There have been so many changes in the retail wine and spirits business over the last 38 years since we opened the first K&L in December, 1976. Wine drinking in the United States was just gaining popularity. “Jug” wines had the strongest following, but varietals were getting popular, and the “fighting varietals” would not hit the U.S. market for another five years. Liquor sales were the king during the 1970s—mainly big brand names. Then liquor sales dropped in the 1980s and 1990s, only to spring back to life in the 2000s. Big brands were, and are, replaced by niche products, and today liquor is back on top of the alcoholic products sales. I guess, “what goes around, comes around.”

This issue will concentrate on wines and their “scores.” Liquor products are now starting to receive scores by the spirits raters, but many of our great spirits are hand-picked by our buyers David Driscoll and David Othenin-Girard and are not in general distribution.

In 1976 there were very few wine publications, and wine writers were a select few. There was Robert Lawrence Balzer’s Private Guide to Food and Wine, Vintage Magazine, Michael Broadbent’s Great Vintage Wine Book, and Robert Finigan. There was the 20-point UC Davis scoring system or the Michael Broadbent five-star system. Now there are a plethora of wine writers and raters. Some big publications such as Wine Spectator and Wine Advocate have many writers specializing in certain regions of the wine world. Most of the writers now use a 100-point scoring system that was really pioneered by Robert Parker at the end of the 1970s.

Today, scores rule for many wine lovers and consumers, so I decided to dedicate this issue to the points. There are 100-point wines in this issue that are very expensive, and there are superb values—90-plus point wines priced less than $40. Since I am a little prejudiced toward Bordeaux, the first two pages will be from that most famous region in the wine world.

100-point Pontet-Canet

2010 Pontet-Canet, Pauillac ($299.99 PA) 100 points RP. Why not start out with a perfect 100-point wine? In fact, why not two perfect wines, including the 2009 Pontet-Canet ($299.99) as we may have a few bottles of this one also available. “Back to back 100-point wines” are as rare as any 100-point wine was in 1986. Cellar these beauties.

Classical d’Yquem

2011 d’Yquem, Sauternes (375ml $219.99; 750ml $429.99) 99 points WS. “A lovely, creamy, tropical style, with mango, papaya and guava notes lending a caressing feel, while singed almond and warm piecruist accents blossom through the lush finish. Just when you think that’s all there is, toasted coconut, fig, orange blossom and persimmon details kick in, lending length and dimension. The finish is ridiculously long.”

2006 Pichon-Lalande, Pauillac ($149.99) My all-time favorite property in Bordeaux in the 1980s, and now this 2006 is at the top again. 95 points Robert Parker’s Wine Advocate: “…A return to the velvety-textured, rich, sexy style most readers would associate with Pichon Lalande…This is a 21st century version of the brilliant 1996.”

2011 Pontet-Canet, St-Estèphe ($109.99) 96 points WE: “Pretty blueberry, lilacs and flowers on the nose. Full-bodied, with chewy tannins and a long finish. Lots going on. Big wine for the appellation. Best in a long time from here.”

2009 Grand Corbin Manuel, St-Emilion ($24.99) 92 points WE: “One of several châteaux in Saint-Émilion with the name Corbin attached, this is a finely made, ripe, dusty wine. It conveys a southern French feel with its rich fruitiness and powerful dry tannins. It has concentration and power, and will develop well over the medium-term. Drink from 2016.”


2011 Smith-Haut-Lafitte Rouge, Pessac-Léognan ($89.99) 94 points JS: “A wine that has a beautiful depth of fruit, with currants, minerals and dried flowers on the nose and palate. It’s full-bodied, with super-integrated tannins that last for minutes.”

2010 Malescot-St-Exupéry, Margaux ($99.99) 95 points JS: “A wine with beautiful strawberry and chocolate with hints of pie crust. It’s full-bodied with super integrated tannins and a long, long finish.”

2009 Nairac, Sauternes ($39.99) 95 points RP: “Nicolas Tari oversaw a sensational 2009 Chateau Nairac. It has a richer bouquet compared to the 2010 with exuberant, explosive scents of acacia honey, dried apricot and a hint of petrol that transposes the exoticism of the vintage…Stack this high in your cellar.”

2004 Latour, Pauillac ($599.99) 95 points RP: “A terrific effort from Administrator Frederic Engerer and owner Francois Pinault, the dark ruby/purple-tinged 2004 Latour exhibits a strong cassis character intermixed with notes of crushed rocks, earth, cedar, and forest floor.”

