgment.

He'd put this to the test when recommending things like the bottle of Sardinian red on sale for around \$8. "Are you kidding?" I asked. "A drinkable red for eight bucks?" But it was more than drinkable, and now I look for Cannonau, a Grenache varietal from the Italian island, whenever I want a big, fruity red.

We seldom bought a highly rated bottle that disappointed, but many unrated bottles, perhaps the kinds of wines that experts ignored, were unexpectedly fine. And here was another benefit of direct experience, Grotkowski's or one's own: it was like insider information. Armed with his recommendations, I became a source of wine tips myself. A hostess gift of a seemingly undistinguished wine became a conversation starter. "Don't read the label, taste it," I could warn, knowing that I could expect admiring mea culpa from my snobby friends as they emptied their glasses.

Grotkowski's direct experience was invaluable. As Pennsylvania considers sale or divestiture of the stores that produce \$1.5 billion in annual sales, the value of knowledgeable, engaged employees such as Grotkowski should not be discounted.

They are not just advisers, but also teachers, guides down a road of connoisseurship that is as rewarding as it is enjoyable to travel.

Alas, the relationship that started me on this road didn't last, but the lessons I learned at Yorktown Centre will serve me well every time I reach for a corkscrew. Every time I raise a glass, I make an unspoken toast to my unlikely and very wise tutor in advanced oenology. He was — and is — dynamite. **LEL**

in the know: FIVE YOU CAN TRY

Feeling adventurous and economical at the same time? Don Grotkowski recommends these five Champaign Selection wines, all of which are priced to move this month.

Gary Farrell Pinot Noir 1999

\$19.99 (quoted at \$42)
No, this is not the fine restaurateur (and noted foodie and wine buff) Gary Farrell, but his namesake who makes very nice — and usually very expensive — wines. Grotkowski finds "dark cherry and some really nice barrel notes, especially vanilla. I was really impressed!"

Merryvale Chardonnay 2008

\$19.99 (quoted at \$35)
"For people who like a lot of butter," Grotkowski advises. "I'm not usually one of them, but I like this. This is one you can drink and drink and drink!" This one got 92 points from Wine Enthusiast last August.

Freemark Abbey Merlot 2003

\$14.99 (quoted at \$25)
Here's an older vintage, which automatically sparks some interest. "This really tastes like a Bordeaux," Grotkowski says. "If I were at a blind tasting and had this wine, I'd think it was a Bordeaux. It's very complex and has that 'Right Bank' taste."

Fetish Playmates 2008

\$12.99 (quoted at \$22)
Once you stop snickering at the silly name and provocative label, you can taste an Australian meritage that starts "big and jammy and typically Australian," Grotkowski observes, "but is brought down to earth with some nice coffee and olive notes. Nice tasting. Good stuff!"

Stella & Mosca Terre Rare Carignano Riserva 2005

\$8 (quoted at \$25)
New this is what bottom-fishing is all about: an \$8 bottle that Grotkowski called "unbelievable. It's like walking into a card-player room and smelling cigars. For \$8 this is extremely complex with spice and flower notes. Killer!"