

KNOW YOUR PLACE



Oz Clarke and travelling partner James May (far right), struggled to find decent, mid-priced wine

AND ANOTHER THING...
Oz Clarke
 Why is there no good, mid-range Californian wine?
 I never buy Californian wine. Why would I? Most of the best is either too expensive or never comes here; the lower end has bad brands and the mid-market range is really odd. In

Last October, Oz Clarke wrote a column in *Decanter* (above), bemoaning the state of Californian mid-priced wines. We invited the Wine Institute of California to submit its top 50 examples to see if they could change his mind...

Last summer, I traipsed around California in a vast mobile home the same length as a London double-decker bus, but with only one bed accompanied by a cheery, hairy wine hooligan called James May. We both had a

After a summer of searching, **OZ CLARKE** is still depressed by the lack of terroir character in mid-priced California wines on the UK market

fine time. We thought California was a brilliant place. We thought the Californians were great, too. And we thought California beer was great. We drank a lot of it.

Oh, and we did drink a lot of Californian wine. I drank some supremely good stuff, right up there in the Premier League for flavour and personality. James discovered his first 'best-wine-I've-ever-drunk' on our second day, and he was still discovering them as we tried to bundle him into the van to race to the airport for our flight home. He's very enthusiastic after a bottle or two.

But the wines we enjoyed were rarely less than \$20 (£10) a bottle, and sometimes three, five or 10 times

that. We drank these bottles in delightful surroundings with the generous producers who opened them for us. When James and I sallied out to the shops to stock up on affordable grog with our own money, I thought \$15 (£7.50) would be a good starting point. But James discovered 'Two Buck Chuck', so learned the hard way. We would haul our booty back to the campsite, but rarely finished a bottle. During our trip around France the previous summer, James and I always drained them dry. When he comes round to my place, I make up a camp bed for him in the cellar. However, in California, in a mood of exuberant excitement, when almost anything would bring a

smile to our eyes – so long as it was liquid and alcoholic – we rarely struck bronze, let alone silver or gold.

What is it with California and the mid-priced bottle? Why is it so difficult to find a wine with a bit ofchutzpah, some real varietal character, some perceptible sense of place and the personality of the producer writ large in the body of the wine?

Thinking that perhaps I had been unfair on our trip and that there was a pile of gems just panting to be discovered, I headed for *Decanter's* swish tasting room to taste wines in a generous price band of £5-£15. I know £15 isn't exactly mid-price for most countries – £5-£10 would suit most of them, and many could do a pretty good job at £5-£8. But I was trying to be fair, and, with an open mind, I set to work.

What did I find? Firstly, there does seem to be a slightly wider range of labels on the British market now, although how many of them are actual independent

producers is difficult to tell. But second, new labels are not much good if the flavours are all lumped together in the bland middle spectrum of trying to avoid causing offence. I can sort of understand the lower-price-end, sugar-water brands all tasting of nothing, because they're not targeted at wine enthusiasts. But surely it isn't unreasonable to ask that a £15 wine at least tastes interesting for us wine lovers? Aren't we the target market?

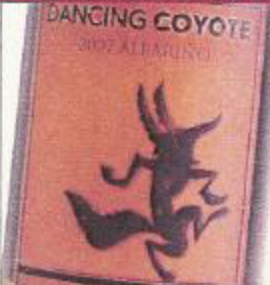
Yet something in the commercial Californian wine psyche seems to be frightened of individuality. They seem to blank out the very things that make grape varieties and regions different, and not for the first time, I find myself wondering whether a lot of California's winelands are

simply unsuitable for the kind of cool-climate varieties, most of them want to grow, because I have lost track of the number of times I wrote 'remarkably little flavour', 'not very Zinfandel/Merlot/Syrah/Sauvignon', and so on. I don't think that being clean and inoffensive is an ambitious enough objective at £5-£15. Too many of these wines, if they came from rival producing countries, would be rated as not worth more than £4.99. Most rival countries have currencies a good deal stronger against the pound than the dollar. It should cost them more to make good wines for us, but they consistently make better wine than California, for less.

All is not lost, though. I found some decent examples (see below). See what you think...