—Clyde Beffa Jr.
THE A GROUP  Around the World in 94-plus Points

When I was in high school and college (many years ago), we were graded on a 100-point system in most classes. A score of 94 to 100 was a solid “A” for a test or class. Well, the 100-point system for wine is in full swing these days thanks to Robert Parker, who popularized it in the early 1980s. Below are some in-stock selections that have scored 94 points and above. I present the A group:

Spain, Argentina and Chile

2009 Bodegas Muga “Selección Especial” Reserva Rioja ($39.99) 95 WS: “Powerful yet harmonious, this rich red delivers black cherry, licorice, fresh herb, smoke and mineral flavors that mingle seamlessly over firm, well-integrated tannins, while balsamic-tinged acidity drives the flavors through the long, spicy finish. Drink now through 2025.”

2001 Faustino I Gran Reserva Rioja ($29.99) 97 points and Decanter Wine of the Year 2013: “Restained, mineral style with elegant tannins. Youthful and fresh, feminine and complex. Deliciously decadent, with extraordinary vitality in the palate and a long unique, finish. A jewel at this price.”

Australia and New Zealand

2011 Kumeu River “Mate’s” Chardonnay Kumeu New Zealand ($39.99) 97 points and #19 of James Suckling’s Top 100 Wines of 2014: “The weight is staggering but the poise and balance makes it all seem effortless. Ripe peach and pear, citrus and gently toasty oak, with chalk and nougat, too.” Also 94 points RP.

2010 Leeuwin “Art Series” Chardonnay Margaret River Western Australia ($69.99) 97 points JH: “Bright yellow-green; the sheer purity and intensity of this wine is remarkable; it has its own flavour and tactile characters stemming from the perfect balance between the white peach and grapefruit flavours carried through the very long and detailed palate by bright acidity.” Also 95+ points RP.

2005 Branson Coach House “Coach House Block Rare Single Vineyard” Shiraz Barossa Valley South Australia ($49.99) 96 points RP: “It reveals aromas of cedar, wood smoke, cassis, blackberry, and blueberry compote. Full-bodied, thick, and rich, this opulent wine is nearly over the top.”

2012 Tongue in Groove “Clayvin Vineyard” Pinot Noir Marlborough New Zealand ($29.99) 96 points Bob Campbell, in Gourmet Traveler: “Dense and quite structured Pinot with black and red cherry, plum, spice and a hint of dark chocolate. A firm backbone of soft, rich tannins suggests cellaring potential. Richly textured wine with a very lengthy finish.”

California

2012 Varner “Home Block” Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay ($47.99) 94 points AG: “Apricot, peach, mint, chamomile and lightly honeyed overtones take shape as the 2012 Chardonnay Home Block shows off its considerable power and breadth. There is a real sense of phenolic weight in the Home Block.”

2012 Sbragia “Gamble Ranch” Napa Valley Chardonnay ($34.99) 96 points RP: “…A spectacular perfume of unbuttered popcorn, caramelized citrus, white peach and honey. This gorgeously textured, opulent, full-bodied Chardonnay offers terrific freshness, precision and length. It can be enjoyed over the next 3-5 years.”

2006 Roederer Estate “l’Ermitage” Anderson Valley Brut ($39.99) 97 points WE: “All the benefits of maturity come through in this deliciously complex flagship sparkling wine of the French-owned estate. It shows very minute, slow-rising bubbles and a beautifully bouquet of ginger, cinnamon, cherry and fresh croissants. The flavors are layered, intricate, subtle but somehow rich.”

Italy

2010 Oddero Barolo ($44.99) 95 points JS: “Very pretty aromas and flavors of dried strawberries and plums follow through to a full body, with velvety tannins and an intense finish.”

2006 Castello di Monsanto “Nemo” Cabernet Sauvignon Toscana ($39.99) 95 points RP: “Sweet scents of French oak meld into blackberries, blueberries, licorice and grilled herbs. The fruit remains extremely primary, while the oak is a touch prominent, both of which suggest further cellaring is needed for all of the elements to come together. A rich, textured, creamy finish provides the final exclamation point to this superb, pedigreed Nemo.”

Rhône

2011 Clos des Papes Châteauneuf-du-Pape ($99.99) 96 points RP: “…A full-bodied, seamless effort that exhibits copious kirsch, ground pepper, dried flowers and underbrush as well as incredibly fine tannin, great mid-palate concentration and ample length on the finish.”

2012 Vincent Paris “Granit 60 Vieilles Vignes” Cornas ($59.99) 94-97 points RP: “…Incredible notes of black raspberry, powdered graphite, licorice and liquid violets. Also full-bodied, with superb concentration and depth, as well as a firm tannic spine, this gorgeous effort should be given 4-5 years of bottle age and consumed over the following 10-15 years.”