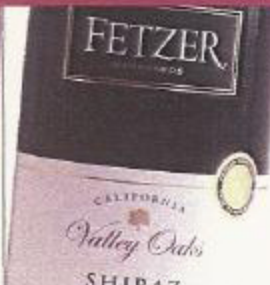
OZ'S RECOMMENDED CALIFORNIAN WINES ON THE HIGH STREET

Dancing Coyote, Albariño, Clarksburg 2007 (16.5/20) ★★★★★
 I was surprised to discover this Californian take on a variety from Spain's chilly northwest. But they've done well – green apple flesh, lemon zest, white pepper and sea-spray soaked stones. **£8.95; M&J, Sid, Vik, WfV, WfB**



Bonterra, Cabernet Sauvignon, Mendocino 2006 (16) ★★★
 Round, gentle, commercial Cabernet. Not terribly thrilling, an probably won't make your pulse race, but if you like good ripe red fruit, tasty tannin and non-intrusive oak, this wine is a good drink. **£9.99 Bth**

Quady, Essensia Orange Muscat, 2006 (16) ★★★
 Quady never lets you down. The Essensia Orange Muscat is a true original – rich, sweet orange flesh doused in honey, roughened up by crystallised Seville orange peel and the bite of herbs and raw spirit. **£7.99; Maj**



Fetzer, Valley Oaks Shiraz, 2007 (15.75) ★★★
 This tastes very young still, bristling with primary fruit flavours of plum and loganberry, banana and pear. But it's balanced, and the fresh jammy fruit will taste a lot more like Shiraz in a year's time. **£6.99; Bth, Sai, Tes, Nis**

Cline, Ancient Vine Mourvèdre 2006 (16) ★★★
 I don't expect beauty from Mourvèdre but I do expect a rough-hewn, sprawling wine, and I get that here. This has tasty cherry and raspberry, and the faint rasp of hillside herbs. **£14; CBC, DWS, Har, Vir, Vpl, WTr**



Ironstone Vineyards, Old Vine Zinfandel, Lodi County 2007 (16) ★★★
 Very nice, modern, midweight Zin. A soft, spicy red, with good juicy blackberry and raspberry, a hint of eucalyptus and tree bark, and apple-peel acidity. More orchard than Ironstone. **£7.99 Eyy, HWC**

Bogle, Petite Sirah 2005 (15.5) ★★★
 I've had brawnier Petite Syrahs than this, but it is typically closed up, packed with cooked, jammy prune, date and dried fig fruit with a dollop of cream, and just a touch of polished wood scent. **£9.95; GWW, Tan**



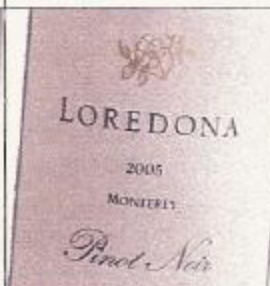
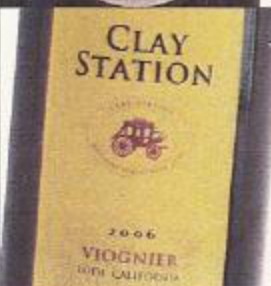
'I wonder whether a lot of California's winelands are simply unsuitable for the kind of cool-climate varieties most producers want to grow'

Hahn Estates, Smith & Hook, Cabernet Sauvignon Grand Reserve, Central Coast 2005 (16) ★★★
 Pretty brash, not focused, not gorgeous, but enough mouthfilling stewy red plum fruit to work, with some welcome leafy acidity to keep it fresh. **£15; Pat**



Quady, Elyslum Black Muscat 2006 (16) ★★★
 I've had this tasting more resplendent, with the heady, ripe hothouse Muscats pleading to be picked. But it's still good, rather like a good damson wine, and a decent wodge, Black Hamburg muscat richness. **£7.99; Maj**

Clay Station, Viognier, Lodi County 2006 (15.5) ★★★
 Viognier should be perfect for California, but many producers drain the variety of its big, fleshy personality. This one is big, not blowsy, but fat on the palate, with peach and apricot syrup coating your tongue. **£7.99; Co, WSo**



Delicato, Loredona Pinot Noir, Monterey 2005 (15) ★★★
 Pleasant, mainstream Pinot Noir. Mellow strawberry fruit and rosehip scent, balanced by a little tannin and oak. Ideally, this should have a bit more fruit, but it is reasonably true to its ambitions. **£8.99; Bcn, Bib**