2012 Domaine de la Mordorée “Reine des Bois” Châteauneuf-du-Pape ($69.99) 95 points RP: “One of the blockbusters in the vintage…fantastic richness and depth in its blackberry liqueur, graphite, wood smoke and crushed-rock-like aromas and flavors. An elegant, stylish and polished example of this cuvée…”

—Clyde Beffa Jr.
A FOR EFFORT Value Wines that Earned 91-plus Points from the Critics

Heck, 91 points was a good score for me on a test. The wines below scored at least that and they are all under $30 a bottle.

Spain, Argentina and Chile

2005 Bodegas Casa Juan Señor de Lesmos Reserva Rioja* (750ml $19.99; 1.5L $39.99) 92 points JS: "This has a beautiful depth of fruit with spice and dark fruits. Hints of parsley and cilantro. Full and super silky with a long and beautiful finish."

2012 Susana Balbo "Signature" Malbec Mendoza ($19.99) 93 points JS: "A fresh, balanced and harmonious red with cherries, berries and hints of nutmeg character. Full and super integrated with fine tannins and a long, flavorful finish."

2011 Bodegas Norton "Privada" Mendoza ($19.99) 93 points and one of Wine Enthusiast's Top 100 Wines of 2014: "Privada displays qualities beyond its price point. This version of Malbec, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon is smoky on the nose, with charcoal, minerals and toast capping crusty berry aromas. The palate is super ripe and healthy in feel, with baked blackberry flavors smothered in toasty oak and chocolate."

2012 Celler de Capcanes "Mas Donis Barrica – Old Vines" Montsant ($12.99) 94 points RP: "It is difficult to find a better value than this incredibly rich effort. The bouquet offers up a smorgasbord of aromas, including crushed rocks, spring flowers, kirsch liqueur and blacker fruits. Full-bodied with a velvety, voluptuous texture, and admirable opulence, density, purity and texture."

2012 Elderton "Estate" Shiraz Barossa Valley South Australia ($19.99) 92 points RP: "Deep garnet-purple colored and just gorgeous on the nose, with intense floral and black fruit notes plus some menthol and dusty earth nuances…It finishes long."

2013 Grey’s Peak (Greystone) Sauvignon Blanc Waipara Valley New Zealand* ($14.99) 92 points JS: “Textured and creamy on the palate, which shows a raft of tropical fruits and defined, stony acidity.”

2012 Jim Barry “Lodge Hill” Shiraz Clare Valley South Australia ($15.99) 95 points JH; 91 points WS: “Concentrated and bright, this blend of 63% Grenache and 37% Syrah has deep flavors of strawberry and licorice. Ready to age for several years, it has a mountain’s worth of tannins, and yet it is incredibly light on its feet.”

2012 Domaine de Bila Haut “Occultum Lapidem” Côtes du Roussillon Villages ($26.99) 94 points RP: “Comprised of mostly Syrah, from schist and gneiss soils, and aged in tank and demi-muid, this superb 2012 has solid mid-palate depth, ample tannin and a beautifully focused finish.”

Domestic

2010 Northstar Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($23.99) 93 points WE: “Consumers may find it difficult to differentiate this from the 2010 Ste. Michelle version of the same wine—both are 100% Cold Creek vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. But this one, bottled under the Northstar label, has more muscle, more power and more depth. Tannic, thick and darkly fruited, it’s a tightly-wound yet expressive effort.”

2010 Prospect 772 “The Brat” Sierra Foothills Rhône Blend ($29.99) 92 points WE: “Concentrated and bright, this blend of 63% Grenache and 37% Syrah has deep flavors of strawberry and licorice. Ready to age for several years, it has a mountain’s worth of tannins, and yet it is incredibly light on its feet.”

Italy

2010 Frescobaldi Nipozzano Chianti Rufina Riserva ($18.99) 92 points WS: “Black cherry, spice, tobacco and earth flavors prevail in this dense red. The tannins verge on being gritty in texture, yet there’s adequate acidity to keep this fresh. Best from 2016 through 2024.”

2009 Querceto Chianti Classico Riserva ($16.99) 93 points JS: “Such clarity of fruit to this Chianti Classico with black cherries and blueberries and sliced mushrooms. Full body, chewy and rich. Very structured. Like a Brunello.” Also 91 points WS.

French Regional

2012 Domaine de Bila Haut “Occultum Lapidem” Côtes du Roussillon Villages ($26.99) 94 points RP: “Comprised of mostly Syrah, from schist and gneiss soils, and aged in tank and demi-muid, this superb 2012 has solid mid-palate depth, ample tannin and a beautifully focused finish.”

2012 Domaine Cabirau Côtes de Roussillon ($12.99) 92 points RP: “Here is a stupendous value that projects distinctive Roussillon virtues including downright dynamic interactivity. I suspect that it will show well for the better part of the decade if not beyond.”

— Clyde Beffa Jr